



STRATEGIC PATHWAYS TO ENDING THE RUSSO- UKRAINIAN WAR

Editor George Spencer Terry

The Conference on Russia Papers 2025

The Conference on Russia Papers 2025

STRATEGIC PATHWAYS TO ENDING THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Edited by George Spencer Terry



UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

Press

EDITORS AND REVIEWERS

Editor-in-Chief:

George Spencer Terry, Baltic Defence College

Language Editors:

- George Spencer Terry, Baltic Defence College
- James Greer
- Samuel Bussiere

Reviewers:

- Dr. Zdzislaw Sliwa, Baltic Defence College
- Dr. Dumitru Minzarari, Baltic Defence College
- Dr. Viljar Veebel, Baltic Defence College
- Dr. Vladimir Sazonov, Estonian Military Academy

Cover Page: Kalle Paalits

ISSN 2806-3902

ISSN 2806-3910 (pdf)

ISBN 978-9916-27-808-6 (print)

ISBN 978-9916-27-809-3 (pdf)

ISBN 978-9916-27-810-9 (epub)

Copyright: authors and Baltic Defence College, 2025

University of Tartu Press

www.tyk.ee

Foreword

Brigadier General Alvydas Šiuparis*

The 2025 edition of the Russia Conference Papers is being published almost three years after the start of the full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine. The initially predicted three days for the Russians to reach Kyiv has extended to three years and will continue for the foreseeable future. The challenge to Ukraine's sovereignty is not just a regional issue but an open challenge to the rules-based world order and regional security. The war highlights Russia's aim of dismantling international norms, the principles of sovereignty, and the assumption of territorial integrity that are fundamental to international law, threatening not only Ukraine but also the security and stability of neighbouring countries and the international order more broadly. Backed by the steadfast support of the Transatlantic community, the determination and resilience of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the Ukrainian people have kept the conflict localised for now. A Ukrainian loss would encourage Russia, giving it time to rebuild its forces, which could then be used against the Baltic states, Poland, Romania, or even farther afield. Such a situation would be unacceptable.

In the past year, the Ukrainian operation into the Kursk region captured hundreds of square kilometres of Russian territory, demonstrating that Russia's red lines were empty threats. Ukrainian drone strikes throughout Russia show the same. At the same time, Russia has made advances in Donbas, forcing the front line farther to the west. This has been a heavy blow. In the meantime, as heavy combat has decreased over the winter period, Russia can think over different methods of escalation and incentivising the growth of its own forces while strengthening its ties with its supporters, China, Iran, and North Korea, but the war itself remains a stalemate. Similarly, as the war becomes increasingly drawn out, such a situation is unacceptable. Ukraine must maintain its sovereignty, but only Ukrainians themselves have the final say on how to do so.

The main topics of discussion in this volume therefore centre around the conditions for maintaining Ukrainian sovereignty. Support so far has been enough to ensure that Ukraine has not lost the war but has not gone far enough to ensure a Ukrainian victory. Some allies fear uncontrolled

* Commandant of the Baltic Defence College

escalation of the war or call for negotiations. Others are pushing for any restrictions to be lifted so that Ukraine might be able to pursue victory without any impositions or limitations. Such debates still dominate at the highest political levels and act as the main background for the discussions in the following pages.

The mission of the Baltic Defence College (BALTDEFCOL) is to ensure and provide the highest quality and up-to-date education at the operational and strategic levels to meet the needs, requirements, and expectations of the Framework Nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. My emphasis as Commandant for the future of our officer education have been clear: an increased focus on multi-domain operations, disruptive and emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, the Combined Joint Staff Exercise “Joint Resolve,” lessons identified and learned in Ukraine, and research. The BALTDEFCOL’s Conference on Russia, as a forum for discussing and understanding the adversary, along with these Russia Conference Papers, contributes to promoting the security and defence needs of the Baltic states by aiding in the formulation of realistic strategies informed by such thorough research. It also supports our Ukrainian partners by raising important arguments and bringing the lessons identified and learned from the war to light.

I extend my appreciation to the Editor-in-Chief of this volume, George Spencer Terry, as well as the authors of each of the individual chapters. Through their hard work and analysis, we can start our conversations from an informed position in both military educational and policy settings for creating the strategies of the future.



Brigadier General Alvydas Šiuparis

Preface

George Spencer Terry*

This current volume of the BALTDEFCOL's Conference on Russia Papers is being released more than three years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and while in the past year Ukraine has brought the fight to Russian territory, victory remains elusive. Ukraine continues to hold its ground and probe Russia at its points of weakness, while Russia persists in launching volleys of missiles and advancing incrementally. Nevertheless, the peace terms proposed by Kyiv and Moscow remain unacceptable to each other at this time, resulting in an impasse. However, pressures for ending the war continue to increase for both parties. Due to the precarity of such an equilibrium, any exogenous shocks due to shifting factors either in the international system or domestically might mean a fulfilment of war goals for one side or the other.

Because of this, the central question of this volume is the same as that of the conference: what exactly are the strategic pathways to ending the Russo-Ukrainian War? Writing in the autumn and winter of 2024, the authors in this volume – scholars, subject matter experts, practitioners, and policymakers – examine this issue prismatically and thematically, focusing on specific spheres of topics to offer focused – and sometimes opposing – conclusions.

First, the war is analysed through its position in the international system, examining Ukraine's role in the international system, Russia's instrumentalisation of its veto in the UNSC, and certain preconditions for ending the war that would bring about stable, lasting peace, which includes Ukraine's territorial integrity as a precondition. Next, diverse analyses are offered on the implications, challenges, and opportunities of the second Trump administration in the United States, particularly in terms of what differing levels of US support could mean to both Ukraine as well as to European NATO member states. The role of Russian émigrés in the EU, as well as Russia's potential instruments of division and narrative amplification within the EU, are also discussed. Then, specific issues and frictions between Russia and other European states in the wider global context of the war, including Germany, France, Poland, and the United Kingdom, are analysed. Other issues, such as sanctions enforcement and contravention, Russia in the context

* Lecturer in Strategic Studies, Baltic Defence College

of the Israeli-Gazan conflict, and Russia's use of narrative manipulation through anti-soft power, are explored. Finally, military lessons learned from the war are studied, including issues of strategic leadership development and selection, the role of technology for future battlefield prospects, issues of electronic warfare, and Russian military reforms and their relation to the war.

Roughly mapped, this takes us from a point of broad international affairs to the uncertainties around the future of US support, to individual country perspectives, to issue-based analyses, to military affairs, from tactical to strategic levels. This volume, therefore, does not offer any clear-cut answers. However, through each of these themes, the contextual yet interconnected conclusions can offer some punctuated points of focus for policymakers, forecasters, and decision-makers to curate and guide strategic conditions to facilitate the conclusion of this war in a way that maintains Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, only Ukraine itself has this sovereign right to choose what this conclusion might be.

From a Baltic and Western perspective, the importance of these conclusions is well understood. Ukraine and the resolve of the Ukrainian people in fighting against Russian aggression are a dam holding back a potential flood of this same aggression targeted against the Alliance itself. However, under increased pressure, even such a dam may start to show some cracks – so policies should be taken to lessen this pressure or even to reverse such damage. Support for Ukraine means support of international law and sovereignty, principles that have undergirded the international order since the foundation of the United Nations. Who supports Ukraine, qualitatively how they support Ukraine, and what the roadblocks are in garnering their full support are similarly important functions in this equation, from larger allies like the United States to other members of the Alliance across the European continent. Other variables – economic, informational, or otherwise – are similarly important in fostering both a material and cognitive space in which to formulate such winning policies. Finally, the Russo-Ukrainian War provides us with the clearest image of what contemporary warfare actually looks like from the realities on the battlefield, its depiction and framing across social media, and discussions and negotiations in the halls of power, meaning that it can, should, and will inform any considerations of warfighting and war for the Baltic and Western countries in the near future.

Table of Contents

Ann Marie DAILEY

1. Ukraine's Fate and the Fate of the International Order	13
---	----

Imants LIEĢIS

2. Ukraine's Right to Freedom Must Be Upheld	23
--	----

Dr. Aleksander OLECH, Stanisław WASZCZYKOWSKI

3. Russian Veto as a Signal of the Kremlin's Intensified Actions: a Lesson from Ukraine	35
--	----

Tomas JANELIŪNAS

4. What are the Preconditions for Ukraine to Restore its Territorial Integrity and Sovereignty?	50
--	----

Dr. Colonel-General Mykhailo Volodymyrovych KOVAL

5. The Territorial Integrity of Ukraine as a Condition for Ending the War	62
---	----

Doug KLAIN

6. Is Trump's Ukraine Peace Doomed to Fail?	73
---	----

James SHERR

7. How to Maintain Ukraine's Security in a Trumpian World	86
---	----

Dr. Michael C. KIMMAGE

8. Winning the Long Term in Ukraine.....	97
--	----

George Spencer TERRY

9. Supporting Ukraine is 'America First': a Neo-Realist Argument.....	106
---	-----

Joshua C. HUMINSKI

10. Constraints and Frictions on Rapprochement between the United States and Russia	119
--	-----

Dr. Stefano BRAGHIROLI

11. Russia-Friendly Parties in the EU Amid Moscow's War on Ukraine: Political Dynamics and Policy Implications	130
---	-----

Dr. Asta MASKALIŪNAITĖ

12. Russian Émigrés in the EU: Citizenship, Sovereignty, and a Reconceptualization of Community	146
--	-----

Nikolai KLIMENIOUK	
13. Germany's Stance on Russia: No Lessons Learned.....	163
Dr. Guillaume LASCONJARIAS	
14. Russia's Influence in Africa: Undermining France through Hybrid Means	176
Dr. (Col. Ret.) Zdzislaw SLIWA	
15. Poland and Ukraine: Sharing Borders and Threats.....	186
Dr. Przemyslaw BISKUP	
16. Unfulfilled Potential of the Polish-British-Ukrainian Trilateral Cooperation: a Perspective from Poland	199
J.C. ELLIS	
17. Shared Values, Diverging Paths: British and American Strategy in the Russo-Ukrainian War	210
Dr. Anton MINKOV, Mitchell CLARKE	
18. Enforcing the Sanctions against Russia: the Case of Canada	222
Dr. Ksenia POLUEKTOVA-KRIMER	
19. How Russia Capitalises on the Israel-Gaza Crisis in Its Information Warfare Against the West.....	234
Liia VIHMAND-VEEBEL	
20. Russian Anti-soft Power and Its Application Since the Onset of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022 through the Lens of Narrative Manipulation	255
Dr. Vasył SERVATYUK, LTC Andriy MOSTOVOY, COL Ludmila SERVATYUK	
21. Repulsing Russian Armed Aggression: The Experience of the Ukrainian Defence Forces (February–May 2022).....	273
Dr. (hab.) Colonel Yurii PUNDA	
22. Strategic Leader Development and Selection: Ukrainian Lessons Identified from 2014.....	285
Alexis SERFATY	
23. Technology Has Been a Driver in Ukraine's Quest to Restore Its Territorial Integrity and Sovereignty, but It's Not the End Game	297

Dr. Thomas WITHINGTON

24. DEFCON Electron..... 307

Dr. Daivis PETRAITIS

25. Russian Military Reform and the War in Ukraine 318

1. Ukraine's Fate and the Fate of the International Order

Ann Marie Dailey*

Abstract

Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine is not just about Ukraine. The conflict goes to the very philosophical and theoretical foundations of what a nation is, what a state is, and whether there are such things as sovereignty and territorial integrity. This article reviews the historical foundations and current state of sovereignty and territorial integrity in international law and practice to see whether the concepts remain valid today. It then assesses competing conceptions – namely, civilizational rule – put forward by China and Russia to argue that failure to uphold sovereignty and territorial integrity would lead to a chaotic world order perfectly suited to Russia, China, and other authoritarian regimes. Finally, the article assesses the political, economic, and military preconditions for upholding Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity, arguing that because this war is not just about Ukraine, the solution cannot come solely from the Ukrainian people.

Keywords: sovereignty, territorial integrity, international order, Ukraine, civilisation

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine nearly three years ago, Ukraine and its supporters have touted the importance of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the "rules-based international order" as pillars of international security that must be protected, even at very high human and material cost. But given the political shifts underway in Europe and the United States, it is worth reviewing the validity of our assumptions and the applicability of heretofore unquestioned principles. Before looking at the preconditions for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity, it is important to ensure we understand what these terms mean, why they are important, and whether our assumptions about them still hold.

For nearly three years, the Ukrainian government and its defenders have underscored the criticality of defending Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial

* Policy Researcher, RAND; Non-resident Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council

integrity. In Ukraine, these principles are framed as critical to Ukraine's survival as a state. Outside Ukraine, diplomats and politicians present the defence of Ukraine and the restoration of its sovereignty and territorial integrity as vital to upholding the "rules-based international order." For those who have spent their careers working on security issues and international relations, these words and phrases are talismanic mantras that are repeated to the point of becoming meaningless catchphrases. To those who do not spend their careers focused on international relations, these words are likely to mean little. An assessment of what they mean, where these meanings came from, and how they manifest today helps uncover just what is at stake as leaders make decisions on whether to defend or abandon them.

Words Mean Things

The concept of sovereignty as an exercise of lawmaking over a territory is at least as old as Plato's musings on model regimes in *The Republic*. Yet its modern counterpart has its roots in 16th century Europe when monarchs sought to impose autocratic control over religious separatists. In this sense, sovereignty meant the divine or God-given right of one single individual to exert supreme authority over all citizens within their territory (Zeidan 2024). In the 17th century, Locke and Rousseau agreed that a government must have supreme power, but that power is derived not from providence but through a social contract between the ruler and the ruled – a concept that formed the foundation for the 18th century US Constitution. While definitions of sovereignty abound, most agree on four basic tenets: 1) territory (i.e., control of land), 2) authority (making and executing laws), 3) population (governed persons), and 4) external recognition (from other sovereign nations).

We most often hear sovereignty discussed in terms of international relations in the sense of freedom from external influence (Watts 2024), or indivisibility. Yet since at least the early 2000s, there has been a large and growing contention that "indivisibility" can no longer be considered sacrosanct (Bartelson 2011). Then-Director of Policy Planning at the State Department Richard Haas declared in a 2003 speech that "sovereignty is not absolute" (Haas 2003). In fact, this initial erosion of sovereignty as absolute and inviolable can be traced at least to the formation of the United Nations, which was established after the horrors of WWII and the Holocaust. The UN Charter simultaneously seeks to impose limitations on nations' actions

while also acknowledging national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Following the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, when the international community pledged to never again allow a genocide to occur under its watch, the UN heads of states and governments adopted the concept of a “responsibility to protect” or R2P (“About the Responsibility to Protect” n.d.), which allows for military intervention in the name of protecting populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Some US-led military interventions that have undermined the principles of sovereignty have been justified using the language of R2P. Russia viewed these interventions as destabilising; and yet Russia too has adopted the language of R2P to justify its full-scale invasion of Ukraine to a global audience, characterising its actions as a “special military operation” to protect Russian-speaking communities against the depredations of so-called “fascists” and “terrorists.”

Thus, the foundational concept of sovereignty as absolute or indivisible rests on somewhat shaky ground. Equally central to the concept of sovereignty is territorial integrity. Virtually all definitions of sovereignty rely on territorial integrity, as a sovereign power must be able to exercise its authority within a defined territory. While the concept of territorial integrity seems more straightforward, even here there are gaps and exceptions. For example, within the United States, Native Americans exercise a degree of sovereignty over their lands. Furthermore, there are countries that clearly would deem themselves to have sovereignty and territorial integrity that also have ongoing territorial disputes. Some are famously friendly, like the Whisky Wars between Canada and Denmark (Forrest 2022). Others are infamously violent and tumultuous, such as the contested Kashmir region sandwiched between the nuclear nations of India, Pakistan, and China.

We therefore find that the concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity contain important caveats, which are applied in highly inconsistent ways: sovereignty means freedom from external influence unless that influence is in the form of an international or multilateral organisation or when the sovereign government does something that leads another state to intervene that has the means to do so. Also, a sovereign state must exercise control over its prescribed territory, though sometimes sovereign nations include other sovereign nations on their sovereign territory, and some nations do not control all their claimed territory.

This is, of course, a type of *reductio ad absurdum*. True, the seemingly concrete concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity that form the

foundation of many international legal concepts are tenuous. And yes, one could argue that the concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity are so diffuse as to be meaningless, or that they are relics of a pre-modern era that cannot be applied in our globally interconnected world. This would be faulty for two reasons. First, exceptions do not make the rule. Noting exceptions to absolute sovereignty does not negate the importance of the concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity nor does it invalidate their use as benchmarks in dealings between nations. Just as a handful of individuals driving five miles per hour over the speed limit does not undermine law and order or invalidate the utility of speed limits, neither do exceptions invalidate the concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity. In practice, sovereign states remain the only entities within the international system capable of marshalling the human, economic, and military resources to enforce their writ within and outside their territories – including the most basic function of the state, which is to make war.

Additionally, it would be unwise to throw sovereignty and territorial integrity into the dustbin of history because that would represent a glaring failure to learn from the historical circumstances that drove the development of the modern concepts of the sovereignty and territorial integrity in the first place. These concepts were created and defined in a time of civilisational and religious upheaval and conflict in Europe to create a bulwark against ideological conflicts that threatened to drive the continent into a near-constant state of chaos. Before allowing that bulwark to crumble – or indeed, working proactively to bring it down – it would be wise to contemplate what forces would be unleashed in doing so.

Why Do Words Matter?

Why belabour these points about the theoretical underpinnings of sovereignty and territorial integrity? Because it points to just how foundational these concepts are to the entire system – the so-called “rules-based international order” in which we live. Many assume this refers exclusively to the US-led set of post-WWII institutions that many in the world look upon unfavourably as a form of soft imperialism. This unfavourable opinion is apparent in the significant and growing number of nations that either never joined in sanctioning or isolating Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, or even supported Russia’s assertion of equivalency between Russia’s intervention

in Ukraine and previous US interventions in places like Kosovo, Libya, and Iraq. These nations who feel they do not benefit from US leadership or the post-WWII international system might therefore see the “rules-based international order” as something that should be dissolved. However, when we unpack the concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity, we see that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine does not just undermine the post-WWII consensus. Rather, this conflict goes much, much deeper – to the very core of what it means to be a nation and who should be allowed to govern.

As mentioned above, the modern concept of sovereignty is enmeshed with the long series of European wars sparked by the Protestant Reformation in Europe, which pitted populations against each other within states and across state boundaries. After 130 years of intermittent, occasionally devastating fighting, the Treaty of Westphalia played an important role in not only helping establish the concept of a nation state – it also played a critically important role in giving sole control over national lawmaking to national authorities – not to the Catholic Church (Philpott 2024). In other words, the concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity are what created some semblance of a durable political order from bitter, consuming religious and civilisational warfare. It would be unwise to dispense with this system absent a viable alternative, which does not exist and is not close to existing.

This is not to assert that these concepts have prevented total war along the lines of the Thirty Years’ War on a global scale. The general adherence to and respect for the concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity have, however, galvanized nations to resist the spread of this type of warfare as the status quo (Mazza 2023). Doing away with the concepts would open the door to a *de facto* international order based on religious and civilisational expansionism. And while the current world order, established on concepts and rules like sovereignty and territorial integrity, remains imperfect, a return to the pre-Westphalian religious and civilisational free-for-all would be more chaotic, authoritarian, and, incidentally, perfectly suited to the whims of China, Russia, and Islamic extremists.

Rules-Based Order versus Civilisational Rule

Since long before the ascendance of the Chinese Communist Party, China has viewed its place and its mission in the world in civilizational terms. China’s Global Civilizational Initiative argues that China’s history is 500,000

years old, and China is the oldest continuous civilization in the world (Ellis 2023). It has embarked on a re-writing of history, ethnicity, anthropology, and archaeology to establish a continuity of Chinese culture and to undergird its arguments for why it rightfully should control the South China Sea and Taiwan. Similarly, post-Cold War Russia has returned to the 19th-century concept of a Eurasian civilisational identity that is neither European nor Asian, but an *osobyi put'* (special path). This discourse was muted and niche in the 1990s and 2000s but has picked up steam in the 2010s and become dominant in the 2020s – famously as an ideological glue in Putin's 2021 essay that foreshadowed Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Dickinson 2021).

There are two key tenets of these civilisational arguments that differ from a 'rules-based' order. First, rather than a Lockean or Rousseau-esque social contract between the governor and the governed, authority to govern is founded on ancient, unshakeable principles. For China, this myth-building focuses on Confucianism, China as a source of key technologies, and the Imperial Examination. For Russia, there is the classic *Pravoslavie, samoderzhavie, narodnost'* (Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality). Orthodoxy, in particular, is central to the Russian argument for its expansionist policies, as Russia portrays itself not only as the *tretiy Rim* (the "Third Rome" after Rome and Constantinople) but also as the civilisation that saved Europe from the expansion of the Golden Horde.

Second, civilisational arguments do not accept the current state of sovereign nations because current borders do not align with the more expansive civilisational boundaries they promote. These civilisations are founded on ancient concepts, and therefore, their proponents argue for a view of territory that aligns with the most expansive territory that civilisation reached. Indeed, the Kremlin argues that it is the protector of all individuals who hold Russian passports or indeed even speak Russian – regardless of where they live or what nationality they claim. At certain points in its history, Russia has even positioned itself as protector of all Slavic peoples – a self-definition that played a role in turning a clash between Austria-Hungary and Serbia into the conflagration of the First World War and which casts a shadow over much of Eastern Europe.

What is This War About?

Endless articles and books will be written debating the “why” of Putin’s decision to conduct a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. But one thing that is clear – and clearly under-appreciated by those who would seek to compartmentalise Russia’s invasion as a purely European affair that is a mere distraction from more important issues in the Pacific – is that the war in Ukraine is not just about Ukraine. It goes to the very philosophical and theoretical foundations of what a nation is, what a state is, and whether there are such things as sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The delineation between Russia and Ukraine is rooted in the Golden Horde’s invasion and control over Muscovy in the 13th century, easily pre-dating the Treaty of Westphalia. The status of Ukrainian lands has been a critical question in the Crimean War, the Russian Civil War, World War I, Russia’s illegal 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the most recent Russian invasion of Ukraine. These wars all centre around that same question: what is a nation, and what is sovereignty? This is important because China has put itself forward as not a mere nation, but also a “civilisation.” And while the Westphalian nation-state exerts sovereignty over an explicitly defined territory, a “civilisation” can extend wherever a culture or people hold sway. Similar principles underlie China’s claims over the South China Sea and Taiwan.

If, then, we accept China’s and Russia’s definition of a civilisational state, then invading neighbouring nations to assert dominance over territories that have, at any point in history, come under a country’s influence, is perfectly acceptable. If we accept this civilisational perspective, then we can expect Russia to expand and include Finland, the Baltic States, Poland, Central Asia, Moldova, the Balkans, Belarus, Ukraine, and parts of the United States. Problematically, it also would push the borders of Poland to include the Baltic States and swathes of Ukraine, of Lithuania to parts of Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, Moldova, and Poland, Turkey to most of the Middle East as well as large swathes of northern Africa and southern Europe (that could be contested by either Italy or Greece), and so on and so forth. This does not even delve into Asia, where Mongolia could claim almost all of Eurasia and China could claim the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and parts of Vietnam, Mongolia, Nepal, India, and Russia. In short, it would nullify the concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity, replacing them with the norms of

pre-Westphalian international behaviour, namely, warring religions, ideologies, and tribes competing for territory and the spoils therein.

What Is to Be Done?

If we reject the Sino-Russian premise of civilisational rule by force, then sovereignty and territorial integrity must mean something. And if they do, in fact, mean something, then a flagrant breach of sovereignty and territorial integrity in the name of civilizational control must be defeated. What must be done for this to occur?

First, because the conflict in Ukraine is not just about Ukraine, it should not be just Ukraine that must act. Preconditions must include a diplomatic commitment from NATO at the very least but ideally any nation that could be the target of a civilisational power grab, that Ukraine's sovereignty must be restored to its 1991 borders. Per the earlier discussion of exceptions to the rules of sovereignty and territorial integrity, this return to 1991 borders need not occur immediately. For example, following WWII, the Federal Republic of Germany formed a government in Bonn and joined NATO but retained the assertion that the GDR was rightfully part of a united Germany. This is not a recommendation to partition Ukraine, but rather, it is an assertion that Russian occupation of Ukrainian lands does not make them Russian, and whatever settlement occurs, it must not enshrine those lands as belonging to Russia.

Second, any political or diplomatic settlement must leave Ukraine able to legislate free of foreign influence and able to implement laws via its executive branch – extending to all its territory as well as its skies and territorial waters. To be able to do this, Ukraine must regain economic independence. This will not come easily. Many of its most productive industrial lands have been devastated and occupied by Russia, and its farmland has not only been churned up by explosives and military vehicles – it also is littered with the highest proportion of unexploded ordnance of any conflict since WWII. This means that Ukraine will require massive economic aid and subsidisation for years as it gets its economy back on its feet and able to support not only its people but also its government – to include a robust military and security arm.

Third, Ukraine's military is now the largest, best trained, and most experienced in Europe. But it is tired and under-equipped after years of conflict.

Therefore, Ukraine will need some form of security guarantee to ensure Russia does not seek to press its military advantage. If NATO or a coalition of nuclear-armed NATO nations are unwilling to provide this, then Ukraine could seek to become a nuclear nation. To fully regain its sovereignty and territorial integrity, those are its only options. If NATO or nuclear-armed nations decide to go the route of security guarantees, then it is in the interest of all of humanity that they also provide Ukraine with additional security assistance to bolster its conventional defences against and thereby help deter future attacks. This should include not only physical barriers such as fences, mines, and tank ditches, but also a sensor mesh that includes ISR support, combat air patrols, air defence, and a resumption of NATO maritime patrols in the Black Sea.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, those nations that support the Westphalian rules-based order over the chaos of civilisational land grabs must commit themselves to an extended fight that does not yet have a clear or well-defined timeline. Ukraine currently does not have sovereign control over its territory. It may not be able to fully exercise its sovereignty or regain its territorial integrity in fact as well as principle for years if not decades. But as previously noted, the exception does not prove the rule. *De facto* Russian occupation of Ukrainian lands does not mean *de jure* control. It is possible to put in place the minimal preconditions for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. The answers are simple in premise but not easy in execution. Thus, the most important precondition for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity is sustained political courage – not only on Ukraine's part, but also on the part of Western nations, and on the part of all other countries that might see in Ukraine's fate a shadow of their own vulnerability in a world where territorial claims are adjudicated not by the rules-based order but by the rule of the jungle.

References

- “About the Responsibility to Protect.” n.d. United Nations. United Nations. Accessed November 22, 2024. <https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/responsibility-protect/about>.
- Bartelson, Jens. 2011. “On the Indivisibility of Sovereignty.” *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 2 (2): 1–15. <https://shc.stanford.edu/arcade/publications/rofl/issues/volume-2-issue-2/indivisibility-sovereignty>.
- Dickinson, Peter. 2021. “Putin’s New Ukraine Essay Reveals Imperial Ambitions.” *Atlantic Council*. July 15, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainenalert/putins-new-ukraine-essay-reflects-imperial-ambitions/>.
- Ellis, R. Evan. 2023. “The Trouble With China’s Global Civilization Initiative.” *The Diplomat*. June 1, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/the-trouble-with-chinas-global-civilization-initiative/>.
- Forrest, Maura. 2022. “Canada and Denmark Settle ‘Whisky War’ with a Bottle Exchange.” *Politico*. June 14, 2022. <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/14/canada-denmark-whisky-war-00039575>.
- Haas, Richard. 2003. “Sovereignty: Existing Rights, Evolving Responsibilities.” Department Of State. Department Of State. The Office of Electronic Information, Bureau of Public Affairs. June 14, 2003. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/p/rem/2003/16648.htm>.
- Philpott, Daniel. 2024. “Sovereignty.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Fall 2024. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/sovereignty/>.
- Watts, Arthur. 2024. “Sovereignty.” *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Self-Determination*. 2024. <https://pesd.princeton.edu/node/671>.
- Zeidan, Adam. 2024. “Jean Bodin.” *Britannica*. November 18, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Bodin>.

2. Ukraine's Right to Freedom Must Be Upheld

Imants Lieģis*

Abstract

Russia's imperialistic full-scale war against Ukraine needs to be dealt with by helping Ukraine defend itself, obtaining the defeat of Russia's Empire, and ensuring that Russia is deterred from future military aggression. Such actions will help uphold sovereign Ukraine's territorial integrity and post-Second World War international norms. Failure would have profound regional and global implications. Ukraine must be engaged in any solution leading to Russia's war terminating. Solutions for peace are based on approaches of idealism and realism with the latter gaining ground following the US Presidential victory of President Trump. Tied to Ukraine's fate is the need for Europe to contribute more to its own defence and security whilst maintaining the cohesion of NATO.

Keywords: defence, defeat, deterrence, Ukraine, freedom

Introduction

As Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine approaches its fourth year, it remains crucial that the country restores its full territorial integrity and sovereignty with the proviso, that this indeed is what the valiant Ukrainians and their leaders wish. If they decide to accept anything less, that remains their prerogative. However, a repeat of appeasement from 1938, with its echoes and parallels of the British forcing "peace for our time" on Czechoslovakia and emboldening Hitler to thereafter continue to take over the rest of Europe, should be avoided.

What needs to be done for Ukraine to prevail after over ten years of aggression by neighbouring Russia? Ukraine's territory in Crimea was illegally annexed back in 2014, with Russia then also starting military assaults on the Eastern part of Ukraine's territory. There are three aspects that can help Ukraine restore its territorial integrity and sovereignty. They can be

* Senior Fellow, Latvian Institute of International Affairs

described as the three “D’s” – defend, defeat and deter. I will consider each individually.

Defend Itself

Russia’s “special military operation,” as described by President Putin, began on 24 February 2022 and was intended to overrun Ukraine militarily by capturing the capital Kyiv in three days, remove the democratically elected President and Government from office, and terminate Ukraine’s existence as an independent country.

Instead of achieving these aims, Ukraine successfully defended its capital and pushed back with battlefield successes during 2022 forcing Russia’s withdrawal from the Kharkiv region and Kherson city. The horrors of Russia’s brutal war tactics were exposed for all to see when the town of Bucha just outside Kyiv was liberated (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). The military successes of Ukraine were one of the reasons that led President Putin to change the rhetoric about the war by moving to describe it as a protracted war against NATO and the West (Bugayova 2024).

As the war drags on towards its fourth year, Ukraine continues to defend its territory because of the organised military resistance. However, recent assessments are gloomy. Ukraine continues to be pounded on a daily basis by Russian missiles and drones. Ukraine lacks necessary air defence interceptors and faces shortfalls of shells, tanks and armoured vehicles. These issues were highlighted in a recent Economist article with the headline “Ukraine is now struggling to survive, not to win” (The Economist 2024). The same article also quotes the US State Department’s top official for Europe, Jim O’Brien, who spoke at the Riga Conference on 19 October. I was also present in the room when he said that “The next several months are an opportunity for us to reaffirm that Ukraine can stay on the battlefield for the next couple of years.” This points to the urgency of the need to support Ukraine to stay the course. There may be a sense of urgency – it has been prevalent during most of 2024 – but the challenge is to use the opportunity mentioned and turn the sense of urgency into a sense of action.

Since then, the positive news is that some \$50 billion will be made available to Ukraine by the end of the year, consisting of loans backed by Russian frozen assets. The funds will support Ukraine’s economic, defence, and

reconstruction needs. The decision was announced by the G7 leaders in a statement on 25 October 2024 following their summit meeting in Italy earlier in the year (Fenhart 2024). However, because of the legal complexities involved, this decision to use interest accrued from Russian frozen assets also took some time in maturing. Offering Ukraine security guarantees to defend itself came into focus at the NATO Vilnius Summit in the summer of 2023. There was already pressure at that stage to offer Ukraine a formal invitation to join NATO.

As is still the case today, a lack of consensus prevailed, with an acrimonious outcome for the Summit. To soften the blow, the G7 group of countries, meeting in the side-lines of the Summit, offered to launch bilateral negotiations for security agreements with Ukraine to enable it to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity (European Council 2023). These bilateral security agreements were in fact taken up by many countries beyond the G7 group. Latvia has also signed such an agreement by which 0.25% of Latvia's GDP is to be spent in the next few years specifically in support of Ukraine. In practice, this will mean the supply of armoured personnel carriers and advanced surveillance drones.

Together with the United Kingdom, Latvia leads a "Drone Coalition" of NATO and NATO partner countries working to supply as many drones to Ukraine as possible on a needs driven basis. This is one of a number of capability coalitions formed amongst the Ukraine Defence Contact Group (the "Ramstein Group") of 57 countries and the EU supporting Ukraine through the provision of military equipment. Within the Drone Coalition, Latvia offers test facilities for drones before they are delivered to Ukraine. The supply of this crucial capability presents complex challenges, particularly due to the rapid technological development of unmanned aerial vehicles as they adapt in real time to war conditions and electronic warfare.

Regrettably, the provision of necessary military support to help Ukraine defend itself has suffered from being too little, too late. This was particularly so during 2024 with the delays arising because of political problems in the US Congress, as well as from the EU. Yet even with these delays, Russia made limited advances in the battlefield. Constraints on the use of military assistance provided by not allowing Ukraine in its self-defence, to attack legitimate military targets in Russia has also provoked some commentators to remark that Ukraine is being forced to fight with one hand behind its back. There have been no rational, moral, legal, or operational reason to uphold these constraints. The question of the speedy supply to Ukraine of weapons,

including more long-distance missiles, without restrictions on their use, is one of five main elements contained in President Zelensky's Victory Plan (Waterhouse 2024).

The focus on these questions has become sharper following the outcome of the Presidential elections in the United States. The return of President Trump risks a halt of US financial support as well as other unpredictable consequences. President Biden therefore abandoned earlier caution soon after the US elections by allowing Ukraine forces to use US-provided ATACMS against military objects in Russia to defend themselves. (Harward 2024) and by agreeing to provide Ukraine with anti-personnel land mines as a way of trying to slow down the advance of Russian troops in Ukraine's east (Lukiv 2024).

Defeat Russia

The Victory Plan is based on a defeat of the aggressor. Regrettably, from the outset of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022, there has been a reluctance amongst some of Ukraine's supporters to define their strategic aim in helping Ukraine. The emphasis has been more on helping Ukraine "for as long as it takes" as opposed to seeking a defeat of Russia in Ukraine. In addition, the phrase "for as long as it takes" leaves open the question about how the phrase should continue. For example, is it meant to be "for as long as it takes for Ukraine to continue fighting" or rather "for as long as it takes for Ukraine to suffer defeat?"

These were some of the points raised by Ukraine's former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, in an interview in a top Latvian weekly magazine *Ir*. He went on to simplify how he perceived Ukraine's victory, namely with three things needing to take place. Firstly, Ukraine itself has to do its homework by becoming stronger. Secondly, Ukraine's partners need to do their homework and provide Ukraine with what it needs, which they are able to do. Finally, Ukraine and its partners need to work together globally to weaken Russia (Ozoliņš 2024). Failure to push for Russia's defeat appears to be based on fear of the consequences of such a defeat, with the fact of Russia being a nuclear power no doubt fuelling the fire of fear. Defining the defeat more precisely could help. It could be termed as "defeating the Russian Empire" or "defeating Russia's imperialistic aggression."

Putin is aiming to restore the empire. After all, he once remarked that the dissolution of the Soviet Union for him was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the last century. His aggressive imperialistic ambitions stretch back to 2008 and Russia's military intervention against Georgia. He has exercised influence also by way of the other ongoing frozen conflicts in Azerbaijan and Moldova. Indications of ongoing interference in the October 2024 elections in both Moldova and Georgia attest to aspirations of not allowing these countries to slip from the grips of Russian influence. Revisionist expansionism has therefore long been at the top of Putin's agenda, culminating in the all-out war against Ukraine in February 2022.

We should not fear the defeat of Russia. There is a historical analysis that indicates that it is actually good for empires to lose wars, just as it would be in the interests of Russia itself that it loses the current war against Ukraine (Shevchenko 2024). Sweden, Poland, Germany, and Italy are all post-imperial countries. From today's perspective, maintaining an empire is inconsistent with trying to maintain the rule of law and human rights at home.

The over concerns about defeating Russia bring to mind the situation in the late 1980s during the Singing Revolution in the Baltic states when the self-implosion of the Soviet Union was under way. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, through policies of "*perestroika* and *glasnost*", was loosening state control. Yet the prospect of a return to freedom for countries subjected to Soviet totalitarianism was not welcomed with open arms by many Western governments. The reaction to demands for the restoration of Baltic independence was along the lines of "Don't rock the boat" or "Gorbachev is a man with whom we can do business." The status quo was seen as preferable to the irritating prospect of dealing with 15 'new' countries.

Today there is a fear about having to deal with a Russia divided into regions. The fate of Russia will be for the people of Russia to decide. It follows that defeating Russia in its war against Ukraine is perhaps the best thing for Russia itself.

Deter from Future Attacks

Ensuring the defence of Ukraine and the ultimate defeat of Russia are both steps towards strengthening deterrence against future Russian aggression. Russia needs to learn its lesson that the price of attacking neighbouring countries would be too great because of the eventual damage that would

be inflicted on Russia itself. Bringing Ukraine into NATO (and the EU) are themselves positive moves towards deterrence. As things stand, the NATO Alliance offers collective defence guarantees to its members, including the important deterrent of a nuclear “umbrella,” provided primarily by the United States.

Whilst the defence guarantee of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty is not applied to non-members of the Alliance, it is clear that Ukraine already complies with the provisions of Article 3. This calls on members to “maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.” This capacity was built up steadily following the start of Russia’s war against Ukraine in 2014, with subsequent assistance from the Alliance. It came into its own following the full-scale attack on 24 February 2022. Ukraine’s ability to defend itself and develop resilience across the whole of society has been remarkable. Many NATO allies will have much to learn from Ukrainians as a result of their experience of fighting Russia. Likewise, Ukraine as an eventual member of NATO, will certainly have contributions to make to the Alliance as a whole, given that contemporary warfare is being shaped on the battlefields of Ukraine.

Deterrence for Ukraine, a country outside of the Alliance, has proved to be a mission impossible. The Budapest Memorandum of 1994 essentially robbed Ukraine of the prospect of relying on its stock of nuclear weapons as a means to deter Russia (United Nations Treaties 1994). The Memorandum, signed by the United States, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, and others was to provide security assurances for Ukraine in return for Ukraine relinquishing its nuclear weapons. Post-Cold War optimism about the future path of Russia, combined with a concern to reduce nuclear warheads through the non-proliferation process, with hindsight, left Ukraine exposed. Russia became set on a path indicating disdain for not only the Budapest Memorandum but also many other international agreements to which it was a party. By 2014, with an increasingly revisionist and imperialistic Putin at the helm, Ukraine on its own could not restrain Russia. Some military support and cooperation with NATO after 2024 helped Ukraine defend itself following Russia’s full-scale war of February 2022, but Russia was not deterred from attempting to fully destroy Ukraine.

Russia is currently not being deterred from continuing to meet its goals. During the last three years, some assessments claim that Western support for Ukraine has been a form of “self-deterrence,” for example, by providing missiles but not allowing them to be fully used in self-defence by allowing

Ukraine to attack legitimate targets in Russia. Ukraine has developed its own means of attacking such targets using unmanned aerial vehicles. It has also successfully taken part of Russian territory by the surprise attack on the Kursk region. Both these measures, along with Ukraine's successful attacks against Russia's Black Sea Fleet, can be viewed as attempts to deter Russia. Despite President-elect Trump's declarations regarding bringing Russia's war to a swift end, Putin's aim may well be to continue for as long as it takes to fully destroy Ukraine.

From the perspective of Ukraine's supporters and countries that are keen to uphold the rules-based international order, any future settlement agreed by Ukraine must ensure that Russia is deterred both from future attacks on Ukraine as well as from potential attacks to expand its empire at the expense of sovereign countries. Such deterrence aimed at Russia should likewise be used as a lesson for other potential aggressors in other parts of the world, such as China, with its potential aspirations for a military takeover of Taiwan and expansionism in the South China Sea.

What Now for Defence, Defeat, and Deterrence?

Failure in any three of the areas of defending Ukraine or defeating and deterring Russia has profound implications for Latvia, the Baltic region, Europe, and beyond. The aggressive imperialism of Putin Russia's will continue if it is not stopped.

What can now be done following the further potential disruption and uncertainty flowing from the outcome of elections in the world's leading power, the United States? The choice seems to reflect the struggle between the "idealists" and the "realists". Either approach must a priori be with the full engagement and approval of Ukraine itself – nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine.

Ukraine and its closest geographic regional supporters still retain a preference for the idealist approach. This reflects the ongoing need to uphold some type of rule-based order as opposed to allowing the total disrespect for international norms that emerged after the Second World War. Legally and morally, Ukraine should be allowed to have its full territorial sovereignty returned. Russia's frozen assets should be used for the restoration and restructuring of Ukraine, which has suffered immense damage as a result of

Russia's unjustified war. President Putin and other leaders of Russia should face trial for the war crimes committed against the people of Ukraine.

Ukraine should be allowed to continue its path towards membership in the EU and NATO. As a country now in negotiations for EU membership, Ukraine will need to fulfil all the necessary conditions to join the block, which includes adopting the laws and norms of member countries. Criteria relating to democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and anti-corruption measures will need to be met. The path to NATO membership has been described as being "irreversible." All political endeavours should be applied to ensure consensus amongst NATO members so that the invitation to join can be issued as soon as possible. In the immediate to short term, all military support (without constraints) should be given to Ukraine to enable a defeat of Russia and the return of all occupied territory. President Zelensky's Victory Plan should be endorsed.

Set against this list of ideal solutions is the increasing pressure to bring the war to an end through a realistic approach. It would not happen in the 24 hours promised by Donald Trump. It should happen with Ukraine's agreement. There have even been indications, highlighted in the Latvian press following the visit of a Latvian officer to Ukraine, that some in Ukraine would prefer a "terrible end" offered by Trump as opposed to the "endless horror" had the Democrats continued in power (Slaidiņš 2024). This was also mentioned in an article in *The Economist*, which stated that "many (Ukrainian) officials were hoping for a Donald Trump victory" (Ward 2024).

President Zelensky has referred to "peace through strength" (Reuters Staff 2024). As things stand, a negotiated settlement would inevitably involve the loss of Ukrainian territory. If so, it should be tied in parallel to an immediate invitation to join NATO with guarantees given to Ukraine by the United States and other big powers to provide security between the period of the invitation and accession to the alliance. Indeed, this appears to be what President Zelensky has suggested as a hypothetical solution (Adams 2024).

In considering the two approaches of idealism and realism, they should not be perceived as being mutually exclusive. A combination could be possible. Anticipating a Trump victory, there have also been endeavours to seek solutions that fall between the realist and idealistic approaches. This idea would revolve around an alternative strategy to both indefinite war and the defeat of Ukraine. It would mean the survival of Ukraine as an independent, sovereign country without a permanent settlement to the issues in dispute. It would also mean (failing membership of NATO) ironclad commitments

by Ukraine's supporters to provide the country with arms for the long haul (Haass 2024).

As we approach a return of President Trump as leader of the world's most powerful country, a period of US introspection can be expected. The United States' engagement in world affairs will inevitably be affected. Uncertainty and unpredictability are likely to return. At the same time, it can be recalled that there were some positive effects of President Trump's first term in office. Ukraine was provided with US Javelin anti-tank missiles. As a result of Trump's insistence that the United States would not allow "free-riders" in NATO at a US expense, many NATO countries increased their defence spending to 2% of GDP and above, in accordance with the commitment given in 2014.

In anticipation of Trump 2.0, urgent action is needed to start reducing Europe's dependency on the United States both in supporting Ukraine and dealing with European security. Signs of this taking place already appeared the day after elections in the United States. Telephone calls between President Macron and Chancellor Scholz took place on 6 November, with their two defence ministers meeting in Paris that same evening. A previously scheduled meeting of European leaders at the European Political Community Summit in Budapest on 7 and 8 November gave an opportunity to consider what actions Europe needs to take to handle the next Trump Presidency. There is talk of France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Poland joining together to play a leading role in Europe (Ruitenbergh 2024). Current internal political turmoil in both France and Germany and with left of centre governments in Poland and the UK would suggest that Prime Minister Meloni's right-wing coalition in Italy is in the strongest position to lead such a grouping in dealing with President Trump. Although weighing against her is the fact that Italy is a laggard in defence spending; currently it spends around 1.5% of GDP with an aim to hit 2% only by 2028.

Developments in the week of Trump's successful return tie in with a suggestion about European 'minilateral security arrangements' – the closer cooperation amongst different groups of countries (Lucas 2024). An example of this is the UK led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) encompassing all of the Nordic and Baltic countries as well as the Netherlands. Such regional arrangements would probably be of use in the event of NATO's survival being threatened by a withdrawal or substantial lessening of engagement of the United States in NATO by the next Trump Administration.

The negative implications of such developments would be a possible fragmentation of NATO. This means that all stops should be pulled out to try to ensure the cohesion of the Alliance. New Secretary General Mark Rutte, given his experience of dealing with Trump between 2017-2021 as Dutch Prime Minister, is well placed to meet this formidable challenge.

Ukraine's supporters must continue to help Ukraine defend itself, defeat Russia, and deter future attacks by an enemy that ignores international norms so as to expand its empire. Failure to do so could result in serious long-term implications for the post-Second World War international order. Democracy must stand up to aggressive, autocratic, and dictatorial regimes in Europe and beyond.

References

- Adams, Paul. November 30, 2024. Zelensky suggests war could end if unoccupied Ukraine comes under Nato. <https://bbc.com/news/articles/cn8g8ylyvyldo>
- Bugayova, Nataliya. 2024. "Institute for the Study of War." Institute for the Study of War, August 14, 2024. <https://understandingwar.org/background/putin-vulnerable-western-policy-masks-russian-weakness>.
- European Council. 2023. "G7: Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine." July 12, 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/07/12/g7-joint-declaration-of-support-for-ukraine/>.
- Fenbert, Abbey. 2024. "G7 to Provide Ukraine \$50 Billion in Loans Backed by Frozen Russian Assets." The Kyiv Independent, October 26, 2024. <https://kyivindependent.com/g7-to-provide-ukraine-50-billion-in-loans-backed-by-frozen-russian-assets/?s=03>.
- Haass, Richard. 2024. "The Perfect Has Become the Enemy of the Good in Ukraine." Foreign Affairs, November 4, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/perfect-has-become-enemy-good-ukraine-haass>.
- Harward, Christina. "Institute for the Study of War." Institute for the Study of War, November 26, 2024. Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 26, 2024 | Institute for the Study of War
- Lucas, Edward. 2024. "Trump Cards: A Survival Kit." Center for European Policy Analysis, November 6, 2024. <https://cepa.org/article/trump-cards-a-survival-kit/>.
- Lukiv, Jaroslav. Biden agrees to give Ukraine anti-personnel mines November 20, 2024 <https://bbc.com/news/articles/cx2d1lj3nwqo>
- Ozoliņš, Aivars. 2024. "Ticot uzvarai.Uzvaras priekšnoteikumi." IR.lv. October 23, 2024. <https://ir.lv/2024/10/23/ticot-uzvarai-uzvaras-prieksnoteikumi/>.
- Reuters Staff. 2024. "Zelenskiy Tells European Summit 'Peace through Strength' Is Needed Now." November 7, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/zelenskiy-tells-european-summit-peace-through-strength-is-needed-now-2024-11-07/>.
- Rutenberg, Rudy. 2024. "French, German Defense Leaders Urge European Unity after Trump Win." Defense News, November 6, 2024. https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2024/11/06/french-german-defense-leaders-urge-european-unity-after-trump-win/?utm_source=sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=dfn-dnr.
- Shevchenko, Sashko. 2024. "'Defeating Russia Is the Best Thing We Could Do for Russia': Historian Timothy Snyder on the Ukraine War." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, August 7, 2024. <https://www.rferl.org/amp/timothy-snyder-russia-ukraine-war-victory/33067942.html>.
- Slaidiņš, Jānis. 2024. "Militārais Eksperts: Maz Ticams, Ka Trampa Ievēlēšana Liks Putinam Uzreiz Mainīt Taktiku Ukrainā." Sargs.lv, November 6, 2024. <https://www.sargs.lv/lv/viedoklis/2024-11-06/militarais-eksperts-maz-ticams-ka-trampa-ievelesana-lik-putinam-uzreiz-mainit>.

- The Economist. 2024. "Ukraine Is Now Struggling to Survive, Not to Win." October 29, 2024. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/10/29/ukraine-is-now-struggling-to-survive-not-to-win>.
- UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2022. "UN Report Details Summary Executions of Civilians by Russian Troops in Northern Ukraine." December 7, 2022. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/12/un-report-details-summary-executions-civilians-russian-troops-northern>.
- United Nations Treaties. 1994. "Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Budapest, 5 December 1994." December 5, 1994. <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%203007/Part/volume-3007-I-52241.pdf>.
- Ward, Alex. 2024. "Why Volodymyr Zelensky May Welcome Donald Trump's Victory." The Economist, November 7, 2024. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/11/07/why-volodymyr-zelensky-may-welcome-donald-trumps-victory>.
- Waterhouse, James. 2024. "Zelensky Presents 'Victory Plan' to Ukrainian Parliament." BBC, October 16, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd0z8gg5v14o>.

3. Russian Veto as a Signal of the Kremlin's Intensified Actions

A Lesson from Ukraine

Dr. Aleksander Olech*

Stanisław Waszczykowski**

Abstract

The Russian Federation, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, holds veto power, allowing it to block decisions under consideration in certain cases. Additionally, veto power in an international context appears in other organisations, including the OSCE, where it manifests as the ability to block consensus. Therefore, Russia influences decision-making both within the most important collective security system—the UN—and within the regional collective security system in Europe—the OSCE. This article attempts to investigate and confirm the thesis that the Russian Federation uses its veto power to achieve goals aligned with its imperial policies. The Kremlin's decisions may be predictable, as they are motivated by its established political strategy. Following the use of the veto, an intensification of Moscow's actions is evident in relation to the area or entity affected by the blocked decision. Selected examples of UN Security Council resolutions and blocked consensus on the extension of the OSCE monitoring mission mandate on the Russian-Ukrainian border are analysed.

Keywords: Russia, veto, Security Council, UN, OSCE

Introduction

For years Russia has used its veto power in international organisations to advance its own national interests. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), it possesses veto power over certain decisions, including those that impact modern global security (Popiuk-Rysińska,

* Defence24, Warsaw, Poland

** International Policy Bureau, Office of the President of the Republic of Poland, Warsaw, Poland

2013, pp. 50–52). Besides influencing decision-making in the main collective security system, represented by the United Nations (UN), Russia also can block consensus in the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The veto power allows Russia to effectively undermine the European collective security system, as it can block the unanimity required for UNSC and OSCE decision-making.

The authors argue that the Russian leverages its veto power to pursue its imperial policy goals. The Kremlin's decisions are often motivated by prior policies concerning the issue addressed by the vetoed resolutions. After exercising the veto, Russia typically intensifies its actions (both short-term and long-term) toward the entity or region affected by the vetoed issue. To support this argument, the authors will examine specific instances of Russian vetoes in the UNSC that have significantly impacted international security. Additionally, it is worth considering whether this mechanism functions similarly within the OSCE, a critical aspect of regional security.

The OSCE has been engaged in Ukraine for several decades, and since 2014, it has conducted two field missions focused on the ongoing war in Ukraine eastern Donbas region (for more on OSCE involvement in Ukraine, see: Waszczykowski, 2021a, 2021b). One of these operations—the OSCE Monitoring Mission at the Russian-controlled checkpoints of Gukovo and Donetsk—was ended by a Russian veto on the mission's mandate extension, occurring in September 2021, just months before the onset of the invasion. Additionally, it is valuable to trace international reactions to Russia's veto on extending the OSCE mission mandate, as it occurred while the Kremlin was amassing troops around Ukraine's eastern borders, with potential conflict escalation widely discussed in public discourse. Conclusions drawn from this example can illustrate the international community's stance on Russia's veto in the OSCE, which may have foreshadowed the impending invasion.

Russian Vetoes in the UN Security Council

The history of the UN demonstrates that both Russia and the Soviet Union are responsible for nearly half of all vetoed decisions by permanent members in the UNSC (Peace Security Data Hub, 2024). The Kremlin's motivations can be traced back to its Soviet and approach to politics within the UN system. During the Cold War, the USSR, as a superpower, used the UN as a platform for rivalry with the United States (Deen, 2023). After the fall of

the Iron Curtain, Russia has sought to rebuild its lost influence, using its inherited elite position in the UNSC. Acting in its national interest and guided by a revisionist approach to the current international order, Moscow uses its veto privilege in the UNSC to further the goals of its imperial policy (Remler, 2020)

In 2008, Russia vetoed a UN resolution that called for an arms embargo and financial and travel restrictions on President Robert Mugabe and his close associates in response to the crisis in Zimbabwe (Nasaw, Rice-Oxley, 2008). The veto allowed Russia to keep Mugabe in power, which subsequently led to strengthened economic ties with Zimbabwe and lucrative investments for Russian businesses, especially in the extraction sector (Matibe, 2024).

In June 2009, Russia vetoed the extension of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG). The Russian ambassador to the UN explained that the extension was impossible since the mission's mandate referenced Georgia's territorial integrity, while Abkhazia had become an independent state (Harding, 2009). In place of UN observers, Russia sent a previously announced increased contingent of its 'peacekeeping forces' and has systematically expanded military bases, as well as made the quasi-state more financially dependent on the Kremlin. Subsequently, Russia took full control of Abkhazia, regaining another piece of its 'near abroad' while blocking Tbilisi's European aspirations.

For many decades, Syria has been regarded by Russia and previously by the USSR as a strategic partner in the Middle East, providing Russia access to the Arab world and a crucial port in Tartus on the Mediterranean coast (Bartz, 2016). Thus, it is unsurprising that Russia cast numerous vetoes during debates on the Syrian war, helping the Kremlin rebuild its position in the Middle East and saving Assad's regime (Mills, 2022). Concurrently, Russia used the Syrian battlefield as a testing ground to showcase and promote its military equipment and contractors.

Other examples include Russian vetoes on matters concerning Venezuela in 2019 (News Wires, 2019) and North Korea in 2022 and 2024 (PAP, 2022). By protecting Maduro's regime, Russia followed the veto with a small military contingent to Caracas and supported Venezuela in circumventing sanctions (Rouvinski, 2020). This aligned with Russia's collaboration with a geographically distant partner who fits Russia's vision of a multipolar and anti-American world order. The case of Pyongyang represents another attempt to support a threatened dictator who, in turn, supports

Russia (e.g., with ammunition supplies and troops) in its aggression against Ukraine (Cha, Kim, 2024). Merely three months after vetoing a resolution on North Korea in 2024, Moscow signed a strategic partnership agreement with Pyongyang, including a clause about supporting its ally in the event of war (Radkiewicz, 2024).

These examples confirm that Russia, by engaging in these issues, has gained short-term benefits (investments, strengthened regional cooperation, military support needed for its war in Ukraine) and achieved its long-term goals – building its influence in different regions and gaining support at the UN against the condemnation of its war in Ukraine (support from both Zimbabwe and Syria). These examples demonstrate that Russia's veto in the UNSC is driven by the Kremlin's imperial strategy. After a veto, various methods are employed to secure Russia's interests in the area concerned by the resolution, such as supporting endangered state leaders politically, economically, and militarily.

The examined issues also suggest that Russian vetoes in international organisations are predictable. After invoking a veto, it is highly likely that Moscow will intensify its involvement in the area or with the entity concerned by the resolution. This demonstrated mechanism of Russia's actions may be universal and not solely limited to using veto power in the UNSC. Given the Russian approach to vetoing UN Security Council resolutions, it is worthwhile to review the blocking of the OSCE operation mandate, where like the examples above, Russian motivations are quite evident, and the veto decision may also have signalled an intensification of actions that followed. Therefore, examining international reactions to Russia's veto in the OSCE and whether these actions led to concerns over further conflict escalation in eastern Ukraine would be valuable.

Russian Veto on Extending the OSCE Monitoring Mission Mandate

On September 30, 2021, the OSCE Monitoring Mission at the Russian-controlled Gukovo and Donetsk checkpoints concluded. Since July 2014, international observers had been reporting on activities observed at these designated border crossings between Russia and Ukraine (Donbas), with the OSCE mission operated at only two of eleven border crossings. OSCE members repeatedly requested to expand the mission to other checkpoints,

but Russia refused, limiting the observers' reports on crucial cross-border personnel movement data to a small section of the nearly 400-kilometer uncontrolled border. Nevertheless, the reports, which included data on the number of people crossing the border, provided valuable information about movement between the Russian Federation and the separatist republics

The final report indicated that since 2014, the mission had observed over 24 million people crossing the border, with nearly 40,000 of them dressed in military attire. Additionally, they documented the passage of more than 290,000 vehicles, including notable mentions of approximately 100 Russian "white humanitarian convoys" (OSCE, 2021a).

These observations are the result of seven years of work by international observers who encountered numerous challenges. Since 2014, Moscow had hindered the mission's capabilities by restricting personnel movement and prohibiting the use of equipment such as binoculars or drones. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic posed additional obstacles to the team. Despite these challenges, the mission's reports provided an objective source of reliable information, with the OSCE mission being the only opportunity for monitoring movement across the uncontrolled border. Observers, who were initially invited by the Russian Federation in 2014, ended their work when Russia expressed an unwillingness to extend the mission's mandate in early September 2021.

As early as May 2021, during an OSCE Permanent Council meeting, Russia obstructed the mission's standard four-month mandate extension (a standard since 2018), ultimately leading to a two-month extension until July 31 (Ткачук, 2021). In response, Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that Russia had blocked consensus on the mission's typical extension period without providing objective reasons. The statement indicated that Russia's position hindered the implementation of the Minsk Protocol, which included provisions for monitoring the border situation and placed additional administrative burdens on the mission (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2021a).

Another two-month extension was granted on July 22, until September 30, 2021 (OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre Secretariat, 2021, p.27). This was the mission's last mandate, as Russia decided not to renew it during a September session of the OSCE Permanent Council (Ukrinform, 2021). At that time, Polish and international media had begun discussing the possibility of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Preparations for a potential invasion or support for Donetsk and Luhansk separatists were evidenced by

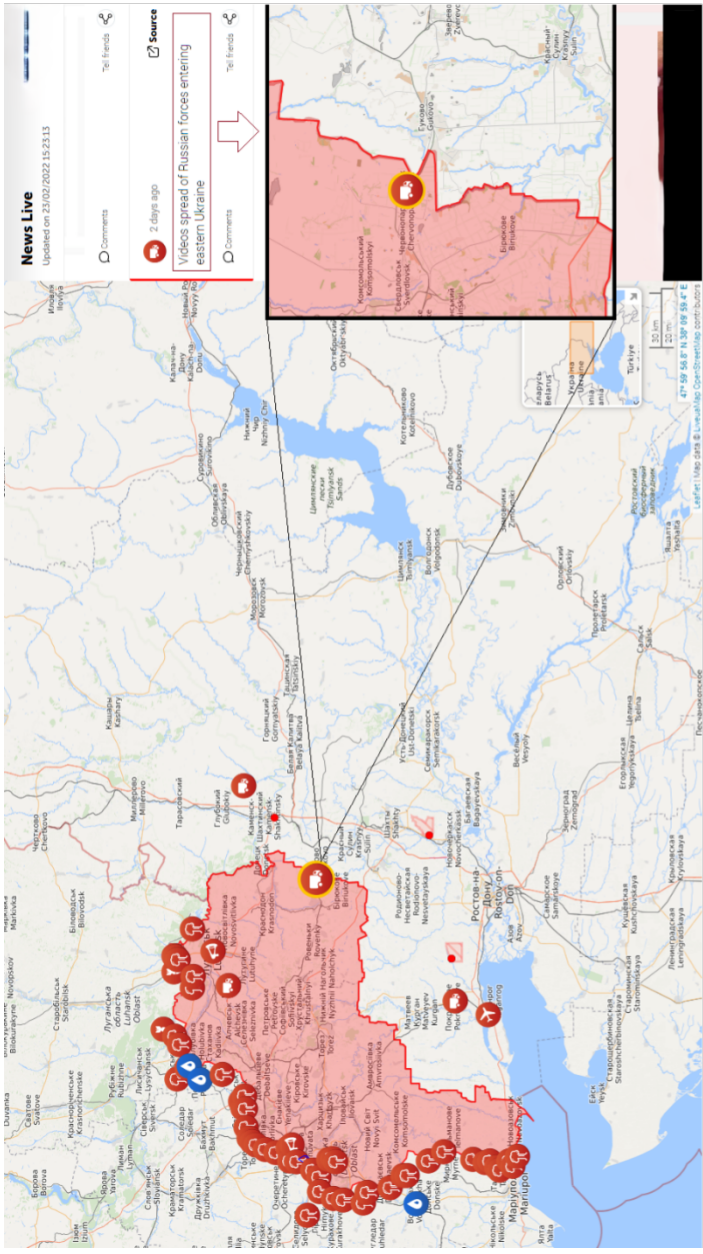
Russian military buildup along Ukraine's border in April and late autumn 2021 (Pińczak, Piotrowski, 2023, pp. 382–384).

The Russian Federation's official stance was presented in two statements from its Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The first, a statement by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova on September 3, described the OSCE Mission as a "gesture of goodwill" from Russia, intended to encourage Kyiv toward a peaceful resolution in eastern Ukraine. Zakharova claimed that Ukraine and its Western allies had not shown respect for this gesture. Additionally, she noted the absence of reports from observers on movements of troops, weapons, ammunition, or military equipment from Russia to Donbas, concluding that the mission did not contribute positively to resolving the conflict and that its extension was counterproductive (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021a).

A broader perspective on the mission's end was presented in a briefing by Deputy Director of the Department of Information and Press, Alexei Zaitsev, on September 30, 2021. Zaitsev reiterated that inviting OSCE observers was an expression of goodwill that Ukraine had failed to capitalise on and instead used, along with its allies, as a pretext for making increasingly "aggressive and absurd" demands against Russia. He also reminded that the observers had been deployed before the Minsk agreements were signed and were not referenced in any subsequent documents. In conclusion, he argued that the decision not to renew the mission's mandate was fully justified (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021b).

Russia's blocking of the consensus needed to extend the mission's mandate was likely motivated by a desire to use the uncontrolled border crossings to increase the supply of weapons, military equipment, ammunition, and personnel (both regular soldiers and mercenaries) to the controlled quasi-republics in eastern Ukraine. Just days before the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, videos and reports emerged confirming Russian military columns crossing the border (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1: Map showing the incursion of Russian forces into Eastern Ukraine on 22 February 2022



Source: Self-elaboration based on Liveuamap (2022). Retrieved from liveuamap.com/en/2022/21-february-videos-spread-of-russian-forces-entering-eastern-

This incursion notably occurred near one of the former OSCE-monitored checkpoints (Gukovo). This example reinforces the main argument proposed by the authors of this article: similar to Russia's vetoes in the UNSC, blocking consensus within the OSCE reflects Russia's broader strategy toward Ukraine. Following Russia's OSCE veto, there was a marked escalation of activity that involved direct use of the now-unmonitored border crossings.

Considering Russia's established pattern of blocking UNSC decisions and the potential for escalation at the time, it is pertinent to examine whether the international community responded adequately to Russia's decision to block the OSCE mission's mandate extension or whether it underestimated the implications of Russia's veto in the OSCE.

International Reactions

Significant attention should be given to the responses from parties involved in the conflict or efforts to resolve it. Russia's position must be contrasted with that of Ukraine (a party to the conflict), the United States and the United Kingdom (signatories of the Budapest Memorandum), France and Germany (participants in the Normandy Format), and regional organisations like the European Union and the OSCE.

The Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Ministry's official statement condemned Russia's decision to not extend the mission mandate and labelled it as sabotage against the Minsk Protocol as well as evidence of continued planning for arms and military equipment supplies to Donetsk and Luhansk separatists. Ukraine criticised Russia's destructive stance and demanded an immediate cessation of such actions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2021b). Additionally, then Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, in a meeting with OSCE Secretary-General Helga Schmid, described Russia's decision as a "deliberate step toward dismantling the Minsk agreements" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2021c).

The United States responded through multiple statements from the US Mission to the OSCE, expressing deep regret over Russia's decision. The statements recalled Russia's commitment in 2014 to uphold the Minsk Protocol, which included provisions for continuous OSCE monitoring of the Ukraine-Russia border. The United States viewed the non-renewal of the mandate as one of Russia's many broken promises regarding Ukraine's peace process (U.S. Mission to the OSCE, 2021a). The United States thanked OSCE

observers for their work under difficult conditions, highlighting the mission's effectiveness and professionalism. The United States accused Russia of arming the separatists and suggested that Russia's initial approval of the mission, followed by its abrupt end, was an attempt to hide its involvement in the eastern Ukraine conflict (U.S. Mission to the OSCE, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d). The State Department similarly expressed regret and concern, urging Russia to extend the mission's mandate and cease its ongoing aggression in Ukraine (U.S. State Department, 2021).

The United Kingdom's statement emphasised the importance of the monitoring mission, which, despite limitations, provided valuable information. It expressed regret and concern over Russia's decision, noting that it contradicted the spirit of the Minsk agreements and constituted a negative step at a time when transparency was urgently needed, especially given Russia's military buildup near Ukraine's borders and in the illegally annexed Crimea (Bush, 2021).

France and Germany issued a joint statement through their Foreign Ministries, briefly lamenting Russia's decision. They highlighted that the mission had provided objective information for seven years and that its termination would weaken monitoring capabilities on the border. They also reminded that the mission was initiated by Normandy Format foreign ministers and called on Russia to commit to a shared effort to resolve the conflict (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

Statements from the European Union (EU, 2021) and the OSCE (OSCE, 2021b), presented by OSCE Chairperson Ann Linde, the Swedish Foreign Minister in 2021, echoed similar sentiments. Along with deep regret, both organisations emphasised the OSCE monitoring mission's importance as a tool for stability and trust-building on the Ukraine-Russia border. They underscored that the OSCE's role as a conflict-resolution platform could only be fulfilled if all available tools, such as dialogue in the Contact Group and the functioning of the Special Monitoring Mission and the now-terminated Border Monitoring Mission, were utilised. The EU further noted that Russia, as a party to the conflict, a Minsk agreement signatory, and the host state for the OSCE mission, demonstrated a lack of political will to resolve the Ukraine conflict peacefully through its decision to terminate the mission.

These responses from various states and institutions partially reveal their stance toward the entire conflict and the OSCE's involvement. The limited ability to counter Russia's decision to block consensus for extending the mission mandate meant that the parties could only express "concern" and

“regret.” However, the statements suggest that the risk posed by Russia’s veto was underestimated or unanticipated. Only Ukraine and the United States clearly condemned Russia’s actions, warning of the risks tied to the mission’s closure. The EU and OSCE highlighted the need to deploy all available OSCE tools to stabilise the conflict. However, the brief and somewhat vague statements from France and Germany combined with Russia’s indifferent or even hostile stance toward the Normandy Format, indicated that negotiations within this framework as well as the Minsk Protocols were proving futile, with Russia’s veto underscoring the lack of a viable path forward.

This instance of Russia blocking consensus within the OSCE aligns with the authors’ thesis that veto power is used to further political objectives – in this case, continuing military confrontation with Ukraine. Blocking the mission’s extension amid Russia’s troop buildup along Ukraine’s borders in spring and winter of 2021 suggests that this decision was a calculated step to prepare conditions for further aggressive actions. Subsequent use of unmonitored border crossings to move Russian troops, culminating in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, confirms intensified Kremlin activity in the area affected by the vetoed decision.

Conclusion

The examples of Russian vetoes in the UNSC confirm the presented thesis. Russia’s approach to veto power in international organisations is characterised by its use as a tool to advance its revisionist political goals. As demonstrated by the examples, following the application of a veto, the Kremlin’s escalatory actions become evident. This universal mechanism extends beyond the UNSC veto to that of the OSCE, such as with the Monitoring Mission mandate at the Gukovo and Donetsk checkpoints.

After several years of mission activity and successive mandate renewals, Moscow decided not to renew the mission just as it was preparing for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia argued that Ukraine was undermining the peaceful resolution process and that observers were unnecessary, as years of monitoring had reportedly not documented soldiers or military equipment crossing the border. As noted, these actions occurred amid Russia’s military buildup near Ukraine’s territory and escalating speculation about a new phase of the conflict. Russia followed a similar pattern of action observed

after its vetoes of UN resolutions, ultimately using unmonitored border crossings to transport its forces to controlled republics in eastern Ukraine.

The statements from selected countries and international institutions suggest a possible underestimation or failure to recognise the risks posed by Russia's decision. Only the United States and Ukraine stressed that Moscow might use this situation to support separatist forces in Donetsk and Luhansk. However, they did not directly point to this decision as an indicator of continued aggression, despite circulating reports of a planned invasion.

In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, it should be emphasised that without reforms to institutions such as the UNSC, the international community has very few and limited options for responding to the Russian veto. However, these reforms are currently unlikely, so aid to the embattled Ukraine must continue to be provided by coalitions of selected countries. As a last resort, there remains the possibility of repeating the Kosovo scenario and launching an intervention without a UN mandate. However, as history has shown, this could similarly be exploited by Russia. In view of this, it is not possible to identify an ideal solution for addressing Russia's institutional veto in the pursuit of a Ukrainian victory in the war.

The model of Russian action proposed by the authors, reflecting the thesis presented at the beginning of the article, suggests that Moscow's future use of veto power in international organisations should not be underestimated. The Russian veto serves as yet another tool for pursuing its imperial policy. It will be employed wherever Kremlin interests are threatened, and, following its application, Russia is likely to intensify actions that often have adverse effects on international and regional security. This is another lesson from the war in Ukraine that should be remembered for the future.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of their employer.

References

- Bartz, L. 2016. "Russian-Syrian Relations: Past and Present." *The Journal of Global Affairs* 5 (2015-2016): 65-74.
- Bush, N. 2021. "Russia Decision to Close OSCE Observer Mission at 2 Russian Border Checkpoints: UK Statement." Official website: gov.uk. September 16. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/russia-decision-to-close-osce-observer-mission-at-2-russian-border-checkpoints-uk-statement>.
- Cha, V., and E. Kim. 2024. "Russia's Veto: Dismembering the UN Sanctions Regime on North Korea." Center for Strategic and International Studies. March 29. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-veto-dismembering-un-sanctions-regime-north-korea>.
- Charter of the United Nations. 1945. San Francisco: Dz.U. 1947 nr 23, poz. 90.
- Deen, T. 2023. "Cold War Politics at the Security Council—and Its Lighter Side." IDN-InDepthNews. <https://indepthnews.net/cold-war-politics-at-the-security-council-and-its-lighter-side/>.
- European Union. 2021. "EUROPEAN UNION, OSCE Permanent Council No. 1336 Vienna, 23 September 2021 - EU Interpretative Statement." September 23. https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/pc_no_1336_bom.pdf.
- Federal Foreign Office. 2021. "France and Germany Deplore End of Mandate of OSCE Border Observation Mission at the Russian-Ukrainian Border." September 17. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/-/2483106>.
- French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2021. "OSCE - Joint Statement by the Spokespersons of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of France and Germany." September 17. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/europe/news/article/osce-joint-statement-by-the-spokespersons-of-the-ministries-of-foreign-affairs>.
- Harding, L. 2009. "Russia Vetoes Plan to Extend UN Mission in Georgia." *The Guardian*, June 16. https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/16/russia-vetoes-georgia-unitednations-mission?fbclid=IwY2xjawExLEVleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHfaOEMECxpGvR3IzmGOA4S_NR08qe1u8gKOTc-jaHTZcG688yjMthcTkQ_aem_5T4OIh52m6q9WfQKRTV35w.
- Matibe, P. 2024. "Zimbabwe-Russia Relations: From Historical Legacies to Contemporary Security and Mineral Interests." *Modern Diplomacy*. June 24. <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2024/06/24/zimbabwe-russia-relations-from-historical-legacies-to-contemporary-security-and-mineral-interests/>.
- Mills, R. 2022. "Remarks at a UN General Assembly Meeting Following Russia's Veto of a UN Security Council Resolution on the Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Mechanism." U.S. Embassy Syria. <https://sy.usembassy.gov/remarks-at-a-un-general-assembly-meeting-following-russias-veto-of-a-un-security-council-resolution-on-the-syria-cross-border-humanitarian-mechanism/>.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. 2021a. "Коментар МЗС України щодо продовження мандата Місії спостерігачів ОБСЄ на російських прикордонних пунктах пропуску «Гуково» і «Донецьк»." May 28. <https://mfa.gov.ua/news/komentar-mzs-ukrayini-shchodo-prodovzhennya-mandata>

- misiyi-sposterigachiv-obsye-na-rosijskich-prikordonnih-punktah-propusku-gukovo-i-doneck.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. 2021b. "Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine on Russia's Intention Not to Extend the Mandate of the OSCE Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints Gukovo and Donetsk." September 2. <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/zayava-mzs-ukrayini-pro-namir-rosiyi-ne-prodovzhuvati-mandat-misiyi-sposterigachiv-obsye-na-rosijskich-prikordonnih-punktah-propusku-gukovo-i-doneck>.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. 2021c. "Dmytro Kuleba Discussed with OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmid Monitoring of Uncontrolled Section of the Russian-Ukrainian Border." October 5. <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/dmytro-kuleba-discussed-osce-secretary-general-helga-schmid-monitoring-uncontrolled-section-russian-ukrainian-border>
- Nasaw, D., and M. Rice-Oxley. 2008. "China and Russia Veto Zimbabwe Sanctions." *The Guardian*, July 11. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jul/11/unitednations.zimbabwe?fbclid=IwY2xjawExLEdleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHcOKlcyC9tKJ-V4qmv_UNVHA31lBNAa05AgW7xtRPW0T92vSQCSH7W Wxog_aem__j9l02gs-NVAZgS-9EPTvw.
- News Wires. 2019. "Russian, US Resolutions on Venezuela Crisis Both Defeated at UN." *France24*, February 28. https://www.france24.com/en/20190228-venezuela-maduro-un-russia-china-veto-us-resolution-urging-new-elections?fbclid=IwY2xjawEyhUxleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHRkuNMTFw7pci7j6luE-m2nVH51u2iLqOMMDumuQUULdwLupiWMSuCr_1g_aem_zdT-NgEigO2KjQ2PxZkP6g.
- OSCE. 2021a. "Report of the Chief Observer of the OSCE Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints of Gukovo & Donetsk." <https://osce.usmission.gov/report-of-the-chief-observer-of-the-osce-observer-mission-at-the-russian-checkpoints-of-gukovo-and-donetsk/>.
- OSCE. 2021b. "Chairperson-in-Office Expressed Regret That No Consensus Could Be Reached on Extension of Mandate of Observer Mission." September 16. <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/498219>.
- OSCE. 2024. "CSCE/OSCE Key Documents." <https://www.osce.org/resources/csce-osce-key-documents>.
- OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre Secretariat. 2021. "Survey of OSCE Field Operations." Vienna: The Secretariat CPC/OSCE, September.
- PAP. 2022. "W RB ONZ Chiny i Rosja Zablokowały Zaostrzenie Sankcji Wobec Korei Północnej." *Polska Agencja Prasowa*. <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1486516%2Cw-rb-onz-chiny-i-rosja-zablokowaly-zaostrzenie-sankcji-wobec-korei>.
- Peace Security Data Hub. 2024. "Security Council Data - Vetoes Since 1946." <https://psdata.un.org/dataset/DPPA-SCVETOES>.
- Pińczak, L., and M. Piotrowski. 2023. "Wojna Rosyjsko-Ukraińska – Kampania 2022 Roku. Przebieg i Następstwa." *Rocznik Strategiczny 2022/2023*: 382-407.
- Popiuk-Rysińska, I. 2013. *Ewolucja Systemu Zbiorowego Bezpieczeństwa Narodów Zjednoczonych Po Zimnej Wojnie*. Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa.

- Radkiewicz, W. 2024. "Rosja Zawiera Sojusz Wojskowy z Koreą Północną." *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich*, June 20. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2024-06-20/rosja-zawiera-sojusz-wojskowy-z-korea-polnocna>.
- Remler, P. 2020. *Russia at the United Nations: Law, Sovereignty, and Legitimacy*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/01/russia-at-the-united-nations-law-sovereignty-and-legitimacy?lang=en>.
- RFE/RL. 2020. "Will They Stay or Will They Go? Russian Peacekeepers in the Post-Soviet Space." *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, November 12. <https://www.rferl.org/a/will-they-stay-or-will-they-go-russian-peacekeepers-in-the-post-soviet-space/30942800.html>.
- Rouvinski, V. 2020. "Russia's Continuing Engagement with Venezuela in 2019 and Beyond - An Update." *Wilson Center*, February. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/russias-continuing-engagement-venezuela-2019-and-beyond-update>.
- Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2021a. "Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on the Termination of OSCE Observer Mission's Activities at the Gukovo and Donetsk Checkpoints on the Russia-Ukraine Border." September 3. https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/kommentarii_predstavitelja/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQUMdqBY/content/id/4852270.
- Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2021b. "Briefing by Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department Alexey Zaytsev, Moscow, September 30, 2021." September 30. https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4875750#.
- Tkaczuk, B. 2021. "Russia Has Reduced the Mandate of the OSCE Mission on the Border with Ukraine Without Objective Reasons — MFA." *Hromadske*, May 28. <https://hromadske.ua/posts/rosiya-bez-obyektivnih-prichin-skorotila-mandat-misiyi-obsye-na-kordoni-z-ukrayinoyu-mzs>.
- Ukrinform. 2021. "Russia Refused to Extend OSCE Mission Mandate at the Border with Ukraine - TCG Participants Issue Statement." September 2. <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3309065-rosia-vidmovilasa-prodovziti-mandat-misii-obse-na-kordoni-z-ukrainou-ucasniki-tkg-vistupili-z-zaavou.html>.
- U.S. Department of State. 2021. "Planned Closure of the OSCE Border Observer Mission." September 17. <https://www.state.gov/planned-closure-of-the-osce-border-observer-mission/>.
- U.S. Mission to the OSCE. 2021a. "Right of Reply to Russia: Russia's Objection to Renewal of the OSCE's Border Observer Mission Mandate." September 2. <https://osce.usmission.gov/right-of-reply-to-russia-russias-objection-to-renewal-of-the-osces-border-observer-mission-mandate/>.
- U.S. Mission to the OSCE. 2021b. "Report of the Chief Observer of the OSCE Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints of Gukovo & Donetsk." September 2. <https://osce.usmission.gov/report-of-the-chief-observer-of-the-osce-observer-mission-at-the-russian-checkpoints-of-gukovo-and-donetsk/>.
- U.S. Mission to the OSCE. 2021c. "On Russia's Continued Objection to Renewal of the OSCE's Border Observation Mission Mandate." September 16. <https://osce>.

usmission.gov/on-russias-continued-objection-to-renewal-of-the-osces-border-observation-mission-mandate/.

U.S. Mission to the OSCE. 2021d. "Interpretative Statement on the Decision on the Budget for Closing the OSCE Border Observation Mission." September 23. <https://osce.usmission.gov/interpretative-statement-on-the-decision-on-the-budget-for-closing-the-osce-border-observation-mission/>.

Waszczykowski, S. 2021a. "OSCE Missions in Ukraine and Border Areas, Part I." *Institute of New Europe*, June 2. <https://ine.org.pl/misje-organizacji-bezpieczenstwa-i-wspolpracy-w-europie-na-ukrainie-i-obszarze-granicznym-czesc-i/>.

Waszczykowski, S. 2021b. "OSCE Missions in Ukraine and Border Areas, Part II." *Institute of New Europe*, June 30. <https://ine.org.pl/misje-organizacji-bezpieczenstwa-i-wspolpracy-w-europie-na-ukrainie-i-obszarze-granicznym-czesc-ii/>.

4. What are the Preconditions for Ukraine to Restore its Territorial Integrity and Sovereignty?

Tomas Janeliūnas*

Abstract

The article examines the complexities surrounding potential resolutions for the Russia-Ukraine conflict, analysing major peace proposals, international responses, and scenarios for the future. The article argues that, given the Western countries' reluctance to equip Ukraine with the means to decisively defeat Russia fully, the likelihood of Ukraine maintaining both full sovereignty and territorial integrity remains low. Instead, a compromise may be inevitable, potentially forcing Ukraine to accept losses of occupied territories and limiting its future security options. Exploring best- and worst-case scenarios underscores the fragile balance between justice-driven peace aspirations and the pragmatic constraints imposed by global political dynamics.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian war, just peace, sovereignty, territorial integrity, scenarios.

Introduction

No war lasts forever. As Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine nears the end of its third year, it seems poised to become an exception rather than a typical case. According to Weisiger (2013), the median duration of interstate wars since 1815 was about four months. Only a few wars in the 20th century were both prolonged and intense, but these wars caused disproportionate human suffering. The Russo-Ukrainian war is one of them. As of September 2024, the number of Ukrainians and Russians killed or wounded has reached approximately one million (Pancevski 2024).

Since 24 February 2022, numerous attempts have been made to propose plans for a ceasefire or potential peace agreement. From official UN resolutions to public commentaries by experts and politicians, there has been a

* Professor at Vilnius University, Institute of International Relations and Political Science

wide range of arguments and calls to end human suffering in Ukraine and stop the war.

Officially, the fundamental need to preserve Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity is not in question. All major international organizations emphasise the obligations under international law to respect Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. The UN General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1, titled "Aggression against Ukraine" and adopted on March 2, 2022, clearly reaffirms its "commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders, extending to its territorial waters"(UN General Assembly (11th emergency special 2022). This principle has been reiterated in subsequent resolutions and declarations by the UN General Assembly, European Council, NATO, and other international institutions. Unfortunately, despite numerous official documents and declarations, international institutions have proven unable to enforce the imperatives of international law and compel Russia to cease its aggression and withdraw its military forces from Ukrainian territory.

When it comes to practical solutions for achieving Ukraine's legal rights, there is a wide range of approaches regarding the conditions and reasoning for ending the ongoing war while preserving Ukraine's political independence and territorial integrity. Despite differences in arguments, depth, and political motivations, most publicly available proposals can be summarised into two categories: those advocating for respect for justice and international obligations and those promoting a pragmatic approach that suggests some trade-offs in pursuit of a potential peace agreement between Ukraine and Russia.

In the first part of this article, a review of some of the most notable proposals from both categories will be provided. The second part will analyse certain shortcomings in the existing plans, including the latest Peace Plan revealed by President Volodymyr Zelensky in October 2024, and offer conclusions on potential conditions for a peace solution. However, these should be regarded more as scenarios, with their likelihood depending on specific political choices by world leaders and developments on the front line. Although the normative approach may be the most appealing option, we must acknowledge the reality of a world where political interests and motives often prevail over international law and normative imperatives.

Peace Plans and Proposed Solutions

In November 2022, at the G-20 meeting in Bali, President Zelensky presented a 10-point peace plan, later referred to as Zelensky's "Peace Formula." It was Ukraine's first consistent proposal following failed negotiations between Russian and Ukrainian representatives, facilitated by the leaders of Turkey and Belarus in the spring of 2022. Zelensky's plan represents perhaps the most assertive stance among those advocating for peace and the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity through decisive strength. Referring to the UN Charter, the plan is based on the precondition of restoring territorial integrity—including Crimea and other parts of Ukraine annexed by Russia in 2014—emphasising that this is "not for negotiation" ("Zelensky's Peace Plan: 10 Essential Points"). It also includes, as a prerequisite, the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory, which is "plain and simple."

As plainly and simply as stated, the plan included no clear path for implementation beyond an open call for support from all nations and international organizations. Although the plan does not address potential NATO membership for Ukraine, Zelensky's Peace Formula includes a point titled "Prevention of Escalation," asserting that further escalation can only be prevented "with proper and effective security guarantees for Ukraine, as well as a renewed post-war security architecture in the Euro-Atlantic space that will include Ukraine" ("Zelensky's Peace Plan: 10 Essential Points").

This concept of escalation prevention later took on a more specific form: before the NATO Vilnius Summit in July 2023, Zelensky had hoped for an invitation to join NATO or, at minimum, firm security guarantees from major NATO powers. In September 2022, a more detailed plan for international security guarantees for Ukraine, known as the Kyiv Security Compact, was introduced. Prepared by former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and the head of Ukraine's Presidential Administration, Andrii Yermak, the Compact became a foundation for official and unofficial lobbying efforts to persuade Western leaders to adopt its recommendations. As the prospect of rapid NATO membership began to fade ahead of the Vilnius Summit, the Kyiv Security Compact was seen as a potential compromise, offering immediate security guarantees for Ukraine. It asserted that the most effective security guarantees would stem from Ukraine's own defence capabilities, with those capacities built through "binding commitments from a group of international partners to mobilise the necessary military and non-military resources" (Rasmussen and Yermak 2022).

To some extent, the envisioned bilateral or multilateral commitments started to take shape at the NATO Vilnius Summit in July 2023. Since then, Ukraine has signed agreements with all G-7 members, as well as with Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Spain, Belgium, Portugal, Iceland, Sweden, and Norway. Among these, the bilateral security agreement with the United States, signed on June 13, 2024, received the most attention (House 2024).

However, these security agreements did not reverse the trend of declining military support for Ukraine, nor did they deter Russia from continuing its aggression. In fact, the agreements were largely normative, focusing on general commitments such as defence consultations. For example, the bilateral security agreement between the United States and Ukraine includes a pledge “to work together to help deter and confront any future aggression against the territorial integrity of either Party” (House 2024). Still, it leaves specific details to be determined by representatives of both countries. In other words, these bilateral agreements did not fully meet Ukraine’s need for comprehensive Western involvement in its defence.

Since the spring of 2024, following the loss of the key defensive position at Avdiivka, the Russian army has slowly but steadily advanced further into Ukrainian territory. The reduced pace of military support from Western allies, restrictions on using long-range rockets within Russian territory, and political uncertainty about the future US stance on support for Ukraine prompted Zelensky to seek new proposals to alter the negative trajectory. In September 2024, Zelensky visited the US to present a “Ukraine’s Victory Plan” to President Joe Biden as well as to both leading US presidential candidates. The plan, later introduced to the Ukrainian Parliament, was based on several key preconditions related to Western commitments and security guarantees (President of Ukraine Office 2024):

1. **NATO Invitation for Ukraine** – emphasizing that “an invitation for Ukraine to join NATO could be fundamental for peace and signal to the Russian dictator that his geopolitical calculations have failed.”
2. **Enhanced Support for Ukrainian Defence** includes “lifting restrictions on the use of long-range weapons, providing appropriate long-range capabilities, and sharing real-time satellite and intelligence data.”
3. **Deterrence of Further Russian Attacks.** Ukraine proposed deploying a comprehensive non-nuclear strategic deterrence package on its territory to protect against any military threat from Russia.

4. **Strategic Economic Potential of Ukraine.** Ukraine's critical resources, such as rare metals and minerals, could be jointly protected with Western partners, alongside agreements for joint investment and utilization of these economic assets.
5. **Post-War European Security.** The plan suggests that, in the post-war period, some US military units stationed in Europe could be replaced with Ukrainian forces experienced in modern warfare.

Zelensky's Victory Plan is based on the "peace through strength" concept, reflecting the belief that Ukraine's victory is achievable if NATO countries extend practical military support and proceed with an invitation for Ukraine to join NATO.

In contrast, China's 12-point Peace Plan, officially titled "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis," was published on February 24, 2023, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. The Chinese plan emphasises broad principles to guide the peace process, beginning with "Respecting the sovereignty of all countries" and calling for the consistent application of international law in addressing the conflict's root causes. However, it also includes a statement that "double standards must be rejected," which leaves a lot of ambiguity about its precise meaning (Parley Policy Initiative 2023).

This idea is further expanded in the second point, where China calls for "abandoning the Cold War mentality" and criticises NATO expansion, asserting that "all parties should oppose the pursuit of one's own security at the cost of others' security, prevent bloc confrontation, and work together for peace and stability on the Eurasian continent" (Parley Policy Initiative 2023). The remaining points address general conditions for peace: "Ceasing hostilities," "Resuming peace talks," "Resolving the humanitarian crisis," "Protecting civilians and prisoners of war," "Keeping nuclear power plants safe," "Reducing strategic risks," "Facilitating grain exports," "Stopping unilateral sanctions," "Maintaining stable industrial and supply chains," and "Promoting post-conflict reconstruction."

Although China's 12-point plan is primarily a declaration of its political stance and an attempt to position itself as a potential mediator, there are notable omissions. For instance, the plan does not call for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory, implying a tacit acceptance of the possibility that illegally annexed Ukrainian territories might remain under Russian control. Additionally, the plan reflects clear support for Russian

narratives, as it blames the West and NATO for expansionism, implicitly justifying Russia's actions.

Nevertheless, there are examples of unofficial recommendations or expert opinions that attempt to suggest "rational solutions," compromises, or middle-ground approaches that reflect Ukraine's interests while considering the current realities of the war front, where Russia's gains are hard to ignore. As Masha Hedberg from the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University summarises, the wide range of such recommendations varies on four major issues (Hedberg 2024):

1. Sustainability of Ukraine's sovereignty: through NATO membership vs. neutrality.
2. Control over all Ukrainian territory, including Crimea, vs. acceptance of parts of Ukraine under de facto Russian occupation.
3. The need for an official ceasefire or peace agreement vs. accepting a de facto frozen conflict.
4. Different versions of future European security architecture and Ukraine's place in it.

Although Ukraine's NATO membership as a long-term goal is affirmed in the declarations of the NATO Summits in Vilnius and Washington, there is a political understanding that achieving a positive consensus among all NATO members in the near future would be unrealistic. According to Politico, at least seven NATO members opposed offering membership or extending an invitation to Ukraine while the war was still ongoing. (Politico, eu 2024).

Some experts, acknowledging the lack of political will within NATO, suggest that "well-armed neutrality" could better serve Ukraine's security guarantees (Allison 2022; Corson 2024). Some have even proposed that to bring Russia to the negotiating table, the US and NATO might pledge to "postpone NATO membership for an extended period of time" (Kellogg and Fleitz 2024). However, the more dominant position among Western experts is to at least issue an invitation for Ukraine to join NATO, with actual membership contingent on meeting specific conditions or upon a common agreement among NATO members (Rasmussen Global 2024; Coffey 2024).

There is also a suggestion that while Ukraine's sovereignty and independence are non-negotiable, "achieving that goal does not require the country to recover full control of Crimea and the Donbas in the near term" (Haass and Kupchan 2023). This position stems from the so-called pragmatic approach,

arguing that military victory over Russia could not be the only way to end the war and still keep Ukraine as a sovereign country. As Russia made slow but steady progress in the second half of 2024, with no clear prospect for Ukraine to reverse the war's trajectory on the ground, this position gained at least some tacit support among Western politicians and experts.

Scenarios and Preconditions

The first international Peace Summit in Switzerland, held in June 2024, did not come with a clear path or guidelines to peace, but it revealed positions where Ukraine and Russia are standing on this “long road”, as many summit participants admitted.

Ukraine's position remains the same and relies on the premises of “just peace”: Russia is an intruder, and negotiations with Russia are possible only when Russia withdraws military forces from Ukraine. As Zelensky told at the news conference at the summit, “Russia can start the negotiations with us tomorrow, not waiting for anything, if they pull out from our legal territories.” (Voice of America 2024). On the other hand, Russians responded with their potential conditions for a peace deal: the Kremlin said that Ukraine should “reflect” on Putin's demands that Ukraine drops its bid to join NATO and gives up the four districts Russia now claims: Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson (Voice of America 2024). Although Russian military forces do not entirely control the named districts (as of November 2024), Russia declared the annexations of those four districts after holding faked referendums in occupied areas of Ukraine already in the autumn of 2022. Of course, there is no guarantee that Russian forces would not attempt to move deeper into Ukraine's territory, but there is at least some plausible line where Russia could stop its military advance.

A few scenarios can be drawn regarding how the ceasefire of peace agreement could be made. The main variable in the different scenarios is still the factual control of Ukraine's (and Russia's, as far as Ukrainian forces control some part of Kursk district) territories.

1. **Just peace.** The real restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty within its internationally recognised borders is the war's only just and long-lasting resolution. Only in this way could Ukraine expect to maintain a feasible peace with Russia and all sovereign rights to choose its forms of security, including memberships

in political, economic, and military alliances. All other compromises, especially leaving de facto control of some Ukrainian territories to Russia, could be seen only as a temporary solution or conditions for a ceasefire, but not as long-lasting peace. Furthermore, there is almost a certain risk that Russia, able to keep some Ukrainian territories under its de facto control, would treat such a situation only as a temporary stage in a longer conquest to take over Ukraine entirely.

The acceptance of this reality leads to an inevitable precondition for the “just peace” scenario: a confident and assertive retake of Russian-occupied territories, including Crimea, by Ukrainian forces. A variant of this military solution could be an agreement to swap de facto-controlled territories if Ukraine’s forces expand its presence in the Kursk district or other Russian territory.

Although looking at recent trends on the battleground, this scenario seems to be unrealistic, it could be potentially achievable under some specific conditions:

- The permission for Ukraine’s military forces to use long-range weapons on targets inside the Russian soil.
- A radical increase in military and economic support to Ukraine from Western and democratic countries without the exclusion of any sort of weaponry.
- Clear and specific guarantees from NATO’s nuclear countries to include Ukraine in extended nuclear deterrence. Such guarantees could be linked with a political decision to invite Ukraine to join NATO or provided by specific bilateral security agreements with the US, UK, and France.

Unfortunately, all those relatively simple conditions are not foreseeable, at least under the current political leadership of the US and the biggest European NATO states. It would be naïve to expect that even the change of governments in the US or Germany could result in a more assertive goal to defeat Russia. Therefore, this scenario is very unlikely.

2. **Russia enforced a temporary peace agreement.** This scenario stems from the current negative trend on the battleground when Russian forces are gradually moving forward and inching towards the district borders of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. Following this trend, and supposing Western support for Ukraine also keeps

slowing and diminishing, Ukrainians could be forced to negotiate with Russia while still holding the remaining territory control and political sovereignty. Accordingly, the Kremlin should seek to impose certain restrictions on Ukraine, which may include:

- Neutrality of Ukraine refraining from joining NATO or forming military alliances against Russia; this condition could be additionally supplemented with some requirements to minimise military cooperation with NATO countries or limit NATO military support for Ukraine.
- The front lines could be recognised as provisional borders, with Russian forces controlling the four occupied districts and de facto possessing economic and political administration of the occupied territories.
- A partial demilitarization of Ukraine: Kyiv can be pressed to restrict military presence near the ceasefire line, limiting heavy weaponry, long-range missile systems and troop concentrations within a specified zone or in total numbers.
- Ukraine's commitment to remain a non-nuclear state.

Even if such conditions are acceptable to Ukraine, as a temporary agreement, the potential treaty should bear the guarantee that Russia will not threaten Ukraine and will keep its obligations. That would require some strong commitments from other states, such as the US, Germany, France, the UK, China, India, and Turkey, to observe the implementation of the agreement and clear sanction mechanisms in the event of the agreement breach.

Needless to say, such an agreement would resemble more of a Ukraine capitulation rather than a feasible peace treaty. The occupied territories of Ukraine would not be recognised internationally, and the Ukrainian government would never accept the Russian occupation. At best, such a resolution could lead to another “frozen conflict”, but more likely, it could be only a short-term pause until Russia re-stocks its resources and prepares for the next aggression wave.

Conclusions

The current political realities and warfare trends in Ukraine show that the possibility of Ukraine achieving both full political sovereignty and complete territorial integrity appears increasingly slim. The Western countries' hesitation to provide Ukraine unrestricted military support — such as advanced long-range weaponry and rapid NATO accession — limits Ukraine's capacity to reclaim occupied territories through sheer military strength and to achieve so-called “just peace”. Without sufficient external backing, Ukraine may need to consider concessions, such as trading certain aspects of its sovereignty or territorial claims for an end of war. This reluctance from Western allies creates significant constraints on Ukraine's negotiating position, making it difficult to achieve an ideal outcome solely through its efforts.

The most concerning outcome would be a scenario in which Ukraine is compelled to accept *de facto* Russian control over already occupied territories, such as Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson districts regions, and Crimea. If coupled with eventual restrictions on Ukraine's freedom to join security alliances or develop its military forces, such a resolution could create a precarious “peace” built on substantial sacrifices. In effect, Ukraine might be forced to forego key aspects of its sovereignty, unable to pursue NATO membership or receive advanced military support, leaving it vulnerable to future Russian aggression. This combination of territorial concessions and reduced political autonomy would limit Ukraine's security options and set a troubling precedent about the consequences of external aggression. It will only be a matter of time before Russia launches another attempt to expand its influence or territory.

While a just and enduring peace would ideally restore Ukraine's territorial boundaries and fully protect its sovereignty, the likelihood of this outcome remains low under current conditions. Instead, the most probable resolution could involve a partial compromise where Ukraine retains the current democratic regime and political sovereignty but at the cost of territorial concessions or limitations on its eventual security policies. Though undesirable, this outcome might temporarily cease hostilities and serve as a starting point for future negotiations. However, any settlement that undermines Ukraine's political independence and territorial claims risks becoming a fragile, short-term fix rather than a stable, lasting peace. The ongoing international response will thus play a crucial role in determining the sustainability of any potential peace agreement and the broader implications for global security norms.

References

- Allison, Roy. 2022. 'Russia, Ukraine and State Survival through Neutrality'. *International Affairs* 98 (6): 1849–72. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaac230>.
- Coffey, Luke. 2024. 'NATO, Ukraine, and US National Security'. 7 October 2024. <https://www.hudson.org/security-alliances/nato-ukraine-us-national-security-luke-coffey>.
- Corson, Trevor. 2024. 'Neutrality for Ukraine Is the Best Route to Peace – The Boston Globe'. BostonGlobe.Com. 26 June 2024. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2024/06/26/opinion/ukraine-neutrality-nato-peace/>.
- Haass, Richard, and Charles Kupchan. 2023. 'The West Needs a New Strategy in Ukraine'. *Foreign Affairs*, 13 April 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/russia-richard-haass-west-battlefield-negotiations>.
- Hedberg, Masha. 2024. 'Comparing Pathways to Peace in Ukraine'. Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. 30 August 2024. <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/comparing-pathways-peace-ukraine>.
- House, The White. 2024. 'Bilateral Security Agreement Between the United States of America and Ukraine'. The White House. 13 June 2024. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/06/13/bilateral-security-agreement-between-the-united-states-of-america-and-ukraine/>.
- Kellogg, Keith, and Fred Fleitz. 2024. 'America First, Russia, and Ukraine'. America First Policy Institute. https://americafirstpolicy.com/assets/uploads/files/America_First%2C_Russia%2C___Ukraine_.pdf.
- Pancevski, Bojan. 2024. 'Exclusive | One Million Are Now Dead or Injured in the Russia-Ukraine War'. WSJ. 17 September 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/world/one-million-are-now-dead-or-injured-in-the-russia-ukraine-war-b09d04e5>.
- Parley Policy Initiative. 2023. 'China's 12-Point Peace Plan, Explained'. Parley Policy. 4 March 2023. <https://www.parleypolicy.com/post/china-s-12-point-peace-plan-explained>.
- Politico.eu. 2024. 'Washington and Berlin Are Slow-Walking Ukraine's Bid for a NATO Invitation'. POLITICO. 23 October 2024. <https://www.politico.eu/article/volodymyr-zelenskyy-ukraine-nato-bid-us-germany/>.
- President of Ukraine Office. 2024. 'Victory Plan Consists of Five Points and Three Secret Annexes'. President of Ukraine. 16 October 2024. <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/plan-peremogi-skladayetsya-z-pyati-punktiv-i-troh-tayemnih-d-93857>.
- Rasmussen, Anders Fogh, and Andrii Yermak. 2022. 'The Kyiv Security Compact—International Security Guarantees for Ukraine: Recommendations'. *The Office of the President of Ukraine*, September. https://www.president.gov.ua/storage/j-files-storage/01/15/89/41fd0ec2d72259a561313370ceelbe6e_1663050954.pdf.
- Rasmussen Global. 2024. 'Rasmussen-Yermak Task Force Releases Recommendations on Ukraine's Path to NATO Membership'. *Rasmussen Global* (blog). 14 May 2024. <https://rasmussenglobal.com/rasmussen-yermak-task-force-releases-recommendations-on-ukraines-path-to-nato-membership/>.

UN General Assembly (11th emergency special, Sess.: 2022). 2022. 'Aggression against Ukraine:: Resolution /: Adopted by the General Assembly', March. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3965290>.

Voice of America. 2024. 'Swiss Summit: Ukraine's Territorial Integrity a Precondition for Peace'. Voice of America. 16 June 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/swiss-peace-summit-ukraine-s-territorial-integrity-a-precondition-for-peace/7658123.html>.

Weisiger, Alex. 2013. *Logics of War: Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Conflicts*. Cornell University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1xx5pk>.
'Zelenskyy's Peace Plan: 10 Essential Points'. Russia's War in Ukraine. <https://war.ukraine.ua/faq/zelenskyys-10-point-peace-plan/>.

5. The Territorial Integrity of Ukraine as a Condition for Ending the War

Dr. Colonel-General Mykhailo Volodymyrovych Koval*

Abstract

The principle of inviolability of state territory, established post-World War II, has been challenged by Russia's actions against Ukraine since 2014, culminating in a full-scale invasion in 2022. This article examines the legal and geopolitical implications of Russia's aggression, highlighting the international community's response and the importance of upholding international law. It argues that the primary condition for ending the conflict is to strengthen support for Ukraine to restore its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Proposals in the interim are discussed, but the article emphasises that real assistance to Ukraine is crucial. This support is vital not only for Ukraine's sovereignty but also for maintaining global order and the principles of international law.

Keywords: territorial integrity, sovereignty, international law, Russian aggression, global order

Introduction

After the Second World War, the principle of public international law became key, according to which the territory of a state is inviolable from encroachment by other states through the use of military force or the threat of force. Although military operations took place in some countries, the global community tried to condemn the aggressor and support the victim, thus restoring order and law. However, the aggressor has always sought to find excuses to convince the world of its "good intentions" to protect someone or something.

The war that the Russian Federation unleashed against Ukraine in the spring of 2014, occupying the Crimean Peninsula and parts of Donetsk and

* Doctor of Military Sciences, Commandant of the National Defence University of Ukraine, Kyiv

Luhansk oblasts, changed dramatically on 24 February 2022, transforming into an open, large-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Russian occupation army attacked not only from the east, where Donetsk and Luhansk regions are located, but also from the south and north, although the invaders called the pretext a “defence” of the so-called “DPR” and “LPR.” Unjustifiably hoping for a swift takeover of a country that is ten times smaller than Russia, the invaders were met with fierce resistance from both the Ukrainian army and the civilian population. “My people are here, my people will always be here, no one will cross out my people!” – the words of the Ukrainian poet Vasyl Symonenko accurately reflected the feelings of thousands of Ukrainians who defended the territorial integrity of the country and their own identity in various ways. They acted within the legal framework defined by the country’s Basic Law. In its first two articles, the Constitution of Ukraine legally enshrines the very fact of the existence of the state, its sovereignty, and territorial integrity within its defined borders (Constitution of Ukraine 1996). Chapter 1 of the Constitution of Ukraine defines the principles and powers of state institutions, including the right to use force to defend the state, which is set out in more detail in Chapters IV-VI (*ibid.*).

International law also clearly defines respect for the territorial boundaries of states as an important principle. According to Article 2.4 of the United Nations (UN) Charter, “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State” (Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice, 1945). According to global legal requirements, states recognise international borders after they have been formally agreed upon. This has become the *uti possidetis* assumption in international law – that the colonial line becomes the international border unless otherwise established (Marston 1994).

Since the Russian Federation recognised Ukraine’s independence in 1991, it was legally obliged to recognise Ukraine’s existence as a state with international borders. Several international treaties registered with the UN indicate that the Russian Federation has officially recognised Ukraine as an independent sovereign state (Crawford 2006).

In 1997, according to Article 2 of the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, both sides reiterated their agreement to respect the territorial integrity of the states, reaffirming the commitments of the Agreement signed on 23 June 1992 in Dagomys (Geiss 2015). In addition, the borders between the Russian

Federation and Ukraine were agreed upon and officially recognised. This is enshrined, in particular, in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. The agreement on the delimitation of the border between Russia and Ukraine, concluded during Putin's presidency (2003) and registered with the UN, agreed on the borders (Megoran 2024).

Ukrainian Territorial Integrity and Russian Aggression

However, the Russian leadership has always considered Ukraine a zone of its own interests and part of a future empire called the Russian Federation. One of the steps towards its creation was an attempt to bring Ukraine into the Eurasian Union and later the Customs Union. This was supposed to result in the loss of Ukraine's state sovereignty and its entry into the empire. The updated concept of Russia's foreign policy of 2013 stated that Ukraine should develop only within the CIS-2, where the Russian Federation is the leader in the military, political, and economic spheres. Therefore, Ukraine's desire to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union became a trigger for Russia, which launched large-scale measures against it. Russian agents intensified the implementation of the ideas of separatism, aiming to split Ukraine and destabilise its social and political life.

Long before that time, Russia had been generously funding the creation of anti-Ukrainian political groups and parties, bribing MPs at various levels and representatives of law enforcement agencies. Particular attention was paid to the population of the border regions, which were geographically and culturally closer to Russia. An important aspect of this influence was the discussion about changing the form of Ukraine's state system from a unitary to a federal one. The Donetsk Republic, a terrorist organisation established in 2005, proclaimed that its goal was to grant a special legal status to the eastern regions of Ukraine. Already then, there were calls for the creation of an "independent sovereign Russian federal state" on the basis of Donbas and Kherson region. Provocative steps included the opening of the "embassy of the Donetsk Republic" in Moscow in 2012 and attempts to issue "passports" to its "citizens." It was the adherents of this organisation who initiated rallies for the separation of Donbas from Ukraine, and, in March 2014, stormed the Donetsk Regional State Administration. In Luhansk, the Russian Federation financially supported the activities of the anti-Ukrainian organisation 'Young Guard,' which called on the population to seize law enforcement and

treasury buildings for a monetary reward. The name of the organisation indicated that it was aimed at young people. The Young Guard had close ties with the youth sector of the United Russia party and supported Moscow's anti-Ukrainian activities.

Wishing to draw sovereign states into its empire, the Russian Federation has used and continues to use military force in violation of its international legal obligations. Taking advantage of the crisis of power in Ukraine and Yanukovich's self-removal from the presidency, Russian armed forces crossed the state border of Ukraine in the Kerch Strait on 20 February 2014. On 27 February 2014, Russian troops without insignia seized the premises of the Council of Ministers and the Verkhovna Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. In accordance with the Agreement between Ukraine and the Russian Federation of 28 May 1997, a limited contingent of the Russian Black Sea Fleet was deployed in Crimea. Article 6 of this Agreement stipulated that "military formations shall carry out their activities in the places of deployment in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation, respect the sovereignty of Ukraine, comply with its legislation and not allow interference in the internal affairs of Ukraine" (Agreement..., 1997). However, Russian military personnel were used to block Ukrainian military units and ports with Ukrainian Navy ships. Having previously declared no intention of attacking Ukraine, the Russian Federation moved tens of thousands of troops to the border with Ukraine under the pretext of military exercises. Fulfilling the formal requirements, Vladimir Putin appealed to the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation for consent to use the Russian Armed Forces on the territory of Ukraine. He received such consent on 1 March 2014. This was a violation of both international law and the national legislation of Ukraine. And on 18 March 2014, the so-called "referendum" on Crimea's accession to the Russian Federation took place.

The international community has expressed deep concern over this behaviour of the Russian Federation. The United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 68/262, which declared the "referendum" in Crimea invalid. The illegal use of force to annex land is legally tainted and that Crimea remains a *de jure* part of Ukraine (Geiss 2015). Military analysts see parallels between Putin's activities during the occupation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Hitler's during the Anschluss of Austria and the annexation of Moravia (Czech Republic). Just as then, the concessions of the international community did not stop the invaders, so in 2014 they had no

impact on the newest dictator, Vladimir Putin. Subsequently, the Russian Federation accumulated forces and further escalated the Russian-Ukrainian war, which later spread to the northern and southern regions of Ukraine.

By 2014, Donbas was home to a significant number of Russians (e.g., 38.2% in Donetsk and 39% in Luhansk) and Russian-speaking people, the result of the deliberate replacement of Ukrainians with Russians as a result of the deportation and genocide of the local population during the Soviet era. This region became geopolitically and economically expedient for Russia. In addition, the residents had family and business ties with the population of the Russian border areas and were under the long-term influence of Russian propaganda. Therefore, the idea of the “Russian world” rested on a prepared foundation of pro-Soviet and pro-Russian consciousness. In addition, the participants in the destabilisation expected a repetition of the “Crimean scenario” without a significant armed confrontation, destruction of infrastructure, and human casualties.

Using corrupt law enforcement officers, unemployed youth, people with criminal records, and mercenaries from Russia, Russian special services formed illegal armed groups (IAGs), which under their leadership stormed local government buildings, attacked military units, and destroyed Ukrainian activists and state symbols. Russian battalion tactical groups protected the puppet terrorist groups from defeat (Rusnak, I. 2017).

According to international and national legislation, the state is obliged to stop any forceful actions that threaten its territorial integrity, life and health of its citizens. Therefore, on 14 April 2014, the Decree of the President of Ukraine enacted the decision of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine “On urgent measures to overcome the terrorist threat and preserve the territorial integrity of Ukraine” (Decree of the President of Ukraine 2014) and launched the anti-terrorist operation (ATO).

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has been a gross violation of the international order, which has long been based on the principles of respect for territorial integrity, sovereignty, and the rule of law. The existing international legal framework for maintaining peace and security in the world has proven to be shaky. The United Nations, whose Charter enshrines the principles of sovereign equality and non-interference in the internal affairs of states, has faced significant challenges in the face of Russia’s actions in Ukraine. Questions have been raised about the effectiveness of international law in deterring acts of aggression. The Russian-Ukrainian war has had a significant impact on regional stability and security in Eastern Europe. The

question arose as to how to solve these problems, including reforming the UN decision-making process. Williams draws attention to the serious challenges facing the international community and proposes to reform the UN decision-making processes to increase efficiency and effectiveness in crisis situations (Williams 2022).

To maintain the effectiveness of the principle of territorial integrity of states, all UN decisions must be implemented in accordance with international law, whose main role is to guarantee collective global harmony and security. One of the most important ideas in the field of international law is the rule of territorial integrity. According to Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the UN Security Council has the prerogative to impose economic, diplomatic, and, in extreme cases, military sanctions against countries that demonstrate a tendency to threaten or use force against other states (Sami Ur R 2023).

However, the Russian propaganda machine, which is heavily funded by the invading state, actively and comprehensively influences world opinion. Some foreign authors, including academics, use biased Russian sources in their writing. As a result, narratives that distort the perception of the situation in Ukraine are spreading around the world. For example, Russian sources actively demonise residents of western Ukraine, calling them nationalists only because most of them speak Ukrainian. In unison with Russian propaganda, Hale in his article “The Foundations of Ethnic Politics: Separatism of States and Nations in Eurasia and the World” argues that the resurgence of nationalism is particularly noticeable in the western regions of Ukraine, where the Ukrainian language and culture prevail. In contrast, in Ukraine’s eastern and southern regions, a large proportion of the population ethnically identifies as Russian, reflecting historical ties to Russia and the Soviet era. The author writes about competing national identities and loyalties that are divided along linguistic lines (Hale 2018).

However, Germans, French, and Italians are not called nationalists for speaking the official language of their country. In fact, neither in the centre nor in the west of Ukraine has there been a negative reaction to speaking Russian or any other language. A foreigner will be answered in the language in which he or she speaks. Along with Ukrainians, there are Russians, Belarusians, Crimean Tatars, and others in the military units that have fought and are currently fighting against the Russian occupation army. By 2022, almost 50 per cent of military personnel spoke Russian, as they were fluent in it along with Ukrainian. The composition of the Ukrainian volunteer

formations debunks the myth of Russian propaganda that their fighters are only from western Ukraine (Stasiuk 2018, p. 237). In 2014, at the beginning of the anti-terrorist operation, the largest number of Ukrainian volunteer units and subunits were formed from residents of the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, as shown in *Table 1*.

Table 1.

Name of the Area	Ukrainian Volunteer Formations within the Security and Defence Forces of Ukraine					
	Armed Forces of Ukraine	MINISTRY OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS			NSU	
	Battalion	Regiment	Battalion	Company	Regiment	Battalion
Vinnitsia	1	-	1	1	-	-
Volynska	1	-	-	1	-	-
Dnipropetrovska	4	1	5	-	-	1
Zhytomyrska	1	-	-	-	-	-
Transcarpathian	1	-	-	-	-	-
Zaporizhzhya	2	1	1	2	1	-
Ivano-Frankivsk	1	-	1	-	-	1
Kyiv	3	-	7	2	-	1
Kirovohradska	3	-	1	-	-	-
Luhansk	1	-	-	-	-	-
Lviv	1	-	1	-	-	-
Mykolaivska	1	-	1	-	-	-
Odesa	1	-	1	1	-	-
Poltava	1	-	1	-	-	-
Rivne	1	-	-	-	-	-
Sumy	1	-	1	-	-	-
Ternopil'ska	1	-	1	-	-	-
Kharkivska	1	-	2	2	-	-
Kherson	1	-	1	-	-	-
Khmelnitska	1	-	-	1	-	-
Cherkassy	1	-	-	-	-	-
Chernivetska	1	-	-	1	-	-
Chernihivska	2	-	1	-	-	-
Together	32	2	26	11	1	3

There is a logical explanation for the fact that since 24 February 2022, most Ukrainians have started speaking Ukrainian. This also applies to the army, because along with insignia, language is a way of identifying a soldier.

Russian propaganda slogans reflect Moscow's geopolitical encroachment on the dominance of the "Russian world": "where the Russian language is, Russia is"; "Russia's borders do not end anywhere." For just a month, the Russian army brought the "Russian world" to Irpin, Bucha, Gostomel in the Kyiv region, Sumy, Chernihiv, and Kharkiv regions. The occupiers left behind torture chambers, thousands of executed civilians, raped children, women, and men. The attitude of Russian commanders to war crimes committed by their subordinates is illustrative. Anna Z., a resident of the military town of Gostomel-1, who in March 2022, along with other civilians, was in the basement of a surviving house under the protection of Kadyrov's men, unwittingly witnessed a conversation between two soldiers. "Who are these people?" a soldier of the Russian occupation army asked the guard of the civilians driven into the basement. "Prisoners," the guard replied. "Why don't you shoot them? Aren't you allowed to? We were allowed to do everything in Bucha!", said the 'Russian aswabadite' (Seheda 2024, p. 97).

The militant Russification of Ukrainians, the systematic ousting of the language from the spheres of economy, science, and culture led to the Russification of a large part of the urban population but could not completely destroy neither the language nor Ukrainian traditions. The Holodomor of 1933 as a genocide of the Ukrainian peasantry, the deportation of the Crimean Tatar people from Crimea in 1944, and the importation of immigrants from the Russian hinterland to replace them led to the artificial replacement of the population in eastern and southern Ukraine. Such displacement of the indigenous population from Crimea and the occupied parts of mainland Ukraine is still taking place today. In Russian-occupied Mariupol, people from the Russian Federation are offered preferential conditions for buying housing, including demand for cheap war-damaged housing. Ukrainian schools there have been liquidated, and classes in the existing educational institutions are being taught using the curriculum and textbooks of the Russian Ministry of Education.

Today, the Russian Federation has somewhat "modernised" the rationale for its seizure of foreign territories and the need to strengthen its influence in the world. From Putin's point of view, this is a struggle for a multipolar and fair, in his opinion, world order (We stand for the creation of a fair world order 2024).

Sukhija pertinently notes that the Russian-Ukrainian war has revealed serious legal and diplomatic challenges that require a thorough analysis of international law, treaties such as the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, and diplomatic mechanisms developed by the UN and OSCE to effectively address competing demands and achieve stability in the region (Sukhija 2022).

Conclusion

At the level of heads of state, the information space offers various plans to end the Russian-Ukrainian war, which are linked, among other things, to the new president of the United States of America coming to power. The Financial Times published one of these projects to freeze the war, which involves the creation of demilitarised zones on both sides of the contact line. Ukraine is not required to give up its territories completely, and the Russian Federation is not required to give up its claims. One of the conditions is that our country refuses to join NATO for several years. It remains to be seen whether Russia will agree to such conditions.

In our opinion, the main condition for ending the Russian-Ukrainian war is to strengthen and intensify real assistance to Ukraine in order to regain and maintain its territorial integrity and sovereignty. This was stated by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the Fifth Summit of the European Political Community in Hungary. He called on partners to provide as many weapons as possible to defend against the aggressor and to limit Russia's ability to "profit from oil sales and its ability to circumvent sanctions" (President: We need enough weapons, not support in negotiations, 2024). Restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity and guaranteeing support for its territorial integrity is an important way to uphold international law today and strengthen the global order for the future.

References

- Crawford, J. 2006. *The Creation of States in International Law*. 2nd ed. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Decree of the President of Ukraine. 2014. "On the Decision of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine of 13 April 2014 'On Urgent Measures to Overcome the Terrorist Threat and Preserve the Territorial Integrity of Ukraine' of 14 April 2014, No. 405/2014." <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/405/2014#Text>.
- European Council. 2023. "G7: Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine." July 12, 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/07/12/g7-joint-declaration-of-support-for-ukraine/>.
- Fenbert, Abbey. 2024. "G7 to Provide Ukraine \$50 Billion in Loans Backed by Frozen Russian Assets." *The Kyiv Independent*, October 26, 2024. <https://kyivindependent.com/g7-to-provide-ukraine-50-billion-in-loans-backed-by-frozen-russian-assets/?s=03>.
- Hale, H. E. 2018. *The Foundations of Ethnic Politics: Separatism of States and Nations in Eurasia and the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Haass, Richard. 2024. "The Perfect Has Become the Enemy of the Good in Ukraine." *Foreign Affairs*, November 4, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/perfect-has-become-enemy-good-ukraine-haass>.
- Lucas, Edward. 2024. "Trump Cards: A Survival Kit." *Center for European Policy Analysis*, November 6, 2024. <https://cepa.org/article/trump-cards-a-survival-kit/>.
- Marston, G. 1994. "The Stability of Land and Sea Delimitations in International Law." In *World Boundaries Volume 5: Maritime Boundaries*, edited by G. Blake, 144-167. London: Routledge.
- Megoran, N. 2024. "Is the Ukraine War a Territorial Dispute? Geographical Contributions to Understanding and Resolving the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict." Retrieved from <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/geop.96493>.
- President of Ukraine. 2024. "We Need Enough Weapons, Not Support in Negotiations." Retrieved from <https://president.gov.ua/news/prezident-nam-potribna-dostatnya-kilkist-zbroji-ne-pidtrimka-94285>.
- Reuters Staff. 2024. "Zelenskiy Tells European Summit 'Peace through Strength' Is Needed Now." November 7, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/zelenskiy-tells-european-summit-peace-through-strength-is-needed-now-2024-11-07/>.
- Rutenberg, Rudy. 2024. "French, German Defense Leaders Urge European Unity after Trump Win." *Defense News*, November 6, 2024. https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2024/11/06/french-german-defense-leaders-urge-european-unity-after-trump-win/?utm_source=sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=dfn-dnr.
- Rusnak, I. 2017. *White Book of the Anti-Terrorist Operation in the East of Ukraine (2014-2016)*. Edited by I. Rusnak. Kyiv: Ivan Chernyakhovsky National Defence University of Ukraine.

- Sami Ur R., Shahid, S., and Zaman, N. 2023. "Critical Overview of the Principle of Territorial Integrity under International Law." *Pakistan Journal of Social Research* 5 (2): 943-954.
- Seheda, S., Aleshchenko, V., and Gdanov, I. 2024. "The Role of the Commander in Shaping the Image of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the Russian-Ukrainian War (Based on Military History Experience 2022-2024)." *Military History Bulletin* 3 (53): 90-100. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33099/2707-1383-2024-3-53-90-100>.
- Shevchenko, Sashko. 2024. "'Defeating Russia Is the Best Thing We Could Do for Russia': Historian Timothy Snyder on the Ukraine War." *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, August 7, 2024. <https://www.rferl.org/amp/timothy-snyder-russia-ukraine-war-victory/33067942.html>.
- Stasiuk, Y. 2018. "Ukrainian Volunteer Formations: Creation and Functioning (2014–2015)." https://shron1.chtyvo.org.ua/Stasiuk_Yurii/Ukrainski_dobrovolchi_formuvannia_stvorennia_ta_funktsionuvannia_2014-2015_rr.pdf.
- The Charter of the United Nations and the Statute of the International Court of Justice. Retrieved from <https://ips.ligazakon.net/document/MU45001U>.
- We Stand for the Creation of a Just World Order. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fLSGcMGwRs>.

6. Is Trump's Ukraine Peace Doomed to Fail?

Doug Klain*

Abstract

Donald Trump's election as president of the United States has fundamentally changed the dynamics shaping U.S. support for Ukraine. This chapter examines the prospects for his pledge to rapidly bring an end to the Russo-Ukrainian war by pushing both sides to negotiate a peace. Ukraine and Russia both have differing incentives for negotiation—while Russia faces underlying risks that continue to mount in its mobilization, defence production, and economic stability, Ukraine wants to maintain Washington's military assistance that has so far enabled the successful defense of Ukraine. Even if Kyiv and Moscow come to the table for talks, it is unclear whether any negotiations can be successful as Ukraine's ultimate objective—international security guarantees that safeguard Ukraine's existence and enable its reconstruction—is fundamentally opposed to Russia's objective of dominating or destroying Ukraine. While Trump will likely succeed in initiating peace talks, his administration will quickly find that it is far more difficult to create a durable peace.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, Trump, negotiations, peacebuilding, security guarantees

Former and future president of the United States, Donald Trump, has been clear from the start that he wants to “stop the killing” and force Ukraine and Russia to reach a peace agreement. Those in his orbit have all suggested different formulations for how Trump can become the peacemaker he wants to be, with many of their plans including concessions that would have been unthinkable for Ukraine just months ago. After decisively winning the presidency, Trump's power to shape the future of Ukraine and European security is immense.

* Policy Analyst at Razom for Ukraine; Non-resident Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center

But Washington does not get a veto on decision-making in Kyiv and Moscow. While the Ukrainian government has sought to define terms for a just peace and create incentives for a Trump administration to push for negotiations that favour Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin has held firm on maximalist objectives that would amount to Ukrainian capitulation. Even so, Trump's victory has dramatically shifted the conversation in Washington and other Western capitals as hopes of a US-backed Ukrainian victory have slipped. Now, a key priority for Ukraine's backers is figuring out how to mitigate the risks of Ukraine being sold out in any peace negotiations with Russia and maximize the likelihood of a settlement that favours Ukraine and allows it to achieve its core goals of guaranteed sovereignty and security while enabling Ukraine's reconstruction.

Trump's advisors are sorting through alternate visions for what a desired end-state could be and indicate that the future administration will quickly push for talks after taking office. With Russia's wartime economy facing near-term risks and Ukraine under threat of losing US military assistance, both sides are likely to come to the table at Washington's behest.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other Western leaders have been clear that without meaningful security guarantees – formulated most recently by Zelenskyy as “NATO or nukes” – there will be little to stop Russia from resuming its war to conquer Ukraine. In anticipation of a new US administration, Zelenskyy has promoted a “victory plan” with five recommendations for what partner countries can do to achieve Ukraine's ten-point formula for a durable and just peace. In June, Putin doubled down on his maximalist aims by calling for Ukraine to surrender 20 percent of its territory, to lock in a permanent “neutral, nonaligned, nonnuclear status” and to be “denazified and demilitarize[ed]” (Ilyushina 2024). After Trump's electoral victory, top Kremlin official and former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev posted that “The objectives of the special military operation remain unchanged and will be achieved” (Medvedev 2024).

With a Trump administration soon embarking on efforts to settle the largest war in Europe since 1945, what incentives are there for Kyiv and Moscow to drop their preconditions for negotiations and come to the table at Trump's urging? If Trump succeeds in bringing them to the table, how likely is his suggested settlement to be accepted by Ukraine and Russia, and result in a durable – rather than illusory – peace?

Why Talk Now?

Early into the full-scale invasion before Western military assistance began surging to Ukraine, Russia worked to get Ukrainian negotiators in Istanbul to agree to a peace agreement that would have kept Ukraine partitioned, disarmed, internationally isolated, and unable to defend itself (Dickinson 2024). Due to Moscow's maximalist demands and the discovery of Russian atrocities in Bucha, talks fell apart as Ukraine became convinced that Russia had no intention of ending its efforts to overthrow the Ukrainian government and destroy Ukrainian sovereignty.

Since these April 2022 talks, other negotiations have taken place on discrete issues such as Ukraine's commercial access to the Black Sea, the return of prisoners, and an end to strikes on energy infrastructure. But there have been no publicly reported talks between Moscow and Kyiv for a full ceasefire or settlement to the war.

With the uncertainty of the US presidential election resolved, have Kyiv and Moscow changed their calculus?

After Trump's victory, Zelenskyy signalled a new openness to direct talks by declaring that "we must do everything so that this war ends next year, ends through diplomatic means." Meanwhile, Putin said on 7 November that "we are ready for peace talks, but not on the basis of ever-changing demands that shift from month to month. We are ready to negotiate based on current realities and the agreements reached in Istanbul—grounded in today's reality" (Putin 2024).

To Ukraine's leadership, Russia's war remains an existential threat. "You cannot sit down to talk to a person whose only goal is to destroy you," Zelenskyy said in May (Office of the President of Ukraine 2024b). In response to Putin's declared annexation of Ukraine's Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions in September 2022, Zelenskyy signed a decree formally declaring any talks with the Russian president to be "impossible" (Reuters 2022). Zelenskyy remarked that "we are ready for a dialogue with Russia, but with another president of Russia." Russia has reiterated many of its demands from Istanbul, even though its military is no longer imminently able to decapitate the Ukrainian government and capture Kyiv, instead spending thirty thousand soldiers per month to gain mere kilometres of territory in the Donbas.

Ukraine's incentives to negotiate now are mixed. Despite a complicated military outlook and difficult political circumstances, Russia may be facing dire logistics and manpower crises within the next year or two.

Ukraine's military situation is grim as it heads into the winter of 2024. While Ukraine is struggling to generate new forces that are properly trained and equipped, its troops are exhausted after nearly three years of fighting without regular rotations or clear terms of service. Despite working to spur its indigenous defence production, Ukraine remains deeply reliant on international partners for materiel. Ukrainian forces have shown in Kursk that they are still able to manoeuvre and break through Russian lines, but they lack the capacity and training to keep replicating these breakthroughs on a larger scale before culminating. Russia continues to escalate its air attacks on Ukrainian civilians and infrastructure, with widespread blackouts and brownouts expected for much of the winter. With Ukraine on its backfoot on the battlefield, opening negotiations at this stage could lead to greater concessions to Russia and a worse deal than it might otherwise secure.

Even so, Russia's advantage in mass has failed to produce its own breakthroughs on the battlefield. Its primary offensive in the Donbas continues to advance at a glacial pace, and successful Ukrainian defences in the Pokrovsk direction have forced the Russians to burn through record numbers of troops and armoured vehicles. With the expectation of peace talks on the horizon, Russia is using North Korean troops to mount a last-ditch offensive to retake Kursk.

But the home front is where Russia's real risks lie as its war economy runs hot. It is burning through soldiers as quickly as it can produce new ones, with signing bonuses for new troops at record highs, signalling the difficulty of replacing its losses. At this pace, Russia will likely need a new wave of the same mobilisation that proved politically painful for Putin in 2022. Despite energy revenues, the Russian economy is also showing signs of stress as inflation rises to 8.68 percent in October, employment runs low, and the state's massive cash infusion starting to prove unsustainable (Devore and Mertens 2024; Hodunova 2024).

Defence spending is reaching 7 percent of Russia's GDP and projected to take up 41 percent of the state budget in 2025, while arms production is struggling to meet demand (Knight and Magramo 2024). Half of Russian artillery shells are coming from North Korea, and Russia's two rotary forges can only produce about twenty of the large cannons required for tanks and artillery per month, while Russia loses around 320 of those barrels in the

same period (Devore and Mertens 2024; Hodunova 2024). The outlook is not much better for Russia's tanks and armoured vehicles, which are being destroyed in Ukraine at an average of 155 per month but only replaced by 17 per month. Satellite imagery also shows that the open-air storage facilities where Russia houses its tanks and armoured vehicles are running low as Moscow draws down on its Soviet inheritance to replace its losses in Ukraine (Gierke and Heubl 2024).

Russia has lost an estimated 87 percent of its active-duty ground troops and two-thirds of the tanks it had before invading Ukraine, and it is struggling to create sustainable replacements as its economy treads on thin ice (Strobel and Luxmoore 2023). While a pause in fighting would give the Kremlin a vital lifeline to get its house in order and pursue its war aims again after reconstituting itself, Ukraine has a serious incentive to hold out until Russia hits the iceberg looming in front of it.

The greatest incentive Ukraine has for negotiating now is political. Donald Trump has made clear his desire to rapidly end the war and has surrounded himself with advisers eager to end aid to Ukraine, especially if Kyiv does not go along with any Trump-led peace initiative. Zelenskyy has signalled in recent months, including through efforts to take the initiative on a peace process through international summits and recent statements expressing a readiness to engage in talks, that Ukraine is a willing partner and should not be sidelined in favour of direct US-Russia negotiations over its future.

The formula being outlined by Trump's advisors relies largely on coercion to bring Ukraine and Russia to the table. They have suggested that if Ukraine does not come to the table, the United States could threaten to withhold military assistance – if Russia refuses, it could threaten to increase military assistance to Ukraine while levying further sanctions and removing the kinds of weapons restrictions placed on Kyiv by the Biden administration (Kellogg and Fleitz 2024).

When military aid was paused between December 2023-April 2024 due to domestic crises in the United States, Ukraine faced significant challenges as it ran out of artillery ammunition and air defence interceptors, allowing Russia to take the initiative (Bailey and Kagan 2024). The renewed prospect of decreased military support is a serious driver for Ukrainian willingness to cooperate with Trump and enter into negotiations with few preconditions.

While the hopes of accumulated Russian domestic risks leading to a partial collapse of Moscow's forces and logistics in the near-term might incentivise Ukraine to hold out, the risk of appearing to be an intransigent party and losing US military support is greater. Zelenskyy is likely to stand by his word and work with Trump to open negotiations, while working hard to shape the conditions under which these talks occur by trying to secure additional military support to enter into negotiations from a position of greater strength.

Russia has plenty of incentives to start negotiating, especially if it perceives Ukraine as being pushed into talks by its partners. In the coming months, Russia is likely to continue escalating its strikes on Ukraine – such as its massive November 17 air attack with over 200 missiles and drones – as well as accept increasing personnel and materiel losses on the battlefield in exchange for territory to take a position of strength when talks do commence (O'Grady 2024).

Trump, for his part, is eager to make good on his repeated promises to end the war “in a day” (Blasey and Murphy 2024). While Ukraine and its backers would want Kyiv to be in the best position possible before entering talks – such as by surging military assistance and using sanctions to batter the Russian economy – if Russia agrees to talks, it will be difficult for Zelenskyy to hold out for risk of losing US support. Peace talks could commence quickly once Trump takes power on 20 January, perhaps within weeks or months, with both Moscow and Kyiv heavily incentivised to agree with few preconditions and Trump looking to move quickly.

The Bottom Line for a Negotiated Peace

Trump has been tight-lipped about his desired end-state for the war beyond achieving peace itself. If his track record is any indication, Trump is likely to care less about the details of a settlement itself and more about being able to claim a win. This could mean that pro-Ukraine advisors can secure his support for a settlement that is more favourable to Ukraine, but also that restrainers, isolationists, and anti-Ukraine elements could win the debates likely to rage in a Trump White House on whether to seek peace at any price.

At this early juncture, those likely to join Trump's administration have largely avoided getting into specifics about a desired end-state for risk of getting ahead of what Trump himself is interested in, but different elements

and suggestions being considered have emerged in the press. Broadly, these suggestions for how to resolve the conflict are falling into the type of traditionalist approach favoured by longtime Republican foreign policy hands such as Secretary of State nominee Marco Rubio and the more revisionist approach favoured by figures such as Vice President-elect JD Vance or close Trump ally Elon Musk.

Both approaches to peace recommend freezing the war in place, with Ukraine and Russia renouncing attempts to liberate or conquer more territory through force (Ward 2024). Some influential traditionalist voices, such as Trump's former secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, have called for Ukraine to be rapidly admitted into NATO and the European Union (Urban and Pompeo 2024). Vance and others have called for Russia to get a "guarantee of neutrality" from Ukraine, saying that in his vision of peace, Ukraine "doesn't join NATO, it doesn't join some of these sort of allied institutions" (Barnes 2024).

The front line would turn into a formal demilitarised zone (DMZ) – "heavily fortified so the Russians don't invade again," according to Vance – but it is unclear who those in Trump's team think should police that zone. According to the Wall Street Journal, some members of Trump's team rule out the possibility of sending US forces, with one saying "We can do training and other support but the barrel of the gun is going to be European. We are not sending American men and women to uphold peace in Ukraine. And we are not paying for it. Get the Poles, Germans, British and French to do it" (Ward 2024). One suggestion for how to enact peace from Council on Foreign Relations members Richard Haass and Charles Kupchan – both of whom met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov several months prior – is to offer limited sanctions relief to Russia in exchange for it to uphold a ceasefire and DMZ with full relief coming only after Russian troops vacate Ukraine (Haass and Kupchan 2023). This proposal was endorsed by the Trump-aligned America First Policy Institute in its own peace plan (Kellogg and Fleitz 2024).

As the incoming Trump administration fills out its ranks during the transition, particularly the role of a special envoy tasked with leading negotiations, these plans will take better shape, and observers may see the extent to which Ukraine's input is heard.

Russia's stated goals of overthrowing the Ukrainian government and pulling Ukraine back under Moscow's domination have been consistent since the start of the full-scale invasion. Ukraine's stated goals have likewise

remained consistent since Zelenskyy released his ten-point formula for peace (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2024a). These points are likely to be Kyiv's starting point in negotiations and include: 1) restoring Ukrainian control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and ending nuclear threats, 2) guaranteeing food security and Ukraine's agricultural exports, 3) guaranteeing energy security and ending strikes on Ukrainian energy infrastructure, 4) releasing all Ukrainian prisoners of war, detained civilians, and returning the tens of thousands of forcibly deported Ukrainians scattered across Russia, 5) restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity, 6) withdrawing all Russian forces from the territory of Ukraine and ceasing hostilities, 7) justice for Ukrainian victims of Russian war crimes, 8) environmental protections, 9) security guarantees for Ukraine to avoid the war resuming, and 10) a formal end to the war.

These are all worthy elements of a just and durable peace that guarantees Ukrainian security and allows it to rebuild and heal from Russia's invasion. In future negotiations at the behest of the incoming Trump administration, it is also unlikely that many of them will be fully secured, particularly as the Trump team has already made clear it does not anticipate Ukraine's occupied territories to be returned.

While Ukrainians deserve justice, the clearest line that Zelenskyy has drawn has been the necessity of security guarantees, without which the country cannot attract foreign investment, incentivise its populace to stay and rebuild, and prevent the war from restarting in the near future. "A simple ceasefire is a model we are hearing about from some leaders here, from Brazil, from China, and importantly, we are definitely hearing it from Russia," said Zelenskyy on November 7 (Office of the President of Ukraine 2024a). "This is a great model for Russia," he continued, as it allows Moscow to get its house in order by reconstituting Russian forces, addressing economic stressors, and attempt to achieve its maximalist objectives again when the opportunity arises (Michta and Brodfuehrer 2024).

Ukraine fundamentally does not trust Russia to negotiate in good faith, given its track record of violating previous agreements such as the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, its 2008 ceasefire with Georgia, and the Minsk Accords after Russia's 2014 invasion (Temnycky 2024). Unless Russia renounces the belief that Ukraine is not a legitimate sovereign nation, Ukraine believes Russia will violate any agreement that is not guaranteed by nuclear force (Putin 2021).

In any negotiations brokered by the United States, a legitimate security guarantee is likely to be Ukraine's bottom line, and efforts to take NATO membership off the table without substituting it for some other guarantee that is credible to both Kyiv and Moscow may doom peace talks. Delivering on that guarantee, either through NATO membership, a bilateral security guarantee similar to the US-South Korea relationship, or the kind of nuclear power-backed guarantee the United Kingdom offered Finland and Sweden during their NATO accession, could be enough to convince Ukraine to make otherwise significant concessions in terms of territory and reparations.

Zelenskyy himself has sought to create incentives for a security guarantee with Trump specifically in mind. His "victory plan" suggests that with Ukraine in NATO, Ukrainian troops could take over for US forces in guarding Europe so that Washington can finally pivot to the Indo-Pacific, while also emphasising the significant deposits of rare earth minerals in Ukraine that would help a Trump-led United States compete economically with China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2024b).

While a credible security guarantee may be the key to Ukrainian agreement to any peace deal, it is also a likely deal breaker for Moscow as it could permanently protect Ukraine from Russian domination. There are numerous ways this could play out in negotiations, and both Ukraine and Russia are likely to lobby Washington to support their respective preferences. One plausible outcome is that Ukraine convinces the Trump administration to provide some kind of security guarantee in exchange for substantial concessions, allowing Trump to claim the win he seeks. But if this is not possible and Ukraine sees that negotiations will lead to it being locked in a geopolitical no-man's-land, it may drag talks out in hopes of Russia's underlying risks growing unsustainable or exit negotiations altogether to rally European support in lieu of US military assistance.

Without credible security guarantees that prevent Russia from reigniting the war once it is better prepared, Ukraine will be unable to rebuild and risks becoming an unviable state with a broken economy. This Ukraine would be a mortally wounded animal on Europe's doorstep, with Russian aggression just over the horizon, millions of new migrants moving west, and a government that either collapses into plundering or considers drastic means of survival such as the renewed nuclear program already being signalled as an alternative to NATO membership (Tucker 2024).

To Ukraine's decision-makers, security guarantees from Washington should appear far more preferable to this dark scenario. That long-term view is a gamble with the incoming Trump administration.

Conclusion

When Donald Trump retakes the US presidency on 20 January, he is likely to move fast in trying to bring Ukraine and Russia to the table for peace negotiations. Both parties have strong incentives to agree to talks, but the negotiations themselves are likely to prove far more difficult with meaningful reasons for either belligerent to walk away.

For Moscow, the prospect of Ukraine receiving NATO membership or a similar security guarantee – permanently safeguarding Ukrainians from Moscow's domination – could be enough to disqualify Trump's peace effort. For Kyiv, the risk of permanently being locked in NATO's waiting room and subject to Russian aggression could plausibly push it out of Washington's orbit. If the options are to stop fighting and wait for Russia to attack again once its ready or keep fighting and hope Russia hits a wall, Ukraine may be more likely to choose the latter.

Trump's pledge to end the war in 24 hours has always been the same hyperbolic bluster he has utilised in public life for decades. When he comes to power and tries to make it a reality, his team will find there are significant challenges to a quick settlement. The best hope of preventing Ukraine from being sold out are whether Ukrainians are able to convince Trump of their bottom line needs, whether the anti-Ukraine voices in the incoming Trump administration can be marginalised by traditionalist elements, and whether Vladimir Putin himself has the self-control to temporarily drop his maximalist aims and avoid making it clear to Trump that he'll violate any weak peace agreement the first chance he gets. It will be no easy feat.

References

- Bailey, Riley, and Frederick Kagan. 2024. "Institute for the Study of War." Institute for the Study of War. May 22, 2024. <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounders/how-delays-western-aid-gave-russia-initiative-ukrainian-counteroffensive-kharkiv>.
- Barnes, Julian. 2024. "Vance Describes Plan to End Ukraine War That Sounds a Lot like Putin's." *The New York Times*, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/13/us/politics/vance-trump-ukraine-russia-war.html>.
- Blasey, Laura, and Jessica Murphy. 2024. "What Trump Could Do on Day One in the White House." *BBC*, November 13, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ced961egp65o>.
- DeVore, Marc, and Alexander Mertens. 2024. "Russia's War Economy Is Hitting Its Limits." *Foreign Policy*. November 14, 2024. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/11/14/russia-war-putin-economy-weapons-production-labor-shortage-demographics/>.
- Dickinson, Peter. 2024. "Putin's 2022 'Peace Proposal' Was a Blueprint for the Destruction of Ukraine." *Atlantic Council*. November 6, 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-2022-peace-proposal-was-a-blueprint-for-the-destruction-of-ukraine/>.
- Gierke, Sebastian, and Ben Heubl. 2024. "Ukraine: Putin Gehen Die Panzer Aus." *Süddeutsche.de*. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. June 26, 2024. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/artikel/politik/russland-ukraine-panzer-materialmangel-satellitenbilder-e168870?reduced=true>.
- Haass, Richard, and Charles Kupchan. 2023. "Redefining Success in Ukraine." *Foreign Affairs*. November 17, 2023. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/redefining-success-ukraine?check_logged_in=1.
- Hodunova, Kateryna. 2024. "Putin Cuts Payments for Wounded in War against Ukraine." *The Kyiv Independent*. November 13, 2024. <https://kyivindependent.com/putin-approves-reduction-of-payments-for-injured-in-war-against-ukraine/>.
- Ilyushina, Mary. 2024. "Putin Demands Ukraine Surrender Four Regions to Stop War." *Washington Post*. *The Washington Post*. June 14, 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/06/14/vladimir-putin-demands-war-ukraine/>.
- Kellogg, Keith, and Fred Fleitz. 2024. "America First, Russia, & Ukraine." *America First Policy Institute*. April 11, 2024. <https://americafirstpolicy.com/issues/america-first-russia-ukraine>.
- Knight, Mariya, and Kathleen Magramo. 2024. "Russia Is Offering Moscow Residents a Record \$22,000 to Fight in Ukraine." *CNN*. July 24, 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/24/europe/russia-moscow-troops-signing-bonus-intl-hnk/index.html>.
- Medvedev, Dmitry. 2024. "X.com." *X (Formerly Twitter)*. 2024. <https://x.com/MedvedevRussiaE/status/1854067976720597009>.
- Michta, Andrew, and Joslyn Brodfuehrer. 2024. "NATO-Russia Dynamics: Prospects for Reconstitution of Russian Military Power." *Atlantic Council*.

- September 19, 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/nato-russia-dynamics-prospects-for-reconstitution-of-russian-military-power/>.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. 2024a. "What Is Zelenskyy's 10-Point Peace Plan?" War.ukraine.ua. September 17, 2024. <https://war.ukraine.ua/faq/zelenskyys-10-point-peace-plan/>.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. 2024b. "Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Victory Plan: 5 Steps to Strengthen Ukraine and the Euro-Atlantic Community." War.ukraine.ua. November 19, 2024. <https://war.ukraine.ua/articles/ukraines-victory-plan/>.
- O'Grady, Siobhán. 2024. "Russia Launches More than 200 Missiles and Drones at Ukraine." Washington Post. The Washington Post. November 17, 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/11/17/russia-ukraine-war-missile-drone-attack-energy/>.
- Office of the President of Ukraine. 2024a. "Ceasefire Is Impossible without Clear Security Guarantees for Ukraine – Volodymyr Zelenskyy — Official Website of the President of Ukraine." Official Website of the President of Ukraine. 2024. <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/pripinennya-vognyu-ne-mozhe-butibez-chitkih-garantij-bezpek-94325>.
- Office of the President of Ukraine. 2024b. "Інтерв'ю Володимира Зеленського для Reuters 21.05.2024." YouTube. May 21, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyVwZ16dqTU>.
- Putin, Vladimir. 2021. "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." President of Russia. Kremlin. July 12, 2021. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.
- Putin, Vladimir. 2024. "Valdai Discussion Club Meeting 2024." President of Russia. November 7, 2024. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75521>.
- Reuters. 2022. "Zelenskiy Decree Rules out Ukraine Talks with Putin as 'Impossible.'" *Reuters*, October 4, 2022, sec. Europe. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/zelenskiy-decree-rules-out-ukraine-talks-with-putin-impossible-2022-10-04/>.
- Strobel, Warren, and Matthew Luxmoore. 2023. "Russia Has Lost Almost 90% of Its Prewar Army, U.S. Intelligence Says." *Wall Street Journal*, December 12, 2023. <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/russian-has-lost-almost-90-of-its-prewar-army-u-s-intelligence-says-2e0372ab>.
- Temnycky, Mark. 2024. "History Shows That No Ceasefire or Treaty with Russia Can Be Trusted." The Hill. February 5, 2024. <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4443781-history-shows-that-no-ceasefire-or-treaty-with-russia-can-be-trusted/>.
- Tucker, Maxim. 2024. "Could Zelensky Use Nuclear Bombs? Ukraine's Options Explained." *The Times*. The Times. November 14, 2024. <https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/zelensky-nuclear-weapons-bomb-0ddjrs5hw#Echobox=1731528806-1>.
- Urban, David, and Mike Pompeo. 2024. "A Trump Peace Plan for Ukraine." *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-trump-peace-plan-for-ukraine-russia-foreign-policy-926348cf>.

Ward, Alexander. 2024. "Trump Promised to End the War in Ukraine. Now He Must Decide How." WSJ. The Wall Street Journal. November 6, 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/world/trump-presidency-ukraine-russia-war-plans-008655c0>.

7. How to Maintain Ukraine's Security in a Trumpian World

James Sherr*

Abstract

Donald Trump's presidential victory has demolished the orthodoxies of the Biden years in political as well as intellectual terms. Yet the impact of his policies on Russia's still evolving assault upon Ukraine and the West is profoundly uncertain. About two things we can be grimly confident. First, however radical Trump's policies, they will not bring an end to the Russia-Ukraine war 'in 24 hours' or even soon. Second, Vladimir Putin will not alter his objectives. The question is whether he can be denied them. That will require the employment of US and European leverage to four ends: an end to the fighting, the containment and deterrence of Russia, credible security guarantees for Ukraine and the strengthening of its statehood. These ends are within the bounds of realism, but they will demand at least as much effort from Europe as from the United States. If the 'collective West' fails, it will suffer consequences on a scale that not even Trump will wish to countenance.

Keywords: Trump, Putin, Ukraine, Russia, NATO, Europe, deterrence, leverage

Introduction

Times of upheaval demand intellectual discipline, more so than usual because they overturn the rules and certainties that structure judgement. The victory of Donald Trump has created a maze of unknowns. Yet these unknowns have arisen for a very clear reason. The new president feels no affection for, let alone bond to the interests, institutions, and 'habits of cooperation' that have made 'the West' a meaningful term for eighty years. This rupture of continuity all but guarantees that, as today's unknowns recede,

* James Sherr is Honorary Fellow of the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Tallinn, and an Associate Fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House, London

new ones will appear. Inside this maze, what kind of intellectual discipline is possible?

Let us begin by specifying the 'known unknowns'. Broadly speaking, there are three. Will this upheaval complement, complicate, or derail the most brazen external assault against the Western security order since the height of the Cold War? Will it tear the West asunder, rejuvenate it, or reconstitute it on a more 'transactional' but sustainable basis? In what form will Ukraine emerge from this upheaval, if at all? However Donald Trump might answer these questions, Europeans will need to formulate their own answers, as well as a strategy for realising them. We will not have all the time in the world to do this.

The focus of this enquiry, the war in Ukraine, demands innovative and disciplined thinking in its own right. Uncertainty about the new president's policies provides no excuse for equivocation on the part of those who need to be listened to. If Trump's initial policies produce different consequences than he expects — and this is not unlikely — alternatives will need to be based on practical measures rather than pieties. Moreover, all parties to the discussion would do well to accept that there can and should be no return to Biden's policies.

The Biden Legacy

Amongst several factors explaining Trump's electoral victory in November 2024, not the least was the fact that his predecessor found himself drawn into a war he neither knew how to prosecute nor conclude. To an opponent on a crusade against 'forever wars,' the war in Ukraine was a gift. It need not have been.

Supporting Ukraine 'as long as it takes' was a slogan and, at most, a principle. It lacked coherence as a policy and produced no strategic rigour. Strategy is the enterprise of aligning means to ends. If the ends are not defined, either because the protagonists do not want to define them or lack the intellectual clarity to do so, the means will be ineffective. Moreover, strategic success demands knowledge of the opponent. If it is inadequate, one will neither deter war nor devise means that stand a good chance of achieving one's goals once war occurs.

Before February 2022, the administration's conduct was deficient in three respects.

First, Biden showed more interest in persuading Putin not to go to war than deterring him from doing so. Even before his inauguration, he showcased his commitment to 'strategic stability' by unconditionally extending the New Start Treaty. Russia responded with coolness. As with Obama's 'reset,' the emphasis was placed on 'mutual interests' devised in Washington rather than direct and concrete responses to Russian demands. Moreover, 'codified' and 'proportionate' responses showed more attention to 'virtue signalling' than changing the opponent's calculations. Was the administration prepared to enter into serious discussions 'on Russia's basis'? If not, was it prepared to oppose Russia's 'military-technical alternative'? These were the questions that mattered in Moscow. Putin was neither impressed by Biden's proportionality; nor was interested in 'improving relations'. He wanted changes.

Second, the administration's words were out of kilter with its actions. On 4 February 2021, Biden declared that 'the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions are over.' Only two months later, in response to an abrasive Russian warning, he declared, 'it is time to de-escalate' and cancelled a lawful freedom of navigation operation in the Black Sea (Sherr 2021). Several Russian warnings that Ukraine was 'calling its statehood into question' passed without comment. Even Lavrov's 18 January 2021 'ultimatum' to France and Germany to force Ukraine into compliance or face a 'military-technical alternative' elicited no public response from Washington. When Russia deployed force groupings to Ukraine's borders in April, Biden did not airlift arms to Ukraine. Instead, he proposed a summit. In his two summits with Putin, Biden was determined that Ukraine not dominate proceedings – from which Putin concluded that his commitment to Ukraine's security was less than whole-hearted.

Third, Biden seemed more focused on not 'provoking' Putin than demonstrating his determination to foil any attempt to change the status quo by force. Such elaborate caution might have made sense had Russia feared attack by the United States. But no such fear existed.¹ What did exist, begin-

¹ As summarised in a statement by a specially convened All-Russian Officers Assembly in January 2022: '[E]xternal threats are certainly present. But...they are not critical at the moment. On the whole, strategic stability is preserved... NATO force groupings are not being built up, and there is no threatening activity'. Col-Gen (ret.) Leonid Ivashov, "Обращение Общероссийского офицерского собрания к президенту и гражданам Российской Федерации [Appeal of the All-Russian Officers Assembly to the President and Citizens of the Russian Federation], Общероссийское офицерское собрание [All-Russian Officers Assembly], 31 January 2022.

ning with Lavrov's 'ultimatum' of January 2021 – and more dramatically, the 'exercise' on Ukraine's borders – was a threat to attack Ukraine. For most of 2021, the only measures, that the administration put in place to restrain Russia were financial. It failed to grasp that to Russia's political and military leadership, the combination of economic pressure and military weakness is an inducement, not a deterrent. If someone is coming at you with a gun, you don't disarm him by robbing his bank account. Deterrence is the enterprise of demonstrating that aggression will have ruinous consequences for the aggressor. That the Kremlin was surprised by the West's actual response once war began only underscores the fact that war was not deterred.

When the Kremlin launched its full-scale war against Ukraine, it did so in the belief that the West lacked the strategic purpose, steadfastness, and moral fibre to enable Ukraine to prosecute it to its conclusion. Initially, it appeared that the Kremlin had misjudged the West almost as egregiously as it had misjudged Ukraine. Yet as early as April, we could state that the unifying theme in a painfully evolving policy was 'the fear of victory.'² Without re-treading arguments that the author has no reason to amend, Biden's policy and that of most US allies suffered from three deficiencies:

1. *Absence of clarity.* Neither aims nor means were defined with precision: 'We want to see a democratic, independent, sovereign and prosperous Ukraine' (Biden 2022). By all necessary means? 'This war will only definitively end through diplomacy.' Whatever its result? When Lloyd Austin stated, '[w]e want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine,' the President immediately reproached him for going 'too far' (Borger 2022). What should he have said instead?
2. *Failure to employ power decisively.* In 2022, the West possessed the means to put Russia's armed forces on the back foot and keep them there. Between the Russian army's rout from Kyiv in April and Ukraine's counter-offensive in Kharkiv in September, Western pressure was not wanting. Then it temporised and fell into a cycle

² Five articles constitute the author's testament on the war before Trump's election: *Why Russia Went to War*, ICDS, January 2023 (co-authored by Igor Gretskiy), <https://icds.ee/en/why-russia-went-to-war-a-three-dimensional-perspective/>; 'The Fear of Victory', ICDS, 21 April 2022, <https://icds.ee/en/the-fear-of-victory/>; 'The Dangers of an Undefeated Russia', National Institute of Strategic Studies (Ukraine), August 2022, <https://niss.gov.ua/en/news/articles/dangers-undefeated-russia>; 'The Moment of Truth', ICDS, 10 January 2024, <https://icds.ee/en/the-moment-of-truth/>; 'A War Against Falsehood and Fear', ICDS, 26 June 2024, <https://icds.ee/en/a-war-against-falsehood-and-fear/>.

- of incrementalism. Had it been otherwise, the expulsion of Russian forces to the 24 February border might have been a realistic war aim. Instead, Russia was given leeway to construct its most formidable system of defensive fortifications since the Battle of Moscow in late 1941.
3. *Avoiding Russian escalation evolved from a concern to a reflex.* Inexplicably, the result of Washington's sharp warning of 'catastrophic consequences' to Russia in response to a nuclear strike was a process whereby the United States ended up deterring itself. In this, it was implacably backed by Germany and several other allies. As far back as spring 2022, Russian state intellectuals called for restoring 'fear in geopolitics' (Trenin 2022). The past two and a half years have shown that fear works. It has produced temporising just when swiftness was needed and, in effect, has allowed Russia to impose its own rules of warfighting upon Ukraine's supporters. As Sir Lawrence Freedman has noted, these constraints were set not only by Russian red lines but "presumed Russian red lines" (Freedman 2024). The nuclear question aside, the process has been altogether oblivious of Russian escalation, which has not stopped at Ukraine's borders but now embraces increasingly brazen acts of 'hybrid war' outside them.

In 2022, President Biden was given a winning hand in Ukraine. He didn't play it. To repeat what we wrote in April 2022:

This possibly is the last moment to understand that the West is not in a competition for plaudits or virtue. If we fail to preserve Ukraine as a sovereign and independent state, we fail. 'Alliance unity' will not diminish the consequences of that failure. Muddle — the failure to define aims and bring them into alignment with means — will bring failure closer and consign recovery to the realms of speculation (Sherr 2022).

That is where things stand today.

Between Sustainable Peace and Carnage

We know at least one thing about Donald Trump. His world view affords no place for belief systems or an 'international rules-based order'; it is a transactional world, mediated by money.

We know at least two things about the world that Donald Trump will confront after 20 January. First, there will be no solution to the war in Ukraine 'in 24 hours' or even soon. The issue, then, is not simply the plans that Trump unveils on assuming office, but his willingness to alter them once they collide with this reality. Second, the interests of Ukraine and Russia are immutably opposed. Whereas Zelensky will be at pains to accommodate Trump's wishes short of measures that compromise Ukraine's statehood or sovereignty, Putin remains determined to destroy both. Negotiations will not remove these differences. Putin is most unlikely to alter his objectives; the question is whether he can be denied them. For its part, Ukraine will not agree to die. If Russia cannot be constrained, Ukraine's destruction will be consummated by slaughter, rather than agreement. If the United States then stands aside, the 'collective West' will suffer consequences on a scale that not even Trump will wish to countenance. The challenge is to persuade Trump of this before it is too late.

One can over-dramatise the challenge by fixating on what is least amenable to external 'management': the psyche of Donald Trump and the maverick values of his 'MAGA' supporters. What we must contend with are Trump's priorities; the first of which is trade, the second of which is China. This challenge should not be over-dramatised either. Trump might not begin with the premise that Russia is an inveterate adversary, but he does appear to view it as a wilful player in a highly transactional system. Within these terms – which include an energy policy highly unfavourable to Russian interests – he is completely unsentimental. If Russia honours deals, it will have a good relationship with the United States; if it violates them, we do not know how Trump will react, but we can assume that he will. Towards Ukraine, Trump has no affection, but his oft-cited 'antipathy' towards it is possibly exaggerated. He has no affection for NATO either – he wants allies to 'pay their bills' – but there is no reason to believe that the destruction of NATO is his objective. What he wants is an end to the war. He has no *prima facie* reason to accomplish this on terms that damage US global interests or the collective security of the West. It is not beyond his abilities to grasp that the consequences of Ukraine's betrayal would vastly outweigh those incurred after Biden's shambolic withdrawal from Afghanistan, which he reviles.

In these novel and trying conditions, the overarching challenge for NATO allies is to sustain US national interest in the maintenance of collective security. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte has lost no time in launching this process (Foy 2024). But his personal relationship with Trump

and the pre-eminent logic of his arguments will be of no avail unless allies give tangible demonstration of their determination to defend Europe and support Ukraine as well. This will demand spending money, large amounts of it. Trump's mercurial character should embolden this enterprise. If Europe does not throw its weight onto the scales and devise adequate means to uphold its interests, it could find itself at the mercy of an unpredictable United States as well as an envenomed and implacable Russia.

If, for the sake of argument, we can accept the foregoing points as 'givens,' it is not beyond reason that Trump will tell Putin to end the war and present a hard-edged plan for doing so. The hypothetical plan presented below would be a lesser evil. Its most obvious but unavoidable deficiency is that it would impose disagreeable compromises on Ukraine. But its merits would be fourfold: it would preserve full Ukrainian sovereignty over the territory it controls without ceding *de jure* sovereignty over territory occupied by Russia; it would be underpinned by leverage to ensure Russian compliance (or withering consequences in its absence); it would provide a protracted respite affording Ukraine time for reconstitution and urgent reform (notably of its military training and mobilisation system). Not least, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that Trump would accept it. It would incorporate four elements:

1. A comprehensive cease-fire in place without preconditions;
2. Leverage and deterrence by a combination of political, military, and economic means;
3. Military and financial assistance to Ukraine sufficient to offset any advantage Russia gains from a respite in fighting;
4. Peace negotiations, but only after a cease-fire is in place and DPRK forces leave the theatre of war.

The minimal supporting details are these:

1. *Cease-fire.* This plausibly straightforward step might be, in practice, the most difficult to achieve. Putin insists that conditions for a settlement must be bundled into the cease-fire itself. The harmfulness of this method, entirely at variance with the UN model of peacekeeping, was abundantly demonstrated in the 2014-15 Minsk accords. Ukraine would lose less from an immediate end to the fighting than from an end to US military assistance and political support. Russia loses the primary leverage it has. The reality might be different if Russia were fighting the war for territorial gain. But it isn't. It is fighting to change

the very essence of Ukraine and deprive it of the prerogatives of independence. Rendering unoccupied Ukraine uninhabitable and trebling refugee flows to Europe are part and parcel of this process. Unless Putin is forced into a cease-fire, it is most unlikely that there will be one.

2. *Leverage and Deterrence*. The following measures should come into play *either* if Russia refuses to agree to a cease-fire *or* if it resumes its offensive after it comes into force:

- *Military*. All assistance to Ukraine short of war (the policy the author has advocated since 2014). It is worth noting Trump's statement of July 2023. 'I would tell Putin, if you don't make a deal, we're going to give [Zelensky] a lot. We're going to [give Ukraine] more than they ever got if we have to (Hagstrom 2023). (N.B. He did not say 'Europe'; he said 'we'). The words of Mike Waltz, Trump's National Security Advisor are not at variance with these. 'We have leverage, like taking the handcuffs off of the long-range weapons we provided Ukraine as well' (Inskeep 2024).
- *Political*. Some 20 bilateral 'security agreements' have emerged since the Vilnius Declaration of the G7 in July 2023, along with the separate 'Joint Security Commitments between the EU and Ukraine' of June 2024. But they will not constitute useable leverage until a cohesive coalition concludes a treaty-based guarantee to come to Ukraine's defence if attacked. Ideally, this would need to be a *mutual* defence guarantee along the lines of the 1948 Brussels Treaty and serving as a prelude to full NATO membership.
- *Financial*. The case for withholding transfer of \$300 billion of Russian assets immobilised by the G7 (\$200 bn in EU) to Ukraine should fall to the ground if Russia blocks a cease-fire or violates it. The EU has the means to take this decision without US approval. If EU strategists (*aka* the proponents of 'geopolitical Europe') do not win the argument over EU accountants in these extreme circumstances, then when will they do so? (Gould-Davies 2024)

3. *Military and financial assistance*. Assuming that a cease-fire is brought into effect, it is axiomatic that Russia will use it to refurbish its forces and strengthen their offensive potential. These measures must be counter-balanced, and it is likely that the greater proportion of assistance to this end will have to be borne by non-US allies, inside and outside NATO. The 'capability coalitions' established by the Ukraine Defence

Contact Group provide an adequate framework. To date, there has been a deficit of funding, and this will have to be remedied.

4. *Peace Negotiations.* The United States has a clear, indeed compelling, national interest to make the withdrawal of North Korean forces from Ukraine a precondition for agreeing to negotiations with Russia. There is no principled reason for Trump to be more amenable to North Korea's presence than the recent Republican Chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Michael Turner. In his 18 October letter to President Biden, he described these developments as 'alarming and...an extreme escalation of the conflict in Ukraine. They require an immediate response from the United States and our NATO allies'. Whether these forces amount to a 'game-changer' in Ukraine is beside the point. Russia's *quid pro quo* for their presence – assistance to the DPRK's nuclear programme – poses a manifest threat to US interests in the Korean peninsula and East Asia as a whole. On these grounds, Trump has every reason to declare that the presence of DPRK forces is unacceptable and that a cease-fire cannot proceed until they are withdrawn. Putin will doubtless reply that their presence is a treaty-based response to Ukraine's occupation of Russian territory (Kuhn 2024). Possibly, the point should be conceded. Ukraine itself has defined one purpose of its Kursk operation as leverage in negotiation.

For NATO Allies as well as Ukraine, there should be three red lines in negotiation. First, Ukraine's relations with NATO must remain the business of Ukraine and NATO. The undertakings granted by NATO in Bucharest in 2008 (and repeatedly reaffirmed) will continue to remain NATO policy until 32 NATO Allies decide to remove them. If Trump believes that Ukraine's neutrality lies in the gift of the United States, he will swiftly discover otherwise. Second, there must be no *de jure* recognition of occupied territory, irrespective of whether Ukraine foreswears the employment of military force to alter their *de facto* status. Third, Ukraine's internal affairs must remain Ukraine's business.

On the basis of these principles, Ukraine and its Western partners should be prepared to negotiate until Hell freezes over. There are good precedents. The Korean Armistice Agreement required two years of negotiation and was only concluded three months after Stalin's death. None of its provisions stood in the way of the US-ROK Mutual Defence Treaty of October 1953. The July 1940 Welles Declaration,

denying recognition to the Soviet Union's annexation of the Baltic states, remained the basis of Western policy until the Soviet Union itself recognised their independence in September 1991. The Yalta agreement to establish Allied occupation zones in Germany, reaffirmed at Potsdam, did not obstruct the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, its membership of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, and its accession to NATO in 1955.

In Conclusion

More often than not, the principles that should govern statecraft are different from those that do. Although on 5 December, there is more clarity regarding the principles that will govern President Trump's policy in Ukraine than there was on 5 November when the presidential elections took place, what the outside observer knows is still outweighed by what he does not. The uncertainty is only aggravated by the fact that, for good or ill, Donald Trump regards his reputation for unpredictability as an asset.

For this reason, our recommendations for a path forward are directed towards those who might influence the President at least as much as they are directed towards him. The former include some members of his own Cabinet and the US Congress, including a Republican controlled Senate that has chosen *not* to be led by his preferred candidate and not to confirm at least one of his Cabinet nominees. They also include the Secretary General of NATO as well as US allies in Asia who regard the war in Ukraine and Russia's hostility towards the 'rules-based order' as matters of global importance.

What can be said with fair certainty is that an outcome of this war, consistent with US and Western interests, must contain four elements: an end to the fighting, the containment and deterrence of Russia, credible security guarantees for Ukraine, and measures underpinning its independence and sovereignty.

Donald Trump's election poses a more fundamental question. Will the West remain a meaningful term? Unfortunately, the responsibility for answering that question falls less on American shoulders than on those in Europe who, individually and collectively, have not proved adequate to the task. The grim reaper's presence has long been foretold. Now he is here. It is late to be asking, 'what do we do?'. But there still is time to ask, 'what must be done' and set about doing it.

References

- Biden Jr, Joseph . 2022. "Opinion | President Biden: What America Will and Will Not Do in Ukraine." *The New York Times*, May 31, 2022, sec. Opinion. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html>.
- Borger, Julian. 2022. "Pentagon Chief's Russia Remarks Show Shift in US's Declared Aims in Ukraine." *The Guardian*, April 25, 2022, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/25/russia-weakedend-lloyd-austin-ukraine>.
- Foy, Henry. 2024. "Nato Chief Warns Donald Trump of 'Dire Threat' to US If Ukraine Pushed into Bad Peace Deal." @FinancialTimes. Financial Times. December 2, 2024. <https://www.ft.com/content/8a80fa59-c658-4f83-b133-bb0364ce8913>.
- Freedman, Lawrence. 2024. "Escalations, Red Lines, Risks, and the Russo-Ukrainian War | Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies." Stanford. Stanford University. April 19, 2024. <https://crees.stanford.edu/events/escalations-red-lines-risks-and-russo-ukrainian-war>.
- Gould-Davies, Nigel. 2024. "Europe Needs Strategists, Not Accountants." IISS. 2024. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/06/europe-needs-strategists-not-accountants/>.
- Hagstrom, Anders. 2023. "Trump Describes How He Could Solve Russia-Ukraine Conflict in 24 Hours." Fox News. July 16, 2023. https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-describes-how-he-could-solve-russia-ukraine-conflict-24-hours?msockid=0f99308216bb6307331e241f177062d1&utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.
- Inskip, Steve. 2024. "What Would Foreign Policy Look like under a Second Donald Trump Term?" NPR. November 4, 2024. https://www.npr.org/2024/11/04/nx-s1-5173551/what-would-foreign-policy-look-like-under-a-second-donald-trump-term?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.
- Kuhn, Anthony. 2024. "The Treaty between Russia and North Korea Signals a New Era on 2 Continents." NPR. November 15, 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/15/nx-s1-5188400/russia-north-korea-treaty>.
- Sherr, James. 2021. "Some Initial Lessons Identified for the West from Russia's Action against Ukraine - ICDS." ICDS. April 21, 2021. <https://icds.ee/en/some-initial-lessons-identified-for-the-west-from-russias-action-against-ukraine/>.
- . 2022a. "The Fear of Victory." ICDS. April 21, 2022. <https://icds.ee/en/the-fear-of-victory/>.
- . 2022b. "The Dangers of an Undeclared Russia." National Institute for Strategic Studies. August 17, 2022. <https://niss.gov.ua/en/news/articles/dangers-undeclared-russia>.
- . 2024. "The Moment of Truth - ICDS." ICDS. January 10, 2024. <https://icds.ee/en/the-moment-of-truth/>.
- Sherr, James and Igor Gretskey. 2023. "Why Russia Went to War: A Three-Dimensional Perspective." ICDS. January 30, 2023. <https://icds.ee/en/why-russia-went-to-war-a-three-dimensional-perspective/>.
- Trenin, Dmitry. 2022. "Верните страх!" Россия в глобальной политике. 2022. <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/vernite-strah/>.

8. Winning the Long Term in Ukraine

Dr. Michael C. Kimmage*

Abstract

In working toward the goal of Ukraine's complete territorial integrity and sovereignty, Ukraine and its supporters must learn from history and avoid the mistakes that were made in the past, which were the adoption of half measures and half solutions to the problems Ukraine faced in these two areas. Ukraine and its supporters must also recognise the scope of Russia's territorial ambition vis-à-vis Ukraine, which is not to carve up a small amount of Ukraine but to break the country into a viable section under Russian control and a dysfunctional section not under Russian control. In conceiving a diplomatic and strategic approach to the war, Ukraine and its supporters should be very wary of any territorial concessions, which Russia would likely exploit to continue the war. It would be better to build a sense of futility in Moscow where the war is concerned and to approach the war in a spirit of patience, presuming that leverage rather than persuasion will keep Russia in check and lead to Ukraine's long-term advantage in this war.

Keywords: war in Ukraine, Western strategy, diplomatic posture, territorial sovereignty and territorial integrity

Introduction

Restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty will be essential for European security. The challenge of achieving this restoration will be immense, and to conceptualise it properly, three separate questions must be addressed. Why did Europe and Ukraine fail to restore Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and invaded Eastern Ukraine? What is the nature of Russia's territorial ambitions in Ukraine circa 2024? And, assuming Russia's ambitions do not change, how can Ukraine and Europe contain these ambitions and give Ukraine the normalcy it will need to make its way into 'institutional Europe?' The

* Catholic University of America

answer to this last question is a strategy that is long-term and not to be understood in months or years but in decades. There is no quick fix to Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, and victory for Ukraine, or for Europe, is hardly around the corner.

Europe and the United States might still repeat their past mistakes. In 2014, Russia was generally assessed to have limited ambitions in Ukraine – control over Crimea and partial control over Eastern Ukraine or the Donbas. Because these ambitions were thought to be limited, they could be countered with economic pressure in the form of sanctions. When sanctions did not work, Europe and the United States lost interest in the conflict, assumed it had been adequately resolved, and attempted a normalisation of relations with Russia. Across Europe and in the United States, one can – in the fall of 2024 – sense the spread of “Ukraine fatigue.” The media has moved on to other crises, while multiple political parties and personalities advocate for a normalisation of relations with Russia. The vehicle for such normalisation would be a negotiated settlement to the war, a settlement based on Ukrainian concessions. To travel down this path would be exceptionally dangerous. It would make Europe's borders permanently adjustable, and to accept truncated sovereignty for Ukraine would be to invite the truncated sovereignty of other European countries.¹

Europe and the United States must learn from the past. They can do so by closely observing the foreign policy Putin has fashioned for Russia after coming to power in 2000. Despite some personal peculiarities, Putin is a traditional Russian leader. He sought Russia's modernisation in 2000 for the sake of granting Russia great-power status, and for Russia great-power status translates into regional leverage, not just the right but the capacity to create a ‘near abroad’ that suits Russian interests.² Putin is not trying to restore the Soviet Union or the empire of the Czars. He has built Russia into a twenty-first century power, one that has global reach and that is deeply embedded in the global economy – if no longer in the Western economy. Putin's Europe is viewed in concentric circles: countries like Belarus and Ukraine that Russia will attempt to rule; countries like Georgia and Moldova that Russia would be happy to destabilise or to control informally; and

¹ For history of the war's origins, from 2008 to 2022, see Michael Kimmage, *Collisions: The War in Ukraine and the Origins of the New Global Instability* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

² On Vladimir Putin's foreign-policy priorities see Kathryn E. Stoner, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); and Philip Short, *Putin* (New York: Henry Holt, 2022).

countries like Germany, France, and the United Kingdom that Russia will try to punish (for supporting Ukraine) and to shift away, if possible, from their transatlantic orientation. Europe and the United States must learn how to prevent Putin from establishing his preferred Europe. They can only do so through intelligent confrontation with Russia.

The origins of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine lie in 2014. When Viktor Yanukovich fled Kyiv for Russia in late February 2014, he left a vacuum of power in Ukraine. Russia quickly capitalised on this by annexing Crimea, a more or less bloodless invasion of Ukrainian territory, which Russia conducted by pretending its military was not involved – and that Crimea's annexation was in fact a spontaneous effort to “reconnect” Crimea to Russia. Likewise, in Eastern Ukraine – in the spring of 2014 – Russia fomented unrest behind the scenes and characterised this unrest as a “civil war.” By August 2014, such messaging was no longer sustainable: the Russian army was openly operating in the Donbas. Russia might still claim not to be a party to the conflict, but it was one of the powers at the negotiating table in September 2014 and then again in February 2015 in the “Minsk” diplomatic process. Those who wished to be deceived could ignore Russia's role in its war against Ukraine. It was entirely clear to Europe's governments and to the US Government that Russia had invaded and, having invaded, was by 2014 an occupying power in Ukraine.

By 2014, there was a strong transatlantic consensus on Ukraine, and it was not ambiguous. The goal was the restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. From Berlin to Washington to Tallinn, this was an obvious point of agreement. Since 1991, Europe had been at peace, with the exception of former Yugoslavia, and Europe's peace and prosperity were the function of a distinct regional order. The sovereignty and territorial integrity of Europe's many countries, its big countries and its small countries, were the bedrock of this order. The Obama White House saw Europe as the lynchpin of a liberal international order or a rules-based international order: the preeminent rule was the inviolability of sovereignty and territorial integrity. This, of course, was also the purview of the UN Charter. All of these points were made over and over again in Washington. The same was true for Western Europe. In Central and Eastern Europe, these points were not seminar-room abstractions: they were fundamental to countries that had experienced the long history of empire, of war, and of occupation. There was no real disagreement about the theory.

Problems came with praxis. Putin's Russia had incentives that were very different from the West's incentives and from Ukraine's incentives; that was one category of problems. The West would also prove weak and haphazard in the disincentives it imposed on Russia. This was another category of problems. Russia's actual incentives in Ukraine, its actual motivations, were almost impossible to read. Putin and those who represented the Russian government spoke an evasive language about Ukraine. They were only interested in protecting Russian speakers (who were not endangered in Ukraine). They were only trying to resolve the tensions between "separatists" (meaning the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics) and Kyiv, as if these tensions were external to Russia, when in fact they had mostly been engineered in Moscow. In retrospect, Russia's motivations can be intuited. They were probably to destabilise the post-Yanukovich Ukrainian state, to bring Yanukovich or someone like him back to power, and to reassert the informal control Russia had wielded in Ukraine since the fall of the Soviet Union. Ukrainian sovereignty could work for Russia but only if Russia had suzerainty over Ukraine. For Russia, "Minsk" diplomacy was useful because it hid its real motivations from Western eyes.

The West's Ukraine policy between 2015 and 2022 failed in two ways. It failed on its own terms.³ The stated goal of restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty was manifestly not achieved. Russian troops stayed in Crimea, militarising this territory, and Russian troops stayed in the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Russia made no concessions and never followed through on the Western interpretation of "Minsk." Rather than ratcheting up the pressure on Moscow, the Western powers – each in its own way – began to normalise relations with Russia. Germany opened the door for business, a door that had never truly been closed. Its approach was symbolised by construction of the Nordstream 2 pipeline and by constant repetition of the phrase *Wandel durch Handel* – transformation through trade. The United States also normalised its relations with Russia under President Trump (2017-2021) and then anew under President Biden. When Presidents Biden and Putin met in the summer of 2021 in Geneva, the motif of their meeting was conducting business. The implication, if not always the rhetoric, was of business as usual.

³ For a history of Western post-Cold War policy toward Ukraine see Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023); and Eugene Fishel, *The Moscow Factor: U.S. Foreign Policy toward Sovereign Ukraine and the Kremlin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

The failure to impose the West's interpretation of Minsk on Russia was matched by the West's gradual failure to deter Russia from invading in February 2022. For all too long, this invasion was regarded as unthinkable in Western capitals, and that which is unthinkable does not need to be prevented. Only in the fall of 2021 did US intelligence piece together the basic direction of Russian actions around Ukraine. Russia was readying itself for a large-scale war in ways it could not hide from view by October 2021. When the United States made clear that its soldiers would not be sent to Ukraine and that the core policy response to a Russian invasion would be economic sanctions, Putin could indulge the war optimism he had to have in order to invade. There was a curious asymmetry between the military support rushed to Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 and the reluctance to provide Ukraine with arms in the years before this invasion, as if the costs of a Russian battlefield victory became apparent only at the last possible moment, and as if they had been hidden from view before the war began. Russia's ensuing evisceration of Ukrainian sovereignty was the result.

In the winter of 2024-2025, it is crucial to understand Russia's territorial ambitions in Ukraine if Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity are to be restored. Russia's ambitions cannot be measured empirically. Putin consciously obfuscates his intentions, and Russia has (at best) an opaque decision-making process as well as a decision-making process that changes to accommodate the needs of the moment. Yet there is no evidence that Russia's territorial ambitions for Ukraine have diminished with the passage of time. To the contrary: it is possible and even probable perhaps that Russia's territorial ambitions in Ukraine are greater in the third year of war than they were in the first year of war. This possibility would stem from the sacrifices Russia has already made in this war, which are enormous, and from the sense that momentum is on Russia's side coming from a sense in Moscow that Russia may be gradually achieving its aims in Ukraine.⁴

Russia's ambitions in February 2022 were immense. The Russian army lunged at Kyiv in an attempt to decapitate the Ukrainian government. Russia invaded with a force far too small to occupy the country or even big parts of the country, and the presumption in Moscow was surely that the eastern sections of Ukraine would regard the war as liberation from an unpopular

⁴ On Russian ambitions in Ukraine both actual and historical see Serhii Plokhyy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (New York: Norton, 2023); and *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

government. That this judgement proved to be mistaken is less important (in context) than the insight it provides into Putin's mindset. In the fall of 2022, Russia claimed to have annexed territory it did not control militarily. Placing these circumstances side by side – the initial drive to Kyiv and the evolving will to annex Ukrainian territory – one can see that the partition of the country was a Russian war aim. Russia did not intend to trade territory for concessions – such as Ukraine's de-militarisation or permanent non-acceptance into the NATO alliance. Control of territory from Kyiv to Odessa was the Russian aspiration, control meaning the absorption of Ukrainian territory into Russia and the conversion of the people living on this territory from Ukrainian to Russian citizens.

Russia's ambitions are still immense. Russia has put its economy on a war footing; it has subordinated its foreign policy to the war in Ukraine (at the expense of prior Russian commitments to Armenia and Syria); and the rhetoric of Putin and his Kremlin circle remain maximalist, describing the war in Ukraine as a war with the "collective West." Russia's territorial designs on Ukraine correspond to its goal of undermining Ukrainian statehood. An end to the war that would leave Ukraine largely intact, that would allow for Ukraine's integration into Europe, and that might enable a set of Western security guarantees for Ukraine would be very hard for President Putin to accept. Instead, an end to the war that left Russia in control of the Donbas and Odesa – in complete control of Ukraine's Black Sea coast, though not necessarily of Kyiv – might be acceptable to Putin, not least because it would place near insurmountable burdens on the rump Ukrainian state. A settlement to the war that deprived Ukraine of its major industrial, agricultural, and maritime assets would correspond to Putin's broader vision of Ukraine and the surrounding region, which Russia would have considerable power to shape.

In sum, Russia is not hostile to the idea of a negotiated settlement to the war. Moscow might even be eager for a negotiated settlement to the war, but this would have to be a punitive settlement for Moscow, inclining toward the formal acceptance of Russia's various annexations of Ukrainian territory and placing Ukraine in a position – economically and demographically – where its weakness would be guaranteed. A rump Ukraine as failed state would work well for Russia: it would demonstrate the impotence of Western policy and set a new tone for regional order, as Ukraine's problems would radiate out from Ukraine in the form of migrant flows and general political instability. A rump Ukraine that is not a failed state would, if sufficiently

weakened by a settlement negotiated on Russian terms, be ripe for reinvansion. Unless the Russian economy collapses or the government is overthrown, Putin will end the war in Ukraine when he wishes to end it. He could easily offer Ukraine and its Western backers a negotiated settlement to the war, but that would merely be an operational pause.

Three preconditions are required for the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. The first is the recognition of Russia's expansive regional vision, in which territory and borders can be rearranged, in which war is the norm and in which states can be expunged from the map. The second is the undesirability of half measures, half solutions, and of half-hearted commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. This is what it means to learn from the debacle of Western diplomacy in 2014 and 2015, the debacle of "Minsk." The third precondition for restoring Ukraine to its full territorial integrity and sovereignty is patience. This is likely to be the work of many, many years, which does make the work less important or less crucial to Ukraine's and to Europe's future, but given shifts in the domestic politics of the countries supporting Ukraine, it will require of the West a sustained strategic approach and a degree of domestic political consensus on the merits of assisting Ukraine that cannot be taken for granted.

Putin has staked his presidency on the war in Ukraine. What happens between Ukraine and Russia will certainly determine Putin's legacy, and the risks Putin has been willing to undertake to wage his war against Ukraine are already consequential. Putin has made Russian society complicit in the war, even though he may not have convinced most Russians that the war is as important to them as it is to him. Putin has also recalibrated Russia's relations with the outside world, basing his relations with China, North Korea and Iran on the Russian state's prosecution of war in Ukraine. For Putin to change his calculus would be almost impossible as long as current political and economic conditions stay in place, which may not necessarily be the case. Should political and economic conditions stay more or less static in Russia, one has to assume that Putin will drive forward with his terrible war, that he will not turn back, and that he will not moderate his plans for Ukraine. Putin is not incapable of pragmatism and of compromise. He has put himself in a position, however, where pragmatism and compromise are less accessible to him politically than a relentless and unforgiving fanaticism.

To accept this reading of Russian foreign policy is to establish a clear-eyed diplomatic and strategic posture toward Russia. A premise of such

diplomacy – for the United States and its Western partners – should be that the big questions of Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty are not up for discussion. Once again, territory could be traded for peace or rather for “peace” in Ukraine. This would not be the territory currently under Russian control, which is somewhat less than twenty percent of the country. It would be roughly half the country. Although this territory could in theory be exchanged for a cessation of hostilities, a cessation of hostilities (while Putin or a figure like Putin still rules Russia) would almost definitely be temporary; it would be a method for giving Russia a better position from which to mount its next invasion of Ukraine. Peace in Ukraine is not to be achieved with Putin’s Russia. It is to be achieved in contest and in tension with Putin’s Russia, a supposition that should structure Western diplomacy toward Ukraine.

Not all negotiation with Russia should be avoided. Ukraine and its supporters can cut deals with Moscow, especially deals that relate to the practicalities of waging war. This is happening already – in the form of prisoner exchanges and the like. The more leverage Ukraine acquires on the battlefield and the more it can exploit its asymmetric advantages (as it has in naval battles in the Black Sea), the more Ukraine can – through diplomacy – establish rules of engagement with Russia. Here, Russia will grant no concessions out of esteem for its Western neighbour. Russia will grant only the concessions it is compelled (by force) to grant. In this scheme, Ukraine might grant concessions as well, such as not attacking Russia’s electrical grid for example if Russia were to agree not to attack Ukraine’s electrical grid. Yet the concessions Ukraine might grant would have nothing to do with Russia’s territorial control over parts of Ukraine. This Ukraine cannot accept either explicitly or tacitly. Ukraine and its backers will have to push back against this for a long time to come.

The final precondition for the restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty is patience. This is not World War I or World War II. Russia is not in 2024 a defeatable power. It is a nuclear power, and its non-Ukrainian adversaries in Ukraine are unwilling to directly enter the war. The only country that can truly defeat Russia in Ukraine is Russia itself. This is not an outcome that Kyiv or Washington can engineer: they have insufficient leverage over Moscow and over Russian public opinion. Yet it is an outcome that Kyiv, Washington, and many other capitals can expedite. Russia must hit a wall in Ukraine. It must make only non-strategic progress on the battlefield, as has mostly been the case since the summer of 2022. It

must be shown that its brutal war against Ukraine and the Ukrainian people is futile, a realisation that will permeate the Russian population and the Russian elite (if ever does) month by month and year by year. Russians will want to believe that they are winning in Ukraine. Russian propaganda will eagerly reassure Russians that they are winning in Ukraine. The truth will have to point in the opposite direction.

An anecdote from the history of Washington, DC, illustrates the virtue of patience. In 1945, the three Baltic Republics were annexed by the Soviet Union. The United States was in no position to contest this state of affairs, and there was never a serious conversation about going to war with the Soviet Union to liberate Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. These countries seemed to be lost to the Soviet Union in perpetuity. Yet, in the city of Washington, the three embassies of the Baltic Republics, whose annexation the United States never accepted, were kept as the properties of countries that did not exist on the map. These countries were (to this degree) still sovereign and still possessed of their territorial integrity, a status to which they were able to return in 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed. Ukraine's full territorial integrity and sovereignty should be similarly conceived today. It may appear aspirational and therefore improbable. It may seem far from real, far from possible at times, but it must be the goal. The short term will be difficult. The medium term will not be less difficult. The long term is another story. It is not a story that should be written in the tones of despair, defeatism or surrender.

9. Supporting Ukraine is 'America First'

A Neo-Realist Argument

George Spencer Terry*

Abstract

The 'America First' policy of the first Trump administration, which characterised foreign relations from 2016 to 2021, has also been cited as a key element in the 2024 electoral campaign and for the second Trump administration going forward. Due to the outcome of the 2024 presidential elections, this doctrine will heavily influence US foreign policy decisions in the next four years. This chapter contends that an 'America First' foreign policy doctrine, informed by qualified neo-realist thought, necessitates a reassessment of Ukraine's role in maintaining US primacy within the international system. A Ukrainian victory in the Russo-Ukrainian War would represent a triumph for the United States, whereas Ukraine's defeat would undermine the US position in Europe and hasten its global decline.

Keywords: neo-realism, international political economy, Ukraine, US foreign policy

Introduction: The Long Shadow of 'America First'

On 24 September 2024, President Donald Trump and President Volodymyr Zelensky convened at Trump Tower. President Zelensky presented his peace plan to former President Trump, mere hours after sharing it with the Harris campaign (Herb and Maher 2024). President Zelensky advocated for a lasting peace contingent upon Ukraine's unrestricted use of all necessary means to restore its 1991 borders. However, Trump dismissed this as impractical, asserting that he would swiftly conclude negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, achieving at least a ceasefire, if not outright peace (Hodunova 2024). This notion of 'peace in our time' recalls the period from August 2014 to February 2022, marked by the failed Minsk Agreements. Another such

* Lecturer in Strategic Studies, Baltic Defence College

'peace' – a hypothetical Minsk-3 mediated by the United States – would almost certainly produce similar outcomes.

With President Trump as the victor of the November 2024 US presidential elections, an 'America First' foreign policy will influence US foreign policy making for the years, if not decades, to come. This stance, linked to the foreign policy of the first Trump administration, emphasizes domestic prosperity and an aversion to foreign wars. It is often contrasted with a more interventionist approach, ostensibly defending the liberal democratic universalism championed by the Biden administration, which has been criticised for missteps, miscalculations, and perceived weakness. Both the Trump and Biden camps share the belief that US hegemony in the international system is under threat; however, their proposed solutions to this challenge are markedly different.

However, some of these so-called 'foreign wars' are essential for maintaining hegemonic stability, as well as broader US prosperity and geopolitical and geoeconomic primacy, which depend on such stability. The Russo-Ukrainian War is paramount among them. From the outset, it has evolved from a conflict that might have merely delineated the borders between *Russkiy Mir* and Europe at the Carpathians, further eroding faith in the post-1945 world order based on international law, to a potentially paradigm-shifting war. Russia's strategic goals now encompass not only the subjugation of Ukraine but also the delegitimisation and reconfiguration of the entire international system.

In this context, the hegemonic war or Thucydides Trap that some analysts (Allison 2017) predicted between the United States and China has instead materialised in Ukraine. Russia perceives it as a foreign policy priority to "eliminate the vestiges of domination by the US and other unfriendly states in global affairs" as part of its push towards multipolarity in the international system ("The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation" 2023). Nevertheless, this situation does not directly replicate the Thucydides Trap, as Russia is not attempting to replace the United States as the global hegemon. Instead, it aims to fragment the international system into a multipolar construct of regional powers, which is the most it can aspire to, given its economic and demographic projections for the next century.

This chapter aims to explain why the United States should support Ukraine to victory in this war through the lens of an 'America First' foreign policy. Initially, it will define what an 'America First' paradigm entails in the

context of international relations and political economy. Subsequently, the chapter will argue how a US-aligned Ukraine and a systemic competitor, Russia, fit into this framework. Finally, it will conclude by examining how Ukraine's fate has direct implications for broader US-European relations and global geopolitical power competition.

A Neo-Realist Paradigm for 'America First'

It is insufficient to adhere strictly to a single international affairs theory or paradigm, as these merely represent unfalsifiable explanatory frameworks of interstate relations. Instead, it is crucial to align these paradigms with the worldview of the relevant actor or interlocutor. This approach closely aligns with Alexander George's concept of operational code, which he defines as a "tightly knit set of beliefs about fundamental issues and questions associated with the classical problem of political action" (George 1969, 196). Central to this consideration is how an actor responds to the questions: "What is the 'essential' nature of political life? Is the political universe essentially one of harmony or conflict?" (ibid.).

Thus, the question arises: which paradigm most closely aligns with Donald Trump's worldview on foreign policy? This necessitates a thorough examination of relevant events, policies, and their subsequent justifications. While this approach risks committing the "domestic analogy" fallacy (Bull 1995) by replicating domestic US political dynamics and underestimating the continuity of bureaucratic preferences and long-term strategic culture across administrations (Halperin and Clapp 2007), Trump, as the executive policymaker, filters and articulates these views (Kaarbo and Lantis 2024). His articulations of these policies provide a foundation for analysis.

One of the most emblematic events was Trump's 2017 call for NATO members to "contribute their fair share." He perceived that the United States was providing security to Europe through the collective defence requirements of Article V of the Washington Treaty. The crux of his argument lay at the intersection of wealth and power: the US was expending resources on its armed forces and stationing troops and materiel in Europe, while most European NATO member states were not meeting the requisite 2 percent of GDP on defence as stipulated in the 2014 Defence Investment Pledge.

Trump highlighted that twenty-three of the twenty-eight NATO member states at that time did not meet these spending requirements. He argued

that funds which could have been allocated to defence were instead spent on expanding social programs, which he deemed “unfair to the people and taxpayers of the United States” (Diamond 2017). He further clarified that the United States would only honour Article V obligations with allies who “fulfil their obligations” to the United States (*ibid.*).

Other notable episodes include the Trump administration’s decisions to withdraw from the Paris Agreement in 2016 and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, both of which had been negotiated under the Obama administration. Trump justified the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement by arguing that it forced US taxpayers to “absorb the cost in terms of lost jobs, lower wages, shuttered factories, and vastly diminished economic production” (“Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord” 2017). This rationale can be summarised as a concern over absolute losses that the United States would suffer individually compared to its strategic competitors, such as the People’s Republic of China, which would not be bound by such regulatory or developmentally stunting requirements under the Paris Agreement framework.

Similarly, the decision to withdraw from the JCPOA was based on the perception that the United States was not benefiting from its participation, while the Islamic Republic of Iran was gaining financial advantages at the US’s expense (“President Donald J. Trump Is Ending United States Participation in an Unacceptable Iran Deal” 2018). Both arguments concluded that the United States, as a singular actor, had nothing to gain from continued participation, thus justifying the withdrawal. The trade war with China, initiated in 2018, followed this same logic, with tariffs imposed to address what was perceived as Chinese exploitation of the unbalanced trade relationship with the United States.

Beyond these transactional and contingent policy choices, the accelerated campaign against the Islamic State and the assassination of Qasem Soleimani in early 2020 highlight another aspect: sovereign and privileged action within the international system. The campaign against the Islamic State, including the assassination of al-Baghdadi, was rationalised as part of the US “commitment to the enduring and total defeat of ISIS and other terrorist organizations” (“Remarks by President Trump on the Death of ISIS Leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi” 2019). Similarly, the targeted strike on Soleimani was justified as the necessary and summary elimination of any actors that would harm “US diplomats, service members, all Americans, and US allies” (“Remarks by President Trump on the Killing of Qasem

Soleimani” 2020). Both instances underscore that, under an ‘America First’ foreign policy doctrine, the United States asserts the right to unilaterally and proactively strike against any actors that challenge its interests globally.

From these punctuated events, albeit briefly examined, several key themes of Trump’s foreign policy from 2016 to 2021 can be extrapolated. These include a preference for US material advantages and benefits, autonomous action, an assumption of great power competition, and a transactional foreign policy often based on the premise of absolute gains or losses. A lack of faith in international institutions and their ability to shape state preferences and actions, coupled with a focus on state-centric sovereignty, precludes broadly institutionalist, liberal, or constructivist paradigms. Trump’s own 2017 definition of an ‘America First’ foreign policy as “principled realism” underscores this point (“President Donald J. Trump at the United Nations General Assembly: Outlining an America First Foreign Policy” 2017).

However, the principles of ‘principled realism’ necessitate further qualification. Unlike other realist theorists such as Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, for whom security maximisation and state survival are the sole considerations for state agency in international affairs, Trump’s approach pairs these with a rational preference for wealth maximisation. Additionally, there is a persistent assumption that the United States, while deserving benefits from transactional policies, occupies a privileged position in setting the rules for the international system.

In these respects, Trump’s views align with those of Robert Gilpin, who “instead of thinking solely in terms of power... adds the maximization of wealth” (Guzzini 2002, 9), and that the United States acts as the implicit global hegemon (Gilpin 1981). Thus, Trump subscribes to “an attitude regarding the human condition” (Gilpin 1986, 304) and certain assumptions about the nature of the international system that classify him as a realist in the style of Gilpin. In simpler terms, ‘America First’ entails a calculation of absolute marginal utility maximisation in each foreign policy action for the United States, primarily understood in terms of fungible economic benefits, but also in less fungible aspects such as power and prestige.

From Gilpin, two additional theoretical considerations warrant attention: hegemonic stability theory and the marginal utility maximisation of states in international affairs. Gilpin’s articulation of hegemonic stability theory posits that the international system naturally reaches equilibrium under a single state hegemon, which maintains its preferences through the disproportionate provision of public goods, such as security or trade. This

creates a positive feedback loop, wherein it is in the hegemon's interest to provide these goods, and other states benefit from exploiting them (Gilpin 1981).

However, periods of hegemony are inherently unstable. Over time, due to overstretched resources, the hegemon will take actions in its perceived interest that weaken its position relative to the international system. The resulting hegemonic wars stem from the "contradiction in the system," where the growing power of a challenging state, whose expansion and efforts to transform the international system, brings it into conflict with the hegemonic state (Gilpin 1988, 595). In this context, Russia is not a growing power but a declining revisionist power with a limited timeframe to achieve its goals. Nevertheless, it conflicts with the hegemonic state for similar reasons, primarily the transformation of the international system. Following the theoretical prescriptions of other neo-realists, such as Mearsheimer (2001), the United States should contest any power challenging its hegemony as aggressively and promptly as possible.

The second point from Gilpin pertains to considerations of international political economy, where states are driven by rational marginal utility maximisation. This concept implies that state actors strive to enhance both their wealth and power through their policies until they encounter diminishing marginal returns. In the realms of trade and economics, these calculations are straightforward, as benefits are fungible in terms of trade balance and GDP growth. However, when it comes to prestige or credibility, such measurements are not quantifiable in relation to utility calculation. Nonetheless, policymakers still make these calculations, which further justifies analysing Trump's personal views on foreign policy through the operational code. His perception of these unquantifiable cost-benefit analyses form the basis of policy decisions that collectively constitute the 'America First' doctrine in its current form.

The Role of Ukraine

The previous section illustrated that both Trump and Gilpin concur on the fundamental point that wealth and power are intrinsically linked. Trump's 'America First' foreign policy doctrine is based on the assumption of marginal utility maximisation in absolute terms—every foreign policy action should primarily yield material benefits for the United States and secondarily

enhance its prestige and power. Trump argues that the continued support for Ukraine, as pursued by the Biden administration, is detrimental to both US prosperity and prestige. There is some qualified merit to this argument, as while the Biden administration has pledged to support Ukraine “as long as it takes” (“Remarks by President Biden on Supporting Ukraine, Defending Democratic Values, and Taking Action to Address Global Challenges” 2023), it had long restricted Ukraine’s ability to use US or ally-provided military aid for deep strikes within Russian territory. Moreover, the absence of a clearly articulated strategic end state for the war bears troubling similarities to the US War in Afghanistan.

One of the typical arguments from the anti-Ukrainian side of the MAGA Republicans has been that US aid to Ukraine should be spent in the United States rather than in foreign countries (Cerde 2023). While some of these talking points have been alluded to as being nothing more than a repetition and recapitulation of Russian narratives and talking points (Sanchez and Hauslohner 2024), the fact that these narratives resonate in the Trump electorate shows that these grievances reflect societal demands and grievances that will – in one form or another – find political representation. Nevertheless, the same complaints regarding military aid to Israel (\$310 billion in 2022 dollars since 1948) (“U.S. Aid to Israel in Four Charts” 2024) and the Republic of China (\$567 million in 2024 alone) (*Reuters* 2024) are not reproduced even though the same premises – US taxpayer money should be spent on improving the quality of life for US citizens – could be equally deployed. In those cases, it is accepted that the provision of military aid to both countries is necessary to maintain the conditions necessary for US hegemony, even if the geopolitical and geoeconomic rationales of maintaining maritime access to the Suez, Straits of Aden, South China Sea, and Straits of Malacca for shipping transit – that US economic primacy and prosperity are predicated upon – are not made explicit. The geopolitical and geoeconomic benefits of supporting Ukraine should then be made clear.

For the United States, over 80 percent of aid to Ukraine (i.e., over \$248 billion) is not aid per se, but an investment in the US military-industrial manufacturing industry (Kessler 2024). This would create tens of thousands of stable jobs in former rust-belt areas and revitalise those very local economies that had been gutted by offshoring manufacturing jobs to China and elsewhere. Defence manufacturing has already been reinvigorated in more than 70 US cities because of aid to Ukraine (Thiessen 2023).

Simultaneously, it presents a prime opportunity to modernise the US armed forces by cycling out older—but still battlefield-viable—materiel while manufacturing newer equipment for US forces (Eaglen 2024). Additionally, dependencies on US military manufacturing and future contracts for provision, ammunition, parts, and upkeep will deepen. Consequently, a post-war Ukraine would necessarily be tied to its connections to the United States for the near- to mid-term future. Thus, aid to Ukraine is not merely a humanitarian policy but an investment in anchoring Ukraine within a US-led international system and eliminating any grey zones that Russia might seek to exploit in the future.

Another argument posits that the threat of nuclear escalation from the Kremlin renders Ukraine's defeat inevitable, regardless of the support it receives. This perspective partly derives from Kissinger's observation that the balance of power has become increasingly "abstract, intangible, elusive" (Kissinger 1969, 61) following the proliferation of nuclear weapons, as negotiators can no longer find a common denominator for power ranking without resorting to nuclear threats. Consequently, this implies that the United States, as a nuclear power, would grant a qualified agency in international affairs to other nuclear powers, particularly those like Russia that possess second-strike capabilities. The anti-Ukrainian Republican camp, along with the Biden administration's National Security Council, assumes that Russia would respond to any crossing of its stated red lines with nuclear force.

While Moscow's communicative strategy can be seen as an effort to deter Western support, it has functioned more as a coercive method in practice. These nuclear escalation threats have accompanied many of the Kremlin's previously articulated red lines, from the provision of any military aid to Ukraine (Erlanger 2022), to F-16s (Tarasova 2023), to the provision of longer-range missiles for US-provided ATACMS ("Russia Warns US Not to Provide Longer-Range Missiles to Ukraine" 2022), and to the Ukrainian Armed Forces bringing the war to Russian territory (Waterhouse and Gozzi 2024).

Despite these supposed red lines being crossed with little to no consequences beyond political rhetoric, which should diminish the credibility of such threats (Dickinson 2024), as of October 2024, these threats continue to accompany any authorization of long-range strikes using US missiles or materiel. This nuclear messaging has effectively acted as a measure of reflexive control, consistently pushing Washington to adopt reactive policies or delay additional support to Ukraine over critical months in an attritional war (Vershinin 2024). Through this paralysis of inaction or reaction, the United

States risks losing a steadfast partner, Ukraine, to Russia, which would have far-reaching consequences.

Conclusion: The Nexus of Ukraine, Europe, and the United States

If the United States loses Ukraine, it will eventually lose Europe. Although not legally binding, the Budapest Memorandum of 1996 included a security guarantee for Ukraine, Belarus', and Kazakhstan's 1991 borders, provided by the three signatories—the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia. While one of these signatories directly breached the guarantee by invading Ukraine in 2014, the other two did little to support Ukraine's restoration of its 1991 borders beyond offering rhetorical and diplomatic support paired with sanctions. This fatigue with the conflict led to attempts at negotiation and gradual normalisation, which emboldened Russia to proceed with the full-scale invasion in 2022.

If Russia is allowed to retain its territorial gains through conquest – despite the United States having provided a written security guarantee – the credibility of NATO and the United States will be profoundly undermined. Regional configurations perceived as more reliable, whether in Central-Eastern Europe or through the French vision of strategic autonomy for the European Union, would be strengthened or reinvigorated to the detriment of the United States. This is because the current configuration provides not only security but also market interdependencies and trade, which are closely correlated with these types of agreements (Long 2003). If NATO's collective defence is seen as defunct, economic ties between the United States and its European allies would weaken.

Currently, the trade relationship between the United States and the European Union is the largest in the world, totalling an estimated \$1.3 trillion in 2022 (“European Union,” n.d.) and accounting for a third of global trade in goods and services and around one-third of world GDP (PPP) (“EU Trade Relations with United States” 2024). Additionally, the European manufacturing base is larger than that of the United States (Setser 2019). A final consideration is that the longer Russia is disconnected from the European market due to sanctions and the war, the more beneficial this is for creating additional interdependencies between the US and European economies due to import substitution, especially for oil and gas. Although some sanctions on the import of petrochemicals and natural gas are circumvented through

'shadow fleets' operated by third parties or by mixing crude so that the location of provenance is obscured (Rudnik 2023), the United States has become the primary exporter of LNG to Europe ("The United States Remained the Largest Liquefied Natural Gas Supplier to Europe in 2023" 2024).

However, this scenario presupposes that Russian aggression is halted by Ukraine. A victorious Russia would normalise relations with Europe within a decade, complete the annexation of Ukraine if not already accomplished, and potentially move forward with a similar campaign towards Moldova or, more drastically, towards countries covered by NATO security assurances. By the mid-2030s at the latest, exactly when some analysts predict an invasion of Taiwan (Amonson and Egli 2023), Russia would be pressuring a weakened US position in Europe, leading to a situation where the United States would have to choose between defending its allies in Europe or the Indo-Pacific, potentially losing both. This would mark the absolute end of the *Pax Americana – sic transit gloria mundi*.

Full US support – including the permission granted in November 2024 to conduct deep strikes with US-provided missiles in Russia to impede Russia's logistical support on the front line, especially through rail lines – is an absolute precondition for Ukrainian victory in the Russo-Ukrainian War. Ukrainian victory is a prerequisite for continued US primacy in the international system and domestic prosperity—America first both at home and abroad. An aligned Ukraine would reinvigorate US prestige and trust in Europe, strengthen market interdependence and trade, and revitalise the defence manufacturing industry at home. From the Barents to the Azov Sea, all grey zones of competition would be eliminated under the aegis of NATO collective defence, forcing Russia to redirect its ambitions elsewhere. By stabilising this region, the United States would be better positioned to compete with the People's Republic of China, fully committing to the Indo-Pacific.

References

- Allison, Graham. 2017. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Amonson, Kyle, and Dane Egli. 2023. "The Ambitious Dragon: Beijing's Calculus for Invading Taiwan." *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, no. March-April, 38–54.
- Bull, Hedley. 1995. "Society and Anarchy in International Relations (1966)." In *International Theory: Critical Investigations*, edited by James Der Derian, 75–93. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-23773-9_5.
- Cerda, Andy. 2023. "About Half of Republicans Now Say the U.S. Is Providing Too Much Aid to Ukraine." *Pew Research Center* (blog). December 8, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/12/08/about-half-of-republicans-now-say-the-us-is-providing-too-much-aid-to-ukraine/>.
- Diamond, Jeremy. 2017. "Trump Scolds NATO Allies over Defense Spending | CNN Politics." CNN. May 25, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/25/politics/trump-nato-financial-payments/index.html>.
- Dickinson, Peter. 2024. "Putin Is Becoming Entangled in His Own Discredited Red Lines." *Atlantic Council* (blog). September 17, 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-is-becoming-entangled-in-his-own-discredited-red-lines/>.
- Eaglen, Mackenzie. 2024. "New Military Aid to Ukraine Actually Upgrades America's Army." *American Enterprise Institute* - (blog). April 22, 2024. <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/new-military-aid-to-ukraine-actually-upgrades-americas-army/>.
- Erlanger, Steven. 2022. "NATO Countries Pour Weapons Into Ukraine, Risking Conflict With Russia." *The New York Times*, March 2, 2022, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/02/world/europe/nato-weapons-ukraine-russia.html>.
- "EU Trade Relations with United States." 2024. September 27, 2024. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/united-states_en.
- "European Union." n.d. United States Trade Representative. Accessed October 1, 2024. <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/europe-middle-east/europe/european-union>.
- George, Alexander L. 1969. "The 'Operational Code': A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making." *International Studies Quarterly* 13 (2): 190–222. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3013944>.
- Gilpin, Robert. 1981. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511664267>.
- Gilpin, Robert. 1986. "The Richness of the Realist Tradition." In *Neorealism and Its Critics*, edited by Robert O. Keohane, 301–21. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gilpin, Robert. 1988. "The Theory of Hegemonic War." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18 (4): 591–613. <https://doi.org/10.2307/204816>.
- Guzzini, Stefano. 2002. *Realisms at War: Robert Gilpin's Political Economy of Hegemonic War as a Critique of Waltz's Neorealism*. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Peace Research Institute.

- Halperin, Morton H., and Priscilla Clapp. 2007. *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Herb, Jeremy, and Kit Maher. 2024. "Trump Set to Meet Zelensky amid GOP Tensions over Ukraine Assistance." CNN. September 27, 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/27/politics/trump-zelensky-meeting/index.html>.
- Hodunova, Kateryna. 2024. "Trump Meets with Zelensky, Says His Views on Ending the War 'as Soon as Possible' Have Not Changed." The Kyiv Independent. September 27, 2024. <https://kyivindependent.com/everything-possible-must-be-done-to-put-pressure-on-putin-to-stop-war-zelensky-says-after-meeting-trump/>.
- Kaarbo, Juliet, and Jeffrey S. Lantis. 2024. "Executives and Foreign Policy." In *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis*, edited by Juliet Kaarbo and Cameron G. Thies, 323–41. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198843061.013.18>.
- Kessler, Glenn. 2024. "Analysis | Eighty Percent of Ukraine-Israel Bill Will Be Spent in U.S. or by U.S. Military." *Washington Post*, April 25, 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/04/25/eighty-percent-ukraine-israel-bill-will-be-spent-us-or-by-us-military/>.
- Kissinger, Henry A. 1969. *American Foreign Policy: Three Essays*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Long, A. 2003. "Defense Pacts and International Trade." *Journal of Peace Research* 40:537–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433030405003>.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York City: W. W. Norton & Company.
- "President Donald J. Trump at the United Nations General Assembly: Outlining an America First Foreign Policy." 2017. The White House. September 20, 2017. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-united-nations-general-assembly-outlining-america-first-foreign-policy/>.
- "President Donald J. Trump Is Ending United States Participation in an Unacceptable Iran Deal." 2018. The White House. May 8, 2018. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/>.
- "Remarks by President Biden on Supporting Ukraine, Defending Democratic Values, and Taking Action to Address Global Challenges." 2023. The White House. July 12, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/07/12/remarks-by-president-biden-on-supporting-ukraine-defending-democratic-values-and-taking-action-to-address-global-challenges-vilnius-lithuania/>.
- "Remarks by President Trump on the Death of ISIS Leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi." 2019. The White House. October 27, 2019. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-death-isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi/>.
- "Remarks by President Trump on the Killing of Qasem Soleimani." 2020. The White House. January 3, 2020. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-killing-qasem-soleimani/>.

- Reuters*. 2024. "Biden Approves \$567 Mln in Defense Support for Taiwan, White House Says," September 30, 2024, sec. World. <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-approves-567-mln-defense-support-taiwan-white-house-says-2024-09-30/>.
- Rudnik, Filip. 2023. "Partial Success: Russia's Oil Sector Adapts to Sanctions." Centre for Eastern Studies. August 9, 2023. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-08-09/partial-success-russias-oil-sector-adapts-to-sanctions>.
- "Russia Warns US Not to Provide Longer-Range Missiles to Ukraine." 2022. Al Jazeera. September 15, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/15/russia-longer-range-us-missiles-for-kyiv-would-cross-red-line>.
- Sanchez, Yvonne Wingett, and Abigail Hauslohner. 2024. "Top Republican Warns Pro-Russia Messages Are Echoed 'on the House Floor.'" *Washington Post*, April 7, 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/04/07/russian-propaganda-republicans-congress/>.
- Setser, Brad W. 2019. "When It Comes to Exporting (Manufactures), Europe Is Now the One from Mars." Council on Foreign Relations. August 13, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/when-it-comes-exporting-manufactures-europe-now-one-mars>.
- "Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord." 2017. The White House. June 1, 2017. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-accord/>.
- Tarasova, Darya. 2023. "Russia Warns West of 'Enormous Risks' If Ukraine Is Supplied with F-16 Jets." CNN World. May 20, 2023. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/20/europe/russia-warning-f-16-jets-ukraine-intl/index.html>.
- "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation." 2023. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. March 31, 2023. <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/?lang=en>.
- "The United States Remained the Largest Liquefied Natural Gas Supplier to Europe in 2023." 2024. U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). February 29, 2024. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=61483>.
- Thiessen, Marc A. 2023. "Opinion | Ukraine Aid's Best-Kept Secret: Most of the Money Stays in the U.S.A." *Washington Post*, November 29, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/11/29/ukraine-military-aid-american-economy-boost/>.
- "U.S. Aid to Israel in Four Charts." 2024. Council on Foreign Relations. May 31, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/article/us-aid-israel-four-charts>.
- Vershinin, Alex. 2024. "The Attritional Art of War: Lessons from the Russian War on Ukraine." RUSI. October 1, 2024. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/attritional-art-war-lessons-russian-war-ukraine>.
- Waterhouse, James, and Laura Gozzi. 2024. "Putin Accuses Ukraine of 'provocation' amid Alleged Border Incursion." BBC. August 8, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cm2n9y4nm3lo>.

10. Constraints and Frictions on Rapprochement between the United States and Russia

Joshua C. Huminski*

Abstract

The November 2024 election of President Donald Trump raised the prospect of a rapprochement between the United States and Russia. While the policies or ambitions of the president are, as of this writing, unknown any desired improvement or risk reduction between Washington and Moscow will face frictions over the war in Ukraine, from within the American political system, and resulting from systemic differences and challenges that affect the bilateral relationship, and which have done so since before his election.

Keywords: Donald Trump, White House, Russia, Ukraine, bilateral relations

Introduction

The election of President Donald Trump in November 2024 manifested what were, until then, abstract concerns about the United States' policy towards Ukraine specifically and towards Russia in general. The president's statements since leaving office have raised the prospect of a change in aid to Ukraine and the desire for rapprochement between Washington and Moscow. As of this chapter's writing, the president's actual policies are unknown, though there are some indications found in his selection of key personnel.

The specific policies of the president are, of course, important. The presidency carries with it the power of the 'bully pulpit' and an exceptionally free hand in the realm of national security and foreign policy. Yet, whatever President Trump's ambitions are for relations with Russia (even if merely to reduced perceived risks and bilateral tensions), he will encounter strategic, political, and other frictions. These are important to consider when looking at American politics and diplomacy from outside Washington. Whatever

* Senior Vice President for National Security & Intelligence Programs, Center for the Study of the Presidency & Congress

the president's ambitions translate into policy-wise, he will still face considerable constraints from within and from without.

The Open Question of Ukraine

The immediate and most pressing element of the relationship between Russia and the United States is the war in Ukraine. Under President Joe Biden, the United States pledged considerable support to Kyiv, delivered increasingly advanced weapons systems, imposed sanctions on Russia, and led a coalition of allies to support Ukraine's defence. This enabled Ukraine to avoid complete collapse, but it was carefully calibrated – it ensured that Ukraine would not lose while avoiding the risks of escalation. Biden managed this balance relatively well but did not set Ukraine up for victory, failing to even articulate what victory meant. In the process of doing so, however, the line between partner and ally blurred. The rhetoric used by NATO suggests Kyiv is a partner, but the language used more freely suggested it was the latter. As a result, the conversation on extended deterrence became muddled.

The incoming president and his proxies have made no secret of their desire to bring the conflict to an end, with the president himself suggesting he would end it in one day (Wall Street Journal 2023) or even prior to the inauguration (Slattery 2024). American aid to Ukraine is balanced against the pivot or rebalance to the Indo-Pacific and strategic competition with China and a broader desire on the part of the president to reduce tensions with Russia.

What the president will do in practice is unclear – he cannot technically negotiate with foreign states or leaders prior to entering office, for one – but delinking the war in Ukraine and America's relationship with Russia is unlikely. As a practical matter, it seems unlikely that the White House could advance any other initiatives with the Kremlin or that Moscow would enter negotiations on issues such as arms control without support to Ukraine at the top of the agenda. It is important here to note that, at the moment, the United States and Russia agree on very little if anything and disagree on rather a lot, presenting little foundation on which to rebuild relations. The pathways for communication and interaction have largely been severed (such as arms control processes), and while restarting them will be easier than a cold start, it will add additional frictions to the process.

The president will also contend with two parallel factors related to Ukraine, with impacts further afield. First, ending American aid or slowing it sufficiently to allow the consolidation of Russia's gains at best or a strategic defeat at worst would constitute a foreign policy failure for the president on entering office. The president will, undoubtedly, seek to find the best deal possible and portray it as such. Yet a foreign policy setback shortly on entering office is politically unattractive domestically as well as internationally. Second, the credibility of America's commitment to its allies and partners is questioned in the event of aid stopping or ending. This will have impacts further afield, especially in the Indo-Pacific with China and Taiwan, though it will not be the determinative factor alone in these strategic situations. The president will likely find himself confronted by this strategic calculus over his decisions on Ukraine.

Domestic Political and Congressional Considerations

While the presidency enjoys a relatively free hand in foreign policy and national security, it is not entirely without constraints. These domestic political and congressional constraints will limit his freedom of movement on Ukraine and Russia.

In polling, the American public continues to support Ukraine in its war with Russia, with nearly 50% saying support should 'continue as long as it takes' (Telhami 2024). Over 75% of respondents do support diplomacy towards an end to the conflict, but the propositions are not mutually exclusive. While there are differences between Democrats and Republicans, majorities still favour support for Ukraine. On Russia, two-thirds of Americans have 'no confidence' at all in President Putin and six in ten see Russia as an enemy of the United States, not a partner or competitor (Fagan and Wike 2024). Polling is, of course, not necessarily politics and these responses could change under the next administration, but it is important to note that Americans generally remain supportive of Ukraine and critical of Russia.

Congressionally, the Republicans hold both chambers – the House and the Senate – which in theory, offers the president considerable legislative power to advance his agenda (Bloomberg Government 2024). The majorities he enjoys are, however, very thin – just three seats in Senate (his vice president, J.D. Vance, would cast a tie-breaking vote) – and just one seat in the House because of cabinet appointments. The newly elected and returning

Republicans will not necessarily vote in lockstep with the president and it will only take a few defectors in either chamber to stymie presidential action on aid to Ukraine and other priorities.

Congress can tie the president's hands and has done so recently. In 2023, as part of the 'National Defense Authorization Act,' Congress passed a measure requiring two-thirds Senate approval or an act of Congress to withdraw from NATO. This measure is not without methods of circumvention, but indicative of the Congressional prerogative (Gould et al. 2024). Absent direct voting intervention, the legislature can complicate the president's agenda through hearings and their own media engagement. As with the American public, there is a considerable bloc of support for Ukraine and antipathy towards Russia, which will act as a check on the president's ambitions.

Both domestically and congressionally, there remains concerns about the president's attitudes towards and relationship with Russia. Moscow's interference in the 2016 election – though present, its impact not determinative – became a defining characteristic of Trump's first presidency. While the president's clear victory in 2024 does not carry with it the same taint (partially due to aggressive counter efforts by federal law enforcement), political opponents are likely to seize upon any pro-Russia behaviours as indicative of compromise. The lingering allegations of Russian interference or presidential inclination towards Russia will serve as a political constraint on Trump's policies towards Moscow.

America's Allies and Partners in Europe

While relations between Washington and Moscow are portrayed as a dyad, America's partners in Europe are very much part of the equation. America's standing commitment to NATO, extended deterrence via the nuclear umbrella, and deep military-to-military and intelligence partnerships are central to continental stability. Those relationships are, however, not one-way. While Washington is *prima inter pares*, NATO member-states can and will seek to influence the United States on both Ukraine and Russia. Indeed, the allies were able to force (with Congressional assistance) a reluctant Trump to impose strict sanctions on Moscow following the attempted murder of defected Russian spy Sergei Skripal (Stracqualursi and Gaouette 2019).

Many European states are seeking to hedge against Trump's anticipated policies, yet opportunities to engage diplomatically to ensure continued

support for Ukraine and America's security commitments do remain. Most notably, demonstrating increased spending on defence, meeting or exceeding the 2% of GDP spending obligation – which 23 of the 32 member-states are now meeting – will help offset Trump's concerns about allies taking advantage of the United States. Linking European activity on the continent to America's long-term desire to rebalance to the Indo-Pacific will also help this process.

Here, European nations would do well to remind the president why they remain allies and partners of the United States. There linkage between European stability and American prosperity has become increasingly tenuous in the minds of many Republican politicians. So too has the fact that many NATO allies stood with the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is nonetheless important to remember that during the first Trump administration the military-to-military relationships and intelligence cooperation continued largely unabated. This dynamic looks set to continue under his next presidency. The political tonality may change, but the relational substance will remain.

The open war in Ukraine, American domestic and congressional considerations, and the influence of allies in Europe will all introduce friction into relations with Russia, but perhaps the most important element of the equation is Russia itself. On this, there are three key, interrelated factors that do and will continue to introduce friction – Russia's strategic conception of the zone of competition, Russian agency, and American strategic empathy.

Russia's Conception of the Zone of Strategic Competition

Perhaps the greatest friction point between the United States and Russia stems from the differing conceptions of the strategic space for competition. The delta between America's conception of Russia in the world and Russia's conception of itself in the world is the space in which frictions and irresolvable tensions will emerge.

The United States, generally, and the incoming administration specifically, considers Russia in an almost exclusively – though not entirely – European context. The National Security Strategy of the outgoing Biden administration referenced Russia's behaviours in "Central Asia, and around the world," with passing references to the activity of Russia's private military company, Wagner, in Africa and Russia's involvement in the Arctic (President 2022). This condition was, unsurprisingly, exacerbated by the war in

Ukraine. Even with the increased involvement of Iran and North Korea in supporting Russia's war, and a deepening 'friendship' with China, Russia remains a European problem for American policymakers.

This is despite Moscow's stated policies and the remarks of its senior leadership. Indeed, Russia sees its role and interests in a much more global context. In his speech to foreign defence attaches in December 2023, Chief of the General Staff Valeri Gerasimov offered a tour de horizon of the Russian military's global worldview (Gerasimov 2023). This included pointed references to the Northern Sea Route and Russia's presence in the Arctic, NATO's increasing involvement in the Indo-Pacific, and the AUKUS agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States to share submarines and technology amongst the allies.

If Russia sees Ukraine as merely one front in its global competition with the West, the inverse is not the case – the United States sees Ukraine in the context of Ukrainian security and European stability and little else. Russia is fundamentally hostile to American activity, viewing it as having the goal of perpetuating Washington's hegemony, which does not form a foundation or basis for consensus. The growing relationship between Russia and China and partnerships with Iran and North Korea will undoubtedly stymie the White House's ambitions to engage directly with Moscow, introducing added friction on the geopolitical stage.

America's inability to understand Russia's conception of a global zone of competition means that it will cede some areas to Moscow's primacy. This is a natural outgrowth of strategy – applying finite resources to an intractable problem set. It does, however, mean that the possibilities for strategic surprise, miscalculation, and misunderstanding are far larger than a constrained zone of competition would include. If the United States sees Russia only as a European challenge, it will miss secondary and tertiary zones of competition.

Russian Agency in the War in Ukraine and Beyond

The prospect for improved relations between Russia and the United States requires that both parties are in fact interested. Shortly after the election of Donald Trump, President Putin praised the re-elected president and said, "I very much expect that our relationship with the United States will eventually be restored" adding that "We are open to this" (Troianovski and Hopkins

2024). This is perhaps a positive first step, but how that sentiment translates into action remains unclear. Equally as unclear is what both parties see as the art of the possible in the bilateral relationship and what each is willing to concede to reach some sort of rapprochement.

In his first term, President Trump sought to improve relations with Russia. This outreach was characterised by a mixture of friendly rhetoric, attempts to cultivate a personal relationship with President Putin (even after leaving office, according to Bob Woodward's latest book) (Hirsh 2024), but also strict sanctions (Stracqualursi and Gaouette 2019) in response to Russian malign activities. In aggregate, Washington's relationship with Moscow may have warmed – slightly – but not materially. This is the repeated case over successive administrations, the process of which is explored at length in other volumes. There is little to suggest that the second Trump presidency will encounter more advantageous conditions.

Whether there are sufficient concessions, inducements, or punishments to entice Russia into positive, constructive relations remains an open question. The suspension of sanctions either personal or economic is an attractive offer; the United States and Europe are unlikely to remove military sanctions. On strategic arms control, the entry of China into what was a two-body problem is now a three-body problem set. There is undoubtedly value in conversation and dialogue for the sake of conversation and dialogue, but how Washington and Moscow resume those in-depth substantive engagements is unclear.

On Ukraine specifically, Russia at this present stage does not desire negotiations over the war. Moscow's steady escalation of attacks on Ukraine's infrastructure, increasing militarisation of its economy, and the continued presentation of forces along the front suggest that the Kremlin does not see the need for an off-ramp or an exit strategy – in fact it would suggest Moscow believes it is winning or indeed could win, however that is practically defined.

At the same time, Ukraine is experiencing heavy losses and is running out of troops (Kottasová and Gak 2024). Its forces are spread along a 600-mile-long front, and it lacks sufficient reserves to counter breaches of the defensive line, let alone conduct its own offensives. The operation to seize and hold parts of Kursk, Russia, while impressive was a significant commitment of soldiers and equipment for arguable little gain. Kyiv's ability to sustain the war is directly linked to the provision of continued aid and support from the United States and NATO member-states, but neither Washington nor Brussels can manufacture additional Ukrainians.

The possibility of a Ukrainian ‘defeat’ in the form of battlefield exhaustion cannot be ruled out entirely. While a collapse of the country is unlikely, Kyiv’s ability to generate and present forces to counter Russian offensives is steadily eroding. If Russia shares this strategic assessment, Moscow will have little interest in negotiating away operational advantage. Moreover, Moscow likely suspects – with good reason – that the issue of NATO membership for Ukraine is a non-starter in a second Trump administration, despite prior commitments from the United States on an ‘irreversible’, if not glacial path for Kyiv’s entry (Knickmeyer and Cook 2024).

Russian agency introduces friction into the bilateral relationship ambitions of Trump, not the least of which is due to his self-image as a ‘deal maker.’ For Trump, the only deal worse than no deal is a bad deal, or one in which he is taken advantage of. Entering discussions with Putin, he may find that he has neither as strong a hand or as much to offer as he anticipates nor as willing a partner across the table.

The Role of Strategic Empathy

A weaker-than-expected negotiating hand filters into another central friction point for the United States, that of strategic empathy – the ability to see the world through an ally or adversaries’ eyes. It is central to making policy, yet Washington has consistently failed in its ability to do so, and not just on Russia, but also its European partners. Understanding does, of course, not mean acceptance. Washington can understand Moscow’s strategic insecurity and its paranoia about NATO enlargements but not accept its perspective as fact. Arguably, the United States under President Trump will not understand Russia, its strategic interests, nor its worldview any better than it did under previous administrations.

This will inevitably lead to miscalculations, misunderstandings, and additional friction. What Washington wants is not necessarily what Russia wants, just as equally what Washington thinks Russia wants may not reflect reality and may not be viable. The zone of mutual overlap appears thin. The manifestation of this shortcoming in strategic empathy will prominently feature in the ongoing discussion of signalling, deterrence, and communication. What the Trump administration thinks it is saying is not necessarily what Russia hears, and vice versa.

This will be a central foundational challenge facing President Trump's appointed Special Envoy to Ukraine and Russia, retired Lieutenant General (ret.) Keith Kellogg (Faguy 2024). In addition to navigating a newly forming administration and interacting with Congress, Kellogg will need to see and understand the strategic views of both Ukraine and Russia, as well as America's European allies, while working towards some agreement. Attempting to assert Washington's interests in a vacuum will not achieve a favourable deal for the United States, for Ukraine, or one that is in NATO's interests.

As part of the America First Policy Institute, Kellogg co-authored "America First, Russia, & Ukraine," a research report (Kellogg and Fleitz 2024). In this paper, the authors argued for making continued aid to Kyiv conditional on negotiations but with the caveat that if Russia refused to enter discussions, Ukraine would receive even more assistance. A think-tank paper does not constitute formal administration policy, but it is at least indicative of a possible course of action and one towards which Trump must at least be somewhat favourably inclined.

"Events, Dear Boy"

Whatever Trump's ambitions, his policy priorities are subject to events, geopolitical developments, and the interactions thereof. The president is inheriting a complex and dynamic foreign policy situation with the war in Ukraine, a desire to rebalance to the Indo-Pacific and China, and continued instability in the Middle East; three theatres of conflict and finite resources with which to address each. This is added on top of an ambitious domestic reform agenda that seeks a root and branch overhaul of the civil service, a 'Department of Government Efficiency,' and the potential for various trade wars with allies and adversaries alike.

These frictions from within and from without suggest that Trump's desired foreign policy with Russia, whatever that materialises into, will be just as constrained as his predecessors and as much as his first term. Change is not impossible, but very difficult, doubly so given the competing priorities, deltas in strategic concept, and the fact that Russia has agency in this process. These factors are important to consider when anticipating or assessing the White House's policies and outreach to the Kremlin, and suggest less change and, perhaps, more constancy.

References

- Bloomberg Government. 2024. "Congressional Balance of Power: Republican Majority the House." Bloomberg Government, November 20, 2024. <https://about.bgov.com/insights/congress/balance-of-power-republican-majority-in-the-house/>.
- Fagan, Moira, and Richard Wike. 2024. "Views of Russia and Putin." Pew Research Center, May 8, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/08/views-of-russia-and-putin/>.
- Faguy, Ana. 2024. "Trump Appoints Keith Kellogg for Ukraine-Russia Envoy." BBC News, November 27, 2024. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c14l6d15y4go>.
- Gerasimov, Valery. 2023. "Army General Valery Gerasimov Held a Briefing for Foreign Military Attaches." BPIK.name, December 22, 2023. https://vpk.name/en/807733_army-general-valery-gerasimov-held-a-briefing-for-foreign-military-attaches.html.
- Gould, Joe, Jack Detsch, and Connor O'Brien. 2024. "The Law Is 'Not Airtight': Trump May Have a Way out of NATO." Politico, November 8, 2024. <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/11/08/trump-nato-congress-courts-00188426>.
- Hirsh, Michael. 2024. "What a New Book's Explosive Revelations Tell Us about Biden, Trump, and Putin." Foreign Policy, October 29, 2024. <https://foreign-policy.com/2024/10/09/woodward-war-biden-putin-nuclear-use-trump-russia-logan-act/>.
- Kellogg, Keith, and Fred Fleitz. 2024. "America First, Russia, & Ukraine." America First Policy Institute, April 11, 2024. <https://americafirstpolicy.com/issues/america-first-russia-ukraine>.
- Knickmeyer, Ellen, and Lorne Cook. 2024. "Ukraine Is on an 'irreversible' Path to NATO. but Only after War with Russia Ends." AP News, July 11, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-nato-membership-summit-4156df4062e69e0d-a38e7c18bf657285>.
- Kottasová, Ivana, and Kostya Gak. 2024. "Outgunned and Outnumbered, Ukraine's Military Is Struggling with Low Morale and Desertion." CNN, September 8, 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/08/europe/ukraine-military-morale-desertion-intl-cmd/index.html>.
- President. 2022. National Security Strategy. Washington, DC: White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.
- Slattery, Gram. 2024. "What Will Trump's Foreign Policy Be?" Reuters, November 25, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trumps-foreign-policy-rethink-nato-troops-mexico-end-ukraine-war-2024-11-25/>.
- Stracqualursi, Veronica, and Nicole Gaouette. 2019. "Under Pressure, Trump Slaps Long-Overdue Sanctions on Russia over Chemical Weapons Use." CNN, August 2, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/02/politics/trump-russia-sanctions-chemical-weapons-spy-poisoning/index.html>.
- Telhami, Shibley. 2024. "More Americans Want the US to Stay the Course in Ukraine as Long as It Takes." Brookings, September 27, 2024. <https://www>.

brookings.edu/articles/more-americans-want-the-us-to-stay-the-course-in-ukraine-as-long-as-it-takes/.

Troianovski, Anton, and Valerie Hopkins. 2024. "Putin Lavishes Praise on Trump, Saying Russia Is 'open' to Restored Ties." *The New York Times*, November 7, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/07/world/europe/trump-putin-russia-ukraine-war.html>.

Wall Street Journal. 2023. "Watch: Trump Says as President He'd Settle Ukraine War within 24 Hours." *Wall Street Journal*, May 11, 2023. <https://www.wsj.com/video/watch-trump-says-as-president-hed-settle-ukraine-war-within-24-hours/0BCA9F18-D3BF-43DA-9220-C13587EAEDF2>.

11. Russia-Friendly Parties in the EU Amid Moscow's War on Ukraine

Political Dynamics and Policy Implications

Dr. Stefano Braghiroli*

Abstract

This chapter examines the evolution of the relations of European Russia-friendly political parties with Moscow in the aftermath of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, both at the national and supranational levels. The invasion has rendered overt Kremlin affiliations politically costly, prompting these parties to adapt by reframing pro-Russia narratives as discourse of peace or national interest. These narratives have increasingly influenced national politics in several EU states, traveling from the extremes to the mainstream in a phase described as “contagion.” However, such dynamics remain limited at the EU level of decision-making. By analysing the impact of the recent European Parliament (EP) elections and the partisan alignments on crucial votes, this chapter highlights the risks of normalising Russia-friendly narratives and policies and their potential to undermine EU cohesion in supporting Kyiv.

Keywords: illiberalism, Russia-friendly parties, European Union, European Parliament

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the Kremlin has cultivated an extensive network of relations with both far-right and radical-left parties in Europe. While Moscow viewed these parties as vectors of influence on the continent, with the ultimate goal of destabilising Europe's liberal democracies, these non-mainstream forces saw the Kremlin as both an ideological anchor and a source of organisational and material support. This relationship proved mutually beneficial and relatively low-cost in terms of reputational damage or political exclusion for the parties involved, given the prevailing climate

* University of Tartu (Estonia)

of pragmatic engagement with Moscow across much of Europe – even in the aftermath of Russia's 2008 aggression against Georgia and the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Overall, the Kremlin leveraged this network – established through both formal agreements and informal channels – primarily as a conduit for domestic interference and a soft power tool to advance its long-term foreign policy objectives.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a critical turning point in this symbiotic relationship, significantly impacting the dynamics of mutual dependence. On one hand, for most European parties, maintaining a visible relationship with the Kremlin has become increasingly costly in terms of public image, given Russia's egregious crimes and human rights violations in Ukraine. On the other hand, Moscow's increasingly imperialist rhetoric and totalitarian tones have made its interference efforts more overt, heightening the risk for affiliated parties of being perceived as the Kremlin's Trojan Horses in domestic and European¹ politics.

As 2024 draws to a close, it is an opportune moment to critically reassess Moscow's relationship with Europe's Russia-friendly parties and its policy implications, as its invasion of Ukraine approaches its third year. Two key factors make this timing particularly relevant and are likely to shape the political landscape for years to come. First, the European Parliament (EP) elections held in June have seen a notable rise in illiberal forces within the Strasbourg hemicycle. Second, the return of Donald Trump to the White House promises to significantly reshape Washington's foreign policy vision – particularly regarding Ukraine – and could potentially embolden nationalist forces in Europe. Both developments are poised to impact Europe's political dynamics and the relationship between Moscow and its allies on the continent.

Defining the Conceptual Setting

Both at the national and supranational EU levels, friendly relations have been cultivated between the Kremlin and non-mainstream European parties. To understand how these parties have adapted to the new reality shaped by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it is essential to examine the key factors underpinning this long-standing – and at times symbiotic – relationship.

¹ The term 'European' is preferred over 'Europe' when referring to the geopolitical context or polity specifically defined and shaped by European integration.

These factors vary along ideological lines and have been flexibly exploited by the Kremlin.

On the right side of the political spectrum, the relationship with the Kremlin has often been formalised through bilateral memoranda of understanding with United Russia². This connection has served as an ideological anchor (e.g., national conservatism and traditionalism) and provided access to a broad network of relevant contacts, infrastructural and political expertise, and, in some cases, direct or indirect financial support.

From the Russian perspective, cultivating close connections with relevant party actors in the EU core offered an opportunity to use influence as a vector of counter-hegemonic pressure, strategically aimed at weakening the liberal-democratic order at both domestic and European levels. This allowed Moscow to effectively apply its traditional divide-and-rule strategy to domestic politics. Such a mutually beneficial relationship is not (and has not been) exclusive to Europe's national conservative front; it can also be observed in the context of the communist and post-communist radical left, ranging from Greece's *Communist Party* to Germany's *Left Party*.

A distinctive feature of the Kremlin's strategy is its trans-ideological approach (Braghiroli and Makarychev 2015), which Levinson (1980) defines as "an attitude towards boosting political influence by pragmatically and intermittently breaching the boundaries of ideologies and political doctrines." This strategy manifests through 'multi-layered' and politically diversified ad hoc narratives. As noted by Braghiroli and Makarychev (2015), the primary goal of this approach is to maximise external political support – particularly from non-mainstream and ideologically driven partners – while minimising the contradictions arising from their opposing ideological positions (e.g., far-right versus radical left).

The Kremlin's strategy has traditionally involved a high degree of ideological tailoring, delivering ad hoc messages designed to resonate with specific ideological targets. For the European radical left, this includes references anti-Western narratives and to the Soviet (anti-fascist) past, positioning Russia as its 'natural' successor. In contrast, appeals to the far right emphasise traditional values, bio-nationalism as a form of exclusionary national hygiene (Aktürk 2012; Treisman 1997), and the European Christian tradition. The often contradictory and irreconcilable nature of these messages underscores the Kremlin's pragmatic trans-ideological approach.

² This has been the case for Italy's *The League*, France's *National Rally*, and *Alternative for Germany* (AfD).

Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine: Before and After

The beginning of the current decade has witnessed a growing ideological convergence between Europe's far right and certain sectors of the radical left, both at national and supranational levels. In many national contexts, this trend has manifested in the increasing overlap of illiberal narratives shared by these extremes home to most of Europe's Russia-friendly parties, united in their opposition to the domestic and supranational liberal establishment.' The identification of a common liberal adversary has blurred increasingly ideological distinctions between the far right and parts of the radical left, creating space for previously improbable alliances.

In Germany, the recently established Sahra Wagenknecht's *Alliance for Reason and Justice* (BSW) and the far-right AfD increasingly seem to oppose the liberal 'establishment' more vehemently than they oppose one another. Similar, though less prominent, dynamics can be observed within sectors of France's left. In Italy, unrepentant communist and leader of the red-brown movement *Sovereign and Popular Italy* (ISP), Marco Rizzo, has actively collaborated with neo-fascist circles, claiming that "liberals are the new fascists" (Labate 2023) and accusing the traditional social-democratic left of betraying the working class in favour of globalization and LGBT ideology.

According to Braghiroli (2023), the illiberal perspective increasingly shared by Moscow's allies on both the left and the right, characterised by nativist and populist undertones, can be distilled into a series of dichotomous ideological postures: Brussels vs. EUrope, post-modern values vs. traditional values, multiculturalism vs. ethno-state, and elites vs. people. In this framing, the former is represented by a "soulless" Europe, while the latter embodies the supporters of a "mythical" return to origins and roots. This binary understanding of politics and society aligns with Laurelle's concept of illiberalism (2022), which is defined not only as a political practice but, more importantly, as a new ideological universe. This ideological framework responds to the challenges of post-modernity by advocating a majoritarian, nation-centric, or sovereigntist conception of the political community, emphasising traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity.

While the dynamics of 'parallel convergence' between the illiberal left and right did not render Moscow's trans-ideological approach irrelevant, the natural ideological contradictions between these 'two extremes' have become increasingly less visible – and less significant – than in the past. This shift has reduced the Kremlin's need to develop ad hoc, compartmentalised

channels for engaging with its two friendly counterparts. This ideological simplification proved particularly effective (and useful) in the context of Russia's growing re-ideologisation leading up to Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Domestically, the regime's ideological intensity and its totalising mobilisation of the population increased significantly in the early 2020s. Internationally, Moscow progressively positioned itself as a pole of illiberal convergence and attraction, portraying itself as the model for 'another possible Europe' (Laruelle 2020, 2016; Bassin 2021).

The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine marked a pivotal moment and posed significant tactical and strategic challenges for Russia-friendly parties in Europe's liberal democracies. Connections and positions that were once acceptable became untenable as the invasion unfolded. Mainstream critics and traditional voters increasingly rejected these parties' ties to Putin's regime, as public opinion of Russia plummeted following widespread revelations of atrocities in Ukraine.

Braghiroli (2023) identifies three phases in how these parties – both on the right and the left – adapted their stance toward the Kremlin at national and EU levels: denial, rationalization, and a new equilibrium. In most cases, this “new equilibrium” closely mirrors their pre-war positions, at least in substance, if not in form. According to Braghiroli (2023), many Russia-friendly parties in Europe echoed Kremlin narratives in the period leading up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, downplaying the likelihood of war and dismissing their governments' warnings as fearmongering. They ridiculed Western accusations of Russia's unwillingness to engage diplomatically, instead portraying Moscow's actions as driven by 'legitimate regional interests.' Both far-right and radical-left Russia-friendly parties repeatedly accused the West of interference, often with only vague references to their ideological frameworks (e.g., Greek and Italian Communist groups framing their opposition as an anti-imperialist stance).

In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, these parties entered a second phase, marked by a need to distance themselves from the Kremlin in response to widespread condemnation of Moscow and the stigmatisation of its actions. While many exhibited symbolic solidarity with Ukraine, their gestures were often performative and driven by the necessity to dissociate from a now-toxic relationship. Notable examples include *The League* leader Matteo Salvini's attempt to position himself as a peace mediator at the Polish-Ukrainian border and AfD chief Tino Chrupalla's verbal condemnation of Russia. Despite this performativity, none of these parties – especially

those on the national-conservative side – altered the substance of their relationship with the Kremlin.

During the third phase, these parties shifted toward more overtly isolationist stances, combined with increasingly hollow expressions of solidarity with Ukraine. This solidarity was reframed in the name of realism (e.g., ‘Russia cannot be defeated’), emphasising the need for ‘peace in Ukraine at all costs.’ Opposition to military support for Ukraine, framed as preventing further bloodshed or escalation, has fostered a stance of equidistance in the conflict that effectively serves Moscow’s interests. When such policy preferences were criticized as aiding Russia’s war effort and undermining Ukraine’s struggle, they were conveniently justified in terms of national interest and common sense. This third phase demonstrates a visible convergence of narratives and practices among illiberal forces across the political spectrum, ranging from the far-right *National Rally* in France and the AfD in Germany to the far-left, such as Rizzo’s ISP and Wagenknecht’s BSW.

Nearly three years into Russia’s full-scale invasion, we appear to be entering a new phase where the policy priorities and narratives of Russia-friendly parties are increasingly diffusing into mainstream politics. Over the past year, in various domestic electoral contests, mainstream liberal parties have sought to address growing “war fatigue” among the electorate by normalising some of the discourses previously championed by Russia-friendly groups in their third phase.

Unpacking the Phase of Contagion and its Dynamics

Across Europe, the logic of narrative and policy contagion has manifested in various ways, reflecting the specific dynamics of domestic party systems and political landscapes. However, two general trends can be identified: the growing appeal of “peace at all costs” discourses among electorates, driven by the perceived socio-economic burdens of the geopolitical status quo and the efforts of mainstream parties to counter the rising support for extremist forces that champion such narratives.

In countries like Italy and Germany, this narrative co-optation has become evident as mainstream forces attempt to avoid electoral losses to the extremes. However, this strategy has also contributed to the gradual legitimisation of policy preferences that, whether intentionally or not, align with Russia’s war objectives. By contrast, in countries such as France, Czechia,

and Romania, where mainstream parties have resisted such shifts, the liberal-democratic centre has often experienced significant electoral setbacks.

In Italy, both the governing conservative *Brothers of Italy* and the main opposition force, the liberal *Democratic Party*, have been influenced by these dynamics. Prime Minister Meloni's *Brothers of Italy* faced growing opposition from its junior coalition partner, *The League*, over military support for Kyiv. This tension culminated in Rome opposing the use of Italian-supplied weapons by Ukraine on Russian territory, despite broad support for such measures among most of Italy's allies. The *Democratic Party* faced similar challenges from the populist *Five Star Movement*, which also opposed military aid to Ukraine. In response, the party allowed an open and chaotic internal debate between appeasing voices and more assertive proponents of support for Ukraine. This internal discord resulted in the party leadership adopting an equidistant stance, effectively leading to a political impasse. The broader consequence has been an increasingly cautious Italian parliament, where both government and opposition forces struggle to reach a coherent position on the issue for the fear of being overtaken by their closest ideological competitors.

Similarly, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz appears to have taken note of the electoral success of the far-right, Russia-friendly AfD in the eastern states of Thuringia and Saxony, as well as in the European elections. This is reflected in his visible distancing from traditional partners like London and Paris regarding the way to better support Kyiv, and his adoption of a more openly appeasing approach toward Moscow. This shift was exemplified by a recent phone call with Vladimir Putin to discuss a possible roadmap to peace. As the candidate for the German *Social Democrats* in the upcoming federal elections, Scholz seems poised to make caution in dealing with Russia's invasion of Ukraine a key part of his campaign strategy. The dynamics of narrative and policy contagion are likely to shape Germany's future stance regardless of the election outcome. While the mainstream centre-right opposition is gaining ground, future potential liberal junior coalition partners, such as the *Greens* or the liberal *Free Democratic Party* (FDP), are losing support to the AfD and Sahra Wagenknecht's BSW,³ both of which embody a more Russia-friendly position.

³ Wagenknecht's BSW has played a key role in forming a governing coalition – together with the *Social Democrats* and *Christian Democrats* – in the state of Thuringia, aimed at excluding the far-right AfD from power. Interestingly, one of Wagenknecht's key demands for joining the coalition was the inclusion of a peace clause in the coalition agreement. This clause expressed support for all diplomatic initiatives aimed at ending

While this fourth phase of contagion and the normalisation of related narratives and policies has been more prevalent in Western Europe – due to greater physical distance from the Russo-Ukrainian war and a lower sense of geopolitical urgency – it has not been entirely absent in Central and Eastern Europe. A notable example is Poland, where massive farmers' protests in spring 2024, fuelled by the Russia-friendly party *Confederation*, blocked the transit of agricultural products between Ukraine and Poland. In response, the then-ruling *Law and Justice* (PiS) party not only failed to dismantle the illegal blockades but also imposed a unilateral embargo on Ukrainian crops, in direct violation of EU single market regulations, to appease the protesters.

Recently, Martin Helme, the leader of Estonia's *National Conservative Party* (EKRE) suggested that ceding Ukrainian-occupied territories to Russia would bring peace and “ensure that the war does not reach Estonia” (Kisler 2024). Traditionally known for its vehemently ethnocentric stance and antagonism toward Estonia's Russian-speaking minority, the party shifted its approach in the year leading up to Russia's invasion. For the first time, it sought to appeal to Russian-speaking minorities to expand its electoral base by moving away from ethnocentrism and adopting priorities that resonated with conservative-leaning voters across ethnic lines, such as vaccine denialism, opposition to green policies, and promoting traditional family values (Braghiroli and Makarychev 2023).

As the war in Ukraine dragged on, the party increasingly criticised Ukrainian refugees as a vector of the ‘Slavification’ of the Estonian society and expressed concerns about the economic impact of sanctions against Russia, despite Estonia's strong pro-Ukraine consensus. More recently, following the EP elections, the party faced internal turmoil, with a considerable number of members leaving and creating a competing movement, while accusing the leadership of embracing pro-Russia narratives and policies.

Overall, while the fear of ceding electoral ground to Russia-friendly extremes has been the primary driver behind the normalisation of such narratives and policies, this strategy has not led to their containment. Instead, it has emboldened the extremes and advanced their programmatic priorities, which increasingly align with Russia's war efforts. For instance, in its EP elections programme, the AfD called for Germany to seek observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a security-focussed bloc of autocratic regimes led by Russia and China. The manifesto also advocated for

the war in Ukraine and criticised the delivery of arms to Kyiv, despite federal states having no jurisdiction over foreign and security policy (Goncharova 2024).

German cooperation with the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union and embraced the concept of a ‘multipolar world order’ deeply engrained in Russia’s foreign policy.⁴ Similarly, Marine Le Pen asserted that under her leadership, “France should leave NATO’s integrated command” (France24 2022). In addition, the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU and its instrumentalisation by Prime Minister Orbán have provided a useful framework for consolidating and propagating Russia-friendly narratives and policy alternatives, resulting in a much criticised ‘peace-seeking’ visit of the Hungarian Prime Minister to Moscow.

So far, this phase of mainstream contagion has been primarily witnessed at the national level where its effects are increasingly visible on policy making. Among the other things, Chancellor Scholz’s recent appeals to a negotiated peace and increasingly appeasing approach to the war in Ukraine and Italy’s *Democratic Party*’s growing impasse in supporting Kyiv are manifestations of such dynamics. Conversely, despite Hungary’s presidency of the Council and the encouraging results for many Russia-friendly parties in the recent EP elections, the contagion effect at the supranational level has so far remained limited. This can be attributed to two key factors: the inability of illiberal national-conservative forces to form a united front and the specific consociational decision-making dynamics of the EP, which are anchored in a mainstream grand coalition spanning from the conservative European People’s Party to the progressive Social Democrats.

Given Moscow’s consistent use of its political influence as a tool of soft power and hybrid interference functional to its foreign policy goals, the normalisation of Russia-friendly narratives at the European level and its interlocking with mainstream contagion witnessed at the national level would have very direct consequences on the European support to Ukraine. This would interface with supranational decision-making in relation to matters such as military support to Kyiv and sanction regime against Russia where input and policy initiation takes place at the national level, while consensus building and decision-making take increasingly place at the EU level.

⁴ The AfD electoral programme can be accessed at the following link: https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/AfD_EW_Programm_2024.pdf.

Supranational Dynamics, Contextual Factors, and Impact on the Future of the Union's Ukraine Strategy

The EP elections of June 2024 marked a significant rise in illiberal forces across key member states compared to the previous elections, coupled with a notable decline in progressive and liberal forces, particularly the Greens and centrist liberal-democrats, which lost around 30% of their seats, respectively. This shift was primarily driven by the growing strength of far-right, national-conservative, and nationalist parties, while the radical left either remained stable or experienced a decline in most of the key member states.

Despite the far right and nationalist parties collectively forming the largest ideological bloc in the EP, with 189 MEPs (compared to 188 MEPs for the moderate *European People's Party*), their historically low capacity for unity persisted, resulting in a division into three separate groups: the *European Conservatives and Reformists* (ECR), the *Patriots for Europe* (PfE), and the *Europe of Sovereign Nations* (ESN).

The ECR, anchored by Poland's *Law and Justice* party and *Brothers of Italy*, successfully maintained its continuity from the previous term. In contrast, the PfE and ESN emerged following the dissolution of the Eurosceptic *Independence and Democracy* (ID) group, incorporating also older non-affiliated parties, such as Viktor Orbán's *Fidesz*, and new entrants.

One major factor behind this fragmentation among the illiberal right was differing attitudes toward Russia. The ECR and its member parties have traditionally been more hostile toward Moscow, while divisions between the PfE (anchored by *Fidesz*, *National Rally*, and *The League*) and ESN (dominated by the AfD) – home to most Russia-friendly parties – were primarily driven by power dynamics among key national forces and regional rivalries, rather than by fundamental ideological differences or divergent perspectives on Europe's geopolitical role amidst the Russo-Ukrainian war.

While the shift from the second phase of performative solidarity towards Ukraine towards a more assertive third phase where policies and narratives functional to Moscow's effort are framed in terms of national interest can be seen in the new Parliament, especially in the context of PfE and ESN, dynamics of contagion appear very limited or absent so far. A good example of the contrast between past and present dynamics can be seen by examining two specific instances. In November 2022, the EP approved, by an exceptionally large majority, a resolution recognising the Russian Federation as a

state sponsor of terrorism (see European Parliament 2022). MEPs belonging to mainstream party groups overwhelmingly endorsed the resolution.

However, the positions of the Russia-friendly ID group and the *European Left* were more nuanced than expected. Leftist MEPs appeared largely united in their decision not to endorse the resolution, with only four exceptions from Nordic legislators. Nonetheless, they were divided on their approach: most abstained, while a significant minority, primarily from Germany's *Left Party*, voted against it. Similarly, the ID group displayed internal divisions. Most of its MEPs, led by France's *National Rally* and Germany's *AfD*, either voted against the resolution or abstained. In contrast, all of Salvini's MEPs supported the resolution without exception, likely to avoid embarrassing Meloni's government, with which they form a coalition at the national level. In the new Parliament, however, the positions of the two rightist groups, dominated by Russia-friendly parties, appear much clearer and less nuanced. This clarity is evident not only in their programs but also in their voting records.

One compelling piece of evidence is the formalisation of the “peace at all costs” narrative, not only within the radical left, where it has traditionally thrived, but also within the far right and nationalist camps. A notable example is found in the manifesto of the *PfE*,⁵ which references peace twice: first in its call for “a Europe committed to peace and dialogue” in foreign policy, and second in its prioritization of “sovereignty over federalism, freedom and peace over diktats.” Interestingly, these priorities – along with others highlighted in the manifesto – align closely with the ethos of the 2024 Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, whose Trump-style motto has been “Make Europe Great Again.” Prime Minister Orbán's controversial trip to Moscow (and Kyiv) during the Russo-Ukrainian war, which drew sharp criticism from Brussels and national chancelleries, was justified precisely using this narrative.

The voting records in the parliament can also help us to assess the changes occurred following the 2024 elections and evidence of a potential phase of contagion also at the supranational level. Two votes can be particularly telling. One about the vote of confidence to the new Von der Leyen Commission that can tell us more about the macro-political balance (and future coalition patters) between the party groups in the EP. Another about the first Ukraine-focused vote concerning the continuation of the EU military

⁵ The Manifesto can be accessed at: <https://patriots.eu/manifesto>.

assistance to Ukraine and compare that to the votes discussed above in the past parliamentary term.

The election of the Von der Leyen II Commission on 27 November delivered the smallest majority in the history of the directly elected EP, with only 54% of MEPs voting in favour. This relatively low level of support is only partly attributable to the predictable Eurosceptic votes of the 'two extremes.' More significantly, it reflects Von der Leyen's efforts to build potential future policy convergence with the ECR group – particularly through Italy's Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni – and her backing of Meloni's nominee, Commissioner and Vice-President candidate Raffaele Fitto.

This strategy was widely perceived as a pragmatic attempt to prevent the conservative (and Russia-critical) ECR group from drifting too far from the core of EU decision-making, which has traditionally been dominated by the Christian Democrat–Social Democrat–Liberal triad. However, it came at the cost of alienating a significant portion of progressive MEPs, with approximately 35% casting negative or abstention votes. On the other hand, this approach succeeded in securing the support or abstention of around 50% of ECR-affiliated MEPs, paving the way for potential pragmatic and programmatic collaborations in the future.

The vote on the 'Proposal for Resolution' "Continued financial and military support to Ukraine by EU member states" (European Parliament 2024), held on 29 September 2024, represents one of the first Ukraine-focused votes of the new EP. The vote is particularly relevant since it does not focus only on solidarity, but also on the much-debated aspect on military assistance, often instrumentalised by Russia-friendly forces. When compared to the vote held in November 2022, discussed above, there is very limited evidence of a "contagion phase" in terms of policy stances at the EP level. The resolution was supported by almost 70% of the chamber, with the three mainstream parties and the Greens decisively backing the proposal. Defections were relatively minimal, with negative votes reaching 10% of the total only in the case of the Greens.

Among leftist MEPs, nearly 50% voted against the resolution, while over 20% abstained, and around 30% (primarily from Nordic countries) voted in favour. The ESN group, dominated by Alternative for Germany, was the most cohesive in its opposition. Interestingly, divisions were evident even within the PfiE group, with more than 30% of its legislators abstaining – primarily members from Czechia's ANO and Spain's VOX. As expected, the

ECR group demonstrated strong support for the resolution, with over 85% of its members voting in favour, reflecting the group's Russia-critical stance.

In summary, there is no evidence of a contagion of policy preferences favourable to Russia's war effort spreading from the extremes to the mainstream. If anything, groups containing most of the Russia-friendly parties appear more internally divided than they were in 2022. This is particularly evident in the left and the PfiE group.

What can these initial observations tell us about the EU's role in supporting Ukraine in the years to come and about the political and partisan dynamics related to this? While it is important to exercise a degree of caution – given that the new Parliament has just been inaugurated and the new Commission has only recently begun its mandate – the preliminary trends suggest no evidence of a predictable decline in Brussels' determination to support Kyiv militarily and economically. Moreover, there appears to be no significant erosion of consensus among the mainstream political forces (including the Greens and the ECR) that could lead to the potential contagion of extreme positions influencing the mainstream, as has been observed in various national contexts.⁶

This steadfastness is critical for Ukraine's struggle in light of two key factors. First, the EU's increasingly central role in supporting Kyiv is vital, particularly in the military sphere (notably through the European Peace Facility) and in coordinating Member States' efforts, as highlighted by the appointment of the EU's first Commissioner for Defence. Second, the potentially more erratic Ukraine policy anticipated from the United States following Donald Trump's election – though the specific implications remain uncertain – will likely render Brussels' role even more indispensable. While the new US administration appears increasingly likely to take an active role in seeking an end to the war, it remains too early to predict how the conflict will conclude. Moreover, it would be an overstatement to imply that every development hinges on Brussels. Nonetheless, the EU's commitment and active support – both diplomatic and military – will be crucial in two key respects.

First, the EU must ensure that Ukraine secures the best possible peace terms. This includes resisting any pressure – potentially arising from shifts in US policy – that might push Ukraine toward accepting unfavourable

⁶ One scenario that could alter this dynamic and trigger potential contagion involves the ostracisation of the ECR group by mainstream forces, leading to a more cohesive regrouping of nationalist and far-right factions.

conditions due to insufficient allied support. Second, while the EU may lack the capacity to fully counterbalance potential US disengagement, a united stance from Brussels is far more likely to positively influence Washington's stance than fragmented positions from individual member states, which are more susceptible to divide-and-rule tactics.

Furthermore, the EU could position itself as a new centre of gravity for non-EU allies committed to Ukraine's victory, such as Canada and the United Kingdom. This shift is already evident in the strengthening of bilateral partnerships and multilateral coordination, particularly within the frameworks of EU-NATO cooperation and the European Political Community.

References

- Aktürk, Şener. 2012. "September 11, 1683: Myth of a Christian Europe and the Massacre in Norway." *Insight Turkey* 14 (1): 1–11.
- Bassin, Mark. 2021. "‘Real Europe’ Civilizationism and the Far Right in Eastern Europe." In *The Many Faces of the Far Right in the Post-Communist Space*, edited by Ninna Morner, 15–22. Centre for Baltic and East European Studies, CBEEES, Sodertorn University.
- Braghiroli, Stefano. 2022. "Europe’s Russia-Friendly Parties Put to the Test by Putin’s Invasion of Ukraine." *Journal of Regional Security* 18 (1): 29–38.
- Braghiroli, Stefano, and Andrey Makarychev. 2023. "Conservative populism in Italy and Estonia: playing the multicultural card and engaging ‘domestic others’." *East European Politics* 39 (1): 128–149.
- Braghiroli, Stefano, and Andrey Makarychev. 2015. "Russia and its supporters in Europe: trans-ideology à la carte?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16 (2): 213–233.
- European Parliament. 2024. *European Parliament resolution of 19 September 2024 on Continued financial and military support to Ukraine by EU Member States. (2024/2799(RSP))*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0012_EN.html.
- European Parliament. 2022. *European Parliament resolution of 23 November 2022 on recognising the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terrorism. (2022/2896(RSP))*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0405_EN.html.
- France24. 2022. *Le Pen wants France out of NATO integrated command, backs NATO-Russia links*. 13 April 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20220413-le-pen-wants-france-out-of-nato-integrated-command-backs-nato-russia-links>
- Goncharova, Olena. 2024. "Germany’s new populist party pressures coalition talks with anti-Ukraine stance". *Kyiv Independent*. 03 November 2024. <https://kyivindependent.com/germanys-new-populist-party-pressure-coalition-talks-with-anti-ukraine-stance/>
- Kiisler, Indrek. 2024. "EKRE leader: Ceding occupied territories to Russia would bring peace." *ERR News*. 04 November 2024. <https://news.err.ee/1609511704/ekre-leader-ceding-occupied-territories-to-russia-would-bring-peace>
- Labate, Tommaso. 2023. "Marco Rizzo, l'ex pugile passato dal comunismo ad Alemanno." *Corriere della Sera*. 15 November 2023. https://roma.corriere.it/notizie/politica/23_novembre_15/marco-rizzo-alemanno-6f8dc8dd-9cb3-4946-bbad-3d22b354axlk.shtml
- Laruelle, Marlene. 2020. "Making sense of Russia’s illiberalism." *Journal of Democracy* 31 (3): 115–129.
- Laruelle, Marlene. 2016. "Russia as an anti-liberal European civilisation." In *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000-2015*, edited by Pal Kolsto and Helge Blakkisrud, 275–297. Edinburgh University Press.
- Laurrelle, Marlene. 2022. "Illiberalism: a conceptual introduction." *East European Politics* 38 (2): 303–327.

Levinson, Charles. 1980. *Vodka cola*. Horsham: Biblos.

Treisman, Daniel. S. 1997. "Russia's 'ethnic rival': The separatist activism of regional leaders in a postcommunist order." *World Politics* 49 (2): 212–249.

12. Russian Émigrés in the EU

Citizenship, Sovereignty, and a Reconceptualization of Community

Dr. Asta Maskaliūnaite*

Abstract

Since the 2022 invasion, the debate on the war's origins has polarised views, attributing it to either Russian societal aggression or regime policies. This article argues that the West, particularly the EU, must foster an alternative vision for Russia to prevent prolonged conflict. The article examines the European approach to these émigrés, especially given the EU's non-recognition of the Russian regime. It proposes a democratically elected parliamentary assembly for Russians in Europe, modelled after Tibetan institutions in exile to address legitimacy and representation issues. This assembly would provide a democratic alternative to the regime for those Russians who live in the democratic EU and a legitimate alternative to self-appointed opposition figures as interlocutors for the EU institutions. In addition, it would contribute to the broader debate on sovereignty, representation, and territoriality in global politics.

Keywords: Russian émigrés, European Union, representation, citizenship, sovereignty

Introduction

Since the start of latest Russian invasion in 2022, the discussion on the origins of the war pitted two extreme camps against each other: those who see it as an outcome for the Russian societal demand for aggression and those who view it exclusively as the regime's policy. Yet, the enthusiastic or at least docile participation of large numbers of Russians in this aggression had to be supplemented with the ever-stronger repression of any dissent in the country. The purging of public sphere by these repressive activities and filling the waves with regime sanctioned propaganda leaves an impression of a lack of alternatives raising doubts that the aggression can ever end

* Director of the Department of Political and Strategic Studies, Baltic Defence College

and whether the peace achieved would not be ‘just armistice’ for a certain number of years. This article will argue that, in order to avoid such a fate, the West in general and the EU in particular, should foster a vision of an alternative for Russia and Russian society.

While our eyes are naturally focused on the plight of Ukrainians both in Ukraine and as war refugees abroad, other large exile communities have developed in Europe that may potentially impact regional developments and stability, or lack thereof, in Eastern Europe. A trickle of Russian citizens to Europe has intensified to a strong flow since the attack on Ukraine in February 2022, even though many states have introduced significant restrictions on entry since the full-scale invasion. Currently, around 710,000 people with Russian citizenship reside in EU countries (e.g., EUROSTAT 2024).

Hope that the Putin regime would be toppled by war dissipated at the end of the third year of the conflict, leaving an open question as to what the European approach to these Russian émigrés should be. The containment and deterrence options towards Russia, reminiscent of the Cold War discussions, focus exclusively on building a virtual or even a real wall around the country. Going further, the EU parliament declared the Russian presidential elections illegitimate and the vote non-valid (European Parliament 2024a; bne IntelliNews 2024). This non-recognition implies that the political system and regime itself are not legitimate interlocutors for the EU as such and at least some of its states.

At the same time, few strategies take into account the large numbers of Russian political refugees that are already in the EU. While the return and eventual death of Alexey Navalny is an extreme example, people of lesser stature also face persecution and even disappearance in the vast gulags of the country. Thus, the presence of Russian citizens in Europe requires consideration of what the future approach to these individuals will be, particularly in light of the non-recognition of the established Russian regime.

There are numerous issues that this Russian community wants to address to the EU. The question of passports and/or humanitarian visas is on top of their agenda. Other issues include safety concerns related to Russian intelligence operatives in the EU, economic hardships related to lack of employment opportunities and difficulties transferring money from Russia, and social discrimination and xenophobia due to the war (Shamiev 2024). To deal with these topics and receive stakeholder feedback, EU officials enter discussions with the self-appointed representatives of the Russian opposition whose legitimacy is only based on the personal charisma, such as Michail

Khodorkhovsky, Gary Kasparov, or Yulia Navalnya. Russian blogosphere and vlogosphere are vibrant with political commentary but tend towards silos of admirers of particular individuals, making them very fragmented. Many Russian opposition figures in the West function as lobbyists in European institutions, both to improve the plight of their co-citizens in the European countries and to influence policies towards Russia (e.g., Free Russia Foundation advocacy efforts (Free Russia Foundation 2024) However, their self-appointed status does not allow their interlocutors to judge what is behind these proposals, and they often can only be assessed on the personal traits of these individuals and impressions of trustworthiness that are not institutionalised.

This article aims to address the question of how the EU could engage with the Russian opposition. It will propose the establishment of a parliamentary assembly for Russians in Europe, adjacent to the EU Parliament, that would have a mandate to address issues relevant for the community as a democratically elected representation. The example of Tibetan institutions functioning in exile will be used to illustrate this concept. This example shows a potentially educational interplay between sovereignty, citizenship, and statehood, encouraging a rethinking of these concepts and their connection to territory. The drawbacks of this approach and potential limitations will also be addressed.

As a limitation, it is worth mentioning that while the Russian opposition is present in a large number of countries and the majority of those who left after the full-scale invasion of 2022 did not reach Europe. The proposals will only concern this limited group living in the EU for purely technical reasons of having better control over who could vote in the elections and what remit such an assembly could have. At the same time, similar measures could be extended to other dissident groups, such as Belarusians, or Venezuelans. It is important to note the regimes of these countries are not recognised as legitimate in the EU and its member states (e.g., Jones 2024; Banks 2020).

Governments in Exile and the Tibetan Example

To understand better the potential for establishing the parliamentary assembly for the Russians in exile in Europe, it is worth examining the legal and political questions surrounding such recognitions. The first known instances where a group claimed legitimacy to rule a territory, despite it being physically controlled by another actor, can be traced back to the kingdom

of Judah in 6 century BC. The term of ‘exile’ itself is linked to the Biblical description of ‘Babylonian exile.’

There are numerous historical examples of alternative rulers and governments being introduced as rival sources of legitimate power (e.g., Levin and Lutmar 2020 for an overview and more concretely history of the False Dmitrys from Russian history; Perrie 1995). Governments-in-exile as political and legal entities are a modern phenomenon. They flourished particularly during WWII and its immediate aftermath. As Europe was overrun by Germany and Asia by Japan, political representatives of the occupied states found refuge in London or Washington. Some of these representations continued their activities after the war, as Soviet occupation replaced German occupation in their states.

After WWII, the practice of recognition and non-recognition of governments gained even more legal and political attention. For example, the 1970s debate in Britain resulted in the United Kingdom adopting a policy of recognising states rather than governments under pressure of the public opinion, which saw “formal recognition as tantamount to moral approval” (Talmon 1998, 6) and was concerned with the actions of brutal dictatorships. Nevertheless, the more or less recognised alternative representatives of various states continued to reside in Western countries throughout the Cold War period, and their position and their role in the international system needed to be periodically addressed.

The 20th century saw an ever-increasing number of countries asserting their position as states not only through the objective criteria of government, population, and territory, but also through the subjective recognition of other states, with the ascendance to the UN still seen as the major achievement of recognition. At the same time, a flurry of national liberation movements, national councils, and other opposition groups functioned from abroad. Some of these groups achieved recognition as actual governments-in-exile. Stefan Talmon notes that in the last century, there were 70 governments claiming to be governments-in-exile of which 39 “have received either *de facto* or *de jure* recognition by one or more states” (Talmon 1998, X).

The presence of such recognised entities in the international system, which is based on the absolute and exclusive sovereignty of the states, remains an under-researched peculiarity. How their relations with the host-governments work and under what circumstances they retain legitimacy and weight in their communities is also a topic that requires more attention.

The case of Tibetan government in exile is one of more researched in this regard and offers insights into how continuity, legitimacy, and identification with the government is achieved in a prolonged exile without a connection to the homeland. Discussing this case, Fiona McConnell posits that sovereignty is “historically contingent, socially constructed, and actively rendered and (re)negotiated through practices, discourses and everyday materialities” (McConnell 2009b, 1909). Even though it lacks official recognition, the Tibetan government in exile has “a degree of de facto sovereignty based on its claims to and production of legitimacy” (McConnell 2009a, 344). At the same time, the level and degree of potential sovereignty the Tibetan government retains depend on the continuous reassessment of its position and relation to the host Indian government (McConnell 2011).

The example of the Tibetan government in exile could potentially be useful for this investigation as it shares some similarities with the proposed solutions. The Tibetan government is, first of all, a well-established internationally entity engaged in ‘paradiplomacy,’ but it lacks much official recognition abroad due to pressure from the PRC. In the host country of India, it has established several important institutions, including its own parliament, executive, and judiciary. It has a type of constitution, the ‘Charter of Tibetans in Exile,’ issues its community passports, and collects taxes (‘Charter of the Tibetans in Exile’ 1991; on the functioning of the Tibetan government in exile, see Roemer 2008).

At the same time, it has very little connection with its people in Tibet and even less influence on the events there (McConnell 2009b, 1907). Connection with this exiled government is punishable in Tibet itself, and its position in India is precarious and dependent on the ever-evolving relationship between India and China. Although India hosts the Tibetan government in exile, it recognises Chinese sovereignty over the territory of Tibet (Government of India 2003).

Cases like these, according to McConnell, require a rethinking of the concept of sovereignty in both its theoretical dimension and its practice (McConnell 2009a; 2009b, 2011). This section will further address two aspects of this discussion. First, from a more politico-theoretical and legal perspective, we need to explore the implications that recognising alternative political arrangements for citizens of another state may have on the general understanding of sovereignty. Second, to examine the role the potential parliamentary assembly and a council derived from it could play, we need to

consider how such practices shape understanding of sovereignty and identity of a community.

The state in international relations is understood as possessing at least three objective elements: territory, population, and government, and subjectively recognised as such by other states. The notion of a government-in-exile creates a significant challenge to this delineation, as it introduces a rupture between the territory and government, thereby detaching the government from material and bound space. Similarly, in these situations, the connection between government and population is also problematic. The citizens of territory claimed by such a government must follow the rules and obey different authority and can at most exercise divided loyalty between the two, even if they are not forced to abandon their commitment to the government-in-exile. Thus, the question arises: how can such a government claim legitimacy when it can neither exercise control over territory nor have undivided loyalty of the population, whether ‘home’ or ‘abroad’?

Different possibilities can be explored again through the example of the Tibetans. The Tibetan government in exile is recognised as an institution with legitimacy primarily through the exercise of democracy. Since the 1990s, regular democratic elections to the parliamentary assembly have been practised. In addition to direct result of a parliament, this was also seen as a way to gain legitimacy in the international system, which had begun to increasingly value democracy. Similarly, the figure of Dalai Lama and both his and his government’s commitment to non-violence raised the moral authority and thus legitimacy of Tibetan exiles in their relations with other states (see, for example, the Dalai Lama’s acceptance speech after receiving the Nobel peace prize in 1989 with a clear emphasis on democracy and non-violence, Dalai Lama 1989). Finally, the part of the legitimacy comes from its acting *like* a state for the Tibetan settlements in India.

This last consideration naturally leads us to the second question that was raised earlier: how the practice of governing shapes the understanding of sovereignty and identity (Bueger and Gadinger 2016). The Tibetan government, for example, relies on the Indian state for most of the ‘regular’ functions of the state, such as courts and policing. However, it does issue Tibetan passports and collects some ‘voluntary’ taxes. Its judicial system can legitimately resolve some civil disputes. According to McConnell, by practicing such functions, the Tibetan government is established as a proto-state, and people’s identification with it is formed through practice (McConnell 2009b).

Current European Realities and Potential Solutions

In order to see how the discussed Tibetan example could be used in the European context, a short assessment of the EU policies should be presented. In its current migration politics, the EU follows the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention and has its own rules for managing the process of migration (The UN 1951). Some countries also have special arrangements for people in danger of persecution such as journalists or political activists by issuing them humanitarian visas. The decisions are made regarding individuals and few special arrangements are offered for political institutions. Lithuania hosting the Belarusian government-in-exile headed by the president-elect Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and even issuing non-citizen passports for Belarusians who cannot go back to their country to change their expired documents (Askew 2023) can be seen as rather an exception to an overall rule. In the Belarusian case, the recognition of government-in-exile and non-recognition of a government in Belarus wraps Tsikhanouskaya's administration in a mantle of legitimacy. In practice, it has little influence over the events in Belarus and is mostly successful in dealing with the administrative issues of its co-citizens in the host countries. (Benakis 2023)

The Russian diaspora has even less representation than the Belarusian one. The elections in Russia on the federal level were deemed properly democratic only in the 1990s, and on the municipal level, their democratic credentials have been steadily diminishing since beginning of 2000s (e.g., OSCE assessments on the elections in Russia, OSCE, n.d.). Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, attempts of Russian émigrés to organise some type of representation in the West have intensified. Regular Vilnius fora had been taking place already before 2022 but have since grown in size (MFA Lithuania 2024; BNS 2024). Other organisations develop their own events (e.g., Boris Nemtsov Forum 2024, since 2022 Russian Anti-War Committee 2024; for an overview, see Terekhov 2023) At the same time, no attempt at developing common institutions have been successful. However, laments that opposition cannot unite (Seddon 2023) are met with dismissals that unity would be needed for a concrete action and as no action was envisioned, there was no need for such unity (Borogan and Soldatov 2024).

On the European level, discussions between the EU Parliament and Russian opposition figures have become quite regular and Russian politicians abroad used this platform to influence some decision making (e.g., Khodorkovsky 2023). Instead of addressing the needs of the Russian citizens in

the EU, these visits seem to revolve around the EU policies towards Russia itself, and, in particular, the sanctions regime (European Parliament 2024b; Council of Europe 2023).

As no elections have been held to appoint these individuals to a representative speaking position neither for the Russian community nor for Russia as such, the legitimacy of their actions is dubious. With the length of their stay in the Western countries increasing, the issue of financing their activities also arises. Some of them obtain various grants from Western institutions, (e.g. 'USRF - Free Enterprise Supporting Democracy', n.d.) while others rely more on subscriptions on social media channels. Both methods have their benefits and disadvantages, but neither leads to coalition building. Furthermore, it creates a resentment of people 'living off grants' in the general community. Semi-voluntary contributions as a small fraction of taxes paid to the EU states could alleviate this issue, but this can only be done through agreement amongst elected institutions.

In the autumn of 2024, two scandals shook the opposition world. The first focused on a series of attacks against opposition figures. The researchers of the 'Foundation against Corruption' (*FBK* in Russian), outlet of the late Alexei Navalny, claimed to have evidence that these attacks were orchestrated and paid for by Leonid Nevzlin, business partner and friend of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, one of the star leaders of the opposition since his release from Russian prison in 2013 (e.g., Ebel, Ilyushina, and Dixon 2024). The second scandal centred already on the *FBK* itself, claiming that it was financed by bankers that are accused of stealing millions from Russian citizens and in return help to whitewash these bankers' reputation (The Bell 2024). At the bottom of each of the scandals are personalities and rivalries; however, they can also be seen as an expression of tensions in a community that is continuously threatened by the Russian regime and has lived under stress for close to three years. As the regime looks stable, no prospect of change is visible, war crimes are continuously committed, and society back in Russia is ever more brutalised by the continuing war. Therefore, periodic bouts of doubt in the utility of continuing political activity are understandable. At the same time, a lack of responsibility of the political entrepreneurs also increases these tensions as their world becomes limited to the virtual space and clickbait activity.

Thus, what could potentially help both this community and its interlocutors on the EU level would be the establishment of a parliamentary assembly adjacent to the EU Parliament. The assembly would be elected by Russian

passport holders in the EU, and the electoral process itself would be organised under the auspices of the EU Parliament and, potentially, linked to the European Parliament elections. The establishment of such a body would confer democratic legitimacy to the elected representatives, institutionalising their activities and grounding them in popular support. It could then select a council that would be authorised to address the European parliament as well as national bodies on behalf of the community to solve the issues pertinent to that community on an administrative level and act as a body with real claim to representation.

The everyday functioning of such a body would introduce a practice of sovereignty and democratic political competition. As suggested with the Tibetan example, the exiled communities' institutions 'acting as a state' serve to establish through practice the identification with such proto-states. In addition, their democratic functioning helps to both ground this identity in democratic values and serve as a platform for distilling political ideas and developing negotiation skills that are necessary for any successful functioning of democracy. For the EU Parliament, it would also establish clarity for those who have a democratic mandate to talk on behalf of the émigré community. At the same time, a connection to the EU Parliament would underscore the institutional value of such a body and maintain a clear institutional legitimacy, which the previous mentioned initiatives, being mostly personality-driven, lack. For the EU, which is itself seen as an experiment in a different type of sovereignty, being more than an international organisation but less than a federal state, this would also be a possibility to experiment with a vision of linkage between sovereignty and territoriality that moves beyond the entrenched nation state (Bellamy 2017; Glencross 2011).

Potential Objections

It must be admitted that there are many potential issues with such a proposal. Indeed, even the Tibetan example shows that the interplay between sovereignty, identity, and territoriality are not easily managed. The question of assimilation comes to the fore. Host countries are typically interested in integration and eventually assimilation of arrivals, thereby reducing the tensions brought about by divided loyalties. The individual choices of integration or refusal thereof create a layer of discontent between the host and 'guest' governments and individuals, with their choices becoming trapped

somewhere in between. This is a negative side of the same Tibetan attempts to keep the community distinct and discourage the process of assimilation in their new location (Childs and Barkin 2006; Bloch 2023). It could be said that such pressures on individuals are not necessarily acceptable and that individual choices should be the centre of attention.

On the opposite side, a part of discussion in diaspora studies and beyond focuses on the pressures exercised by the ‘home’ countries on the diasporic communities and the attempts of such states as Turkey, India, or China to exercise influence over other states through their communities in those countries (Adamson and Han 2024). Conversely, there are pressures on the ‘host’ states regarding the communities that are seen as hostile at home (Aggestam, Schierenbeck, and Wackenhut 2023). The use of such communities, however, does not seem to be dependent on their political representation or lack thereof, and the tensions between Russia and the EU are already at a high level can hardly change more.

Host states can also become sites of violent retributions to such groups, transferring the brutality of ‘home’ regime abroad and raising questions in the host society about diminishing security by harbouring the communities in question (Kartschnig 2022). Yet, except in the situations where all access of such communities would be barred for those fleeing the regime at home, such cases can hardly be altogether avoided, and while they do test the willingness of host societies to protect their guests, it seems that the presence or absence of political representation hardly influences such decisions. Furthermore, it could also be claimed that given the democratic nature of political representation, there should be less interest in focusing on some specific individuals who gain credence due to their position rather than personal charisma.

Another objection could be that allowing such representation would open Pandora’s box with an exponentially increasing number of groups demanding similar treatment. However, international relations, in their nature, are a balance between universal rules and particular applications, and thus it is up to the states – and in this case, up to the EU – to decide on the validity of these claims and on the interest of the EU itself to open up possibilities of potential political representation.

Similarly, the objection may arise that this would encourage adversaries to create similar representations. However, Russia is already engaged in activities that go even further in questioning traditional understandings of sovereignty and territoriality with the encouragement of ‘frozen’ conflicts,

and the perpetuation of quasi-states within the boundaries of other national states. This dynamic becomes apparent even more so now with the war in Ukraine, through the annexation of bordering regions (Sauer and Harding 2022), treating them as entities in their pre-war boundaries for the purposes of presidential elections even though only a part of that territory is even physically controlled by Russia (Davis and Litvinova 2024). A European proposal of a limited self-government is an incomparably smaller threat to the traditional conceptualisation of sovereignty than those aforementioned actions.

Yet another question is the overall interest in these communities for such a representation. Two botched experiments in 2024 show the potential limits to such interests: the Belarusian attempt to elect members of their Coordination Council (Kłysiński 2024; Euroradio 2024; Emtseva 2024) and the attempt initiated by Mark Feygin to create a platform for an alternative presidential elections for the Russian Federation (Singh 2024). Both activities met with little interest and raised questions of the wish of the communities to deal with alternative political representations. Nevertheless, both these attempts had flaws which could be addressed in the proposed solution. First, the conduct of elections under the auspices, with the approval of, or in conjunction with the EU Parliament confers legitimacy on the process. Secondly, the limit of the proposal to first engage only the Russian citizens living in the EU creates a clearer remit for the assembly, with a clearer purpose. Through this process, the hypothetical assembly would admit that it would have little influence over events at home, but it could potentially help make life easier for the citizens in the EU and establish practices, which, as has been demonstrated in the Tibetan case, establish connections with institutions and democratic institutional frameworks in particular.

The problem with the previous attempts at democratic representation was also influenced by attempts to involve an as wide as possible electorate into the process and to thus juxtapose the elections to those happening inside the territorially bound states. While more legitimacy to speak in the name of the nation would result from such elections, it is much more complicated to control the voting population in such circumstances. As Russian citizens live legally in the EU, it is easier to create voter lists based on such documentation and a more limited assembly with no right to speak in the name of 'all' Russians but that has a chance to materialise and be active.

Finally, an objection can be made that democratic processes may elect other than 'good Russians' (Rudina 2022) and that the Kremlin would work

hard to sabotage these elections and elect their own agents. While this is a possibility, the limit of voting rights to the group that is already established in the EU addresses a part of the question. Another issue is the moral character of the potential candidates to such a body needs to be addressed by the voters themselves. The expression of their will, however, would also paint a portrait of a 'European Russian,' thus helping to understand what is necessary for engagement with them. Such an elected body would either stay entrenched in the old imperial worldviews that are similar to those emanating from the 'Russia proper' or would work to reverse such thinking and facilitate the development of the post-imperial thinking. It would still be useful for Europeans to ascertain the direction of the community and thus be able to create more realistic and coherent policies towards both the émigré community and Russia.

Conclusions

This chapter addressed the possibility to create a democratically elected parliamentary assembly for émigré Russians in the EU. Russians lack democratically elected representatives, with the last free and fair elections taking place in the country decades ago. While not an answer to all the issues, this elected assembly would be able to address at least some of the issues of legitimacy and representation within a smaller European Russian community. If it would be possible to achieve that, this experiment could be later expanded.

The exercise would raise questions of sovereignty, representation, and territoriality. It would also raise issues of the possibility of integration and assimilation against the maintenance of a distinct political identity. Yet, it would also solve some practical issues by answering the question of who the legitimate representatives of the Russian community in Europe are, as well as who has a right to talk on behalf of this community and address its issues. Currently, the people involved in this representation are self-appointed, and while many of them have great moral gravitas due to having suffered significantly at the hands of the regime, their charisma is no substitution for proper democratic legitimacy conveyed through elections.

At the same time, the changing global environment demands for more experiments with the concept of sovereignty and the linkage between territory and community. Already in previous centuries, diasporas and émigré communities have played a role in imagining new visions for their countries

and were considered an asset in times of trouble. Currently, the climate change-induced disappearance of island states, like Vanuatu, rekindled some discussions of the linkage between territory, community, and the state and ideas of virtual/digital lands and 'digital state preservation' (Rothe et al. 2024). The development of the EU itself, as was mentioned, is also premised on reconsiderations of sovereignty. As more discussions of the confrontation between democracies and autocracies are taking place, this is an ideal time to discuss the limits and extents of sovereignty over various communities. The discussion of position of Russians in the EU is as fitting a starting point in this debate as any other.

References

- Adamson, Fiona B, and Enze Han. 2024. 'Diasporic Geopolitics, Rising Powers, and the Future of International Order'. *Review of International Studies* 50 (3): 476–93.
- Aggestam, Lisbeth, Isabell Schierenbeck, and Arne Wackenhut. 2023. 'Sweden, NATO and the Role of Diasporas in Foreign Policy'. *International Affairs* 99 (6): 2367–85.
- Askew, Joshua. 2023. 'Lithuania to Give Belarusians Special Passports amid Repression Fears | Euronews'. Euronews.Com. 11 September 2023. <https://www.euronews.com/2023/09/11/lithuania-to-give-belarusians-special-passports-amid-repression-fears>.
- Banks, Martin. 2020. 'EU Leaders Reject Belarus Presidential Election Result'. The Parliament Magazine. 20 August 2020. <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/eu-leaders-reject-belarus-presidential-election-result>.
- Bellamy, Richard. 2017. 'Sovereignty, Post-Sovereignty and Pre-Sovereignty: Three Models of the State, Democracy and Rights within the EU'. In *Constitutionalism and Democracy*, edited by Richard Bellamy, 547–70. Routledge.
- Benakis, Theodoros. 2023. 'A Passport for the Thousands of Belarusian Exiles in Europe?' *European Interest* (blog). 1 November 2023. <https://www.europeaninterest.eu/a-passport-for-the-thousands-of-belarusian-exiles-in-europe/>.
- Bloch, Natalia. 2023. 'Boundary-Making and Political Activism in Protracted Exile: Second-Generation Tibetan Refugees in India'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* fead013.
- bne IntelliNews. 2024. 'European Parliament Rules Russia's Presidential Election Illegitimate, Calls Putin a "Murderer"'. 26 April 2024. <https://www.intellinews.com/european-parliament-rules-russia-s-presidential-election-illegitimate-calls-putin-a-murderer-322967/>.
- BNS. 2024. 'Vilnius Hosts 13th Free Russia Forum – LRT'. 4 October 2024. <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2377015/vilnius-hosts-13th-free-russia-forum>.
- Boris Nemtsov Forum. 2024. 'Boris Nemtsov Forum'. *Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom* (blog). 2024. <https://nemtsovfund.org/en/boris-nemtsov-forum/>.
- Borogan, Irina, and Andrei Soldatov. 2024. 'Russia's Opposition: Unity Ain't Strength'. CEPA. 11 July 2024. <https://cepa.org/article/russias-opposition-unity-aint-strength/>.
- Bueger, Christian, and Frank Gadinger. 2016. 'International Practice Theories'. In *Praxeological Political Analysis*, edited by Michael Jonas and Beate Littig, 87–106. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315628479-6>.
- 'Charter of the Tibetans in Exile'. 1991. Central Election Commission. 1991. <https://tibetanelection.net/en/en/tibetan-charter/>.
- Childs, Geoff, and Gareth Barkin. 2006. 'Reproducing Identity: Using Images to Promote Pronatalism and Sexual Endogamy among Tibetan Exiles in South Asia'. *Visual Anthropology Review* 22 (2): 34–52.

- Council of Europe. 2023. 'PACE Leadership Meets Representatives of Russian Democratic Forces - Portal - Wwww.Coe.Int'. Portal. 21 March 2023. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/pace-leadership-meets-representatives-of-russian-democratic-forces>.
- Dalai Lama. 1989. 'The Nobel Peace Prize 1989'. NobelPrize.Org. 1989. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1989/lama/acceptance-speech/>.
- Davis, Kaie Marie, and Dasha Litvinova. 2024. 'Russia Elections: Everything You Need to Know about the Presidential Election | AP News'. Associated Press. 10 March 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-presidential-election-2024-what-to-know-04a363dd56d4b3f15d3048ed8585fe55>.
- Ebel, Francesca, Mary Ilyushina, and Robyn Dixon. 2024. 'Russia's Opposition Abroad Is Tearing Itself Apart, but Clings to Hope'. Washington Post. 20 October 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/10/20/russia-opposition-navalny-khodorkovsky-nevzlin/>.
- Emtseva, Julia. 2024. 'Voting for the Government-in-Exile'. *Verfassungsblog*, June. <https://doi.org/10.59704/da9fa6d62f1e0c7e>.
- European Parliament. 2024a. 'JOINT MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION on Russia's Undemocratic Presidential Elections and Their Illegitimate Extension to the Occupied Territories | RC-B9-0253/2024 | European Parliament'. 2024. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2024-0253_EN.html.
- European Parliament. 2024b. 'Yulia Navalnaya: "If You Want to Defeat Putin, Fight His Criminal Gang" | News | European Parliament'. 28 February 2024. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240223IPR18080/yulia-navalnaya-if-you-want-to-defeat-putin-fight-his-criminal-gang>.
- Euroradio. 2024. 'Why Belarusians Ignored Recent Election to Coordinating Council | Belarus News | Euroradio.Fm'. 3 June 2024. <https://euroradio.fm/en/why-belarusians-ignored-recent-election-coordinating-council>.
- EUROSTAT. 2024. 'Population on 1 January by Age Group, Sex and Citizenship'. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_POP1CTZ__custom_10790980/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=bf659930-c032-42c0-b584-865636c8f46a.
- Free Russia Foundation. 2024. 'Free Russia Foundation → International Advocacy and Justice'. *Free Russia Foundation* → (blog). 29 April 2024. <https://www.4freerussia.org/advocacy/>.
- Glencross, Andrew. 2011. 'A Post-National EU? The Problem of Legitimising the EU without the Nation and National Representation'. *Political Studies* 59 (2): 348–67.
- Government of India. 2003. 'Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China'. 2003. <https://archive.pib.gov.in/release02/lyr2003/rjun2003/24062003/r2406200318.html>.
- Jones, Mared Gwyn. 2024. 'EU Rejects "democratic Legitimacy" of Venezuela's Maduro'. Euronews. 29 August 2024. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/08/29/eu-rejects-legitimacy-of-venezuelas-maduro-stops-short-of-recognising-gonzalez-as-election>.

- Kartschnig, Matthew. 2022. 'License to Kill: How Europe Lets Iran and Russia Get Away with Murder'. *POLITICO*. 1 December 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/license-kill-iran-europe-russia-get-away-murder/>.
- Khodorkovsky, Mikhail. 2023. 'The Future of Russia — and Its Opposition'. *POLITICO* (blog). 5 June 2023. <https://www.politico.eu/article/future-of-russia-and-its-opposition-conference-brussels/>.
- Kłysiński, Kamil. 2024. 'Belarus: Elections to the Opposition Parliament'. OSW Centre for Eastern Studies. 29 May 2024. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-05-29/belarus-elections-to-opposition-parliament>.
- Levin, Dov, and Carmela Lutmar. 2020. 'Violent Regime Change: Causes and Consequences'. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1954>.
- McConnell, Fiona. 2009a. 'De Facto, Displaced, Tacit: The Sovereign Articulations of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile'. *Political Geography* 28 (6): 343–52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2009.04.001>.
- McConnell, Fiona. 2009b. 'Governments-in-Exile: Statehood, Statelessness and the Reconfiguration of Territory and Sovereignty'. *Geography Compass* 3 (5): 1902–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2009.00274.x>.
- McConnell, Fiona. 2011. 'A State within a State? Exploring Relations between the Indian State and the Tibetan Community and Government-in-Exile'. *Contemporary South Asia* 19 (3): 297–313.
- MFA Lithuania. 2024. 'The 10th Vilnius Russia Forum Discusses Measures to Contain Russia | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania'. The 10th Vilnius Russia Forum Discusses Measures to Contain Russia | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania. 10 June 2024. <https://www.urm.lt/en/news/928/the-10th-vilnius-russia-forum-discusses-measures-to-contain-russia:42816>.
- OSCE. n.d. 'Elections in Russia'. Accessed 22 November 2024. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/russia>.
- Perrie, Maureen. 1995. *Pretenders and Popular Monarchism in Early Modern Russia: The False Tsars of the Time and Troubles*. Cambridge University Press.
- Roemer, Stephanie. 2008. *The Tibetan Government-in-Exile: Politics at Large*. Routledge.
- Rothe, Delf, Ingrid Boas, Carol Farbotko, and Taufkiei Kitara. 2024. 'Digital Tuvalu: State Sovereignty in a World of Climate Loss'. *International Affairs* 100 (4): 1491–1509.
- Rudina, Asja. 2022. "Паспорт хорошего русского". Соцсети об идее Каспарова и Гудкова'. *Радио Свобода*, 23 May 2022, sec. Цитаты Свободы. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/pasport-horoshego-russkogo-sotsseti-ob-idee-kasparova-i-gudkova/31862244.html>.
- Russian Anti-War Committee. 2024. 'Russian Anti-War Committee'. Антивоенный Комитет России. 2024. <https://antiwarcommittee.info/en/committee/>.
- Sauer, Pjotr, and Luke Harding. 2022. 'Putin Annexes Four Regions of Ukraine in Major Escalation of Russia's War'. *The Guardian*, 30 September 2022, sec.

- World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/30/putin-russia-war-annexes-ukraine-regions>.
- Seddon, Max. 2023. 'Russia's Opposition Fails to Unite against Putin'. 10 June 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/17acd2fc-fc81-4238-ac29-ddbf82702c24>.
- Shamiev, Ksenia Luchenko, Kirill. 2024. 'Life in Exile: A New Approach to Russian Democrats in Europe'. ECFR. 14 March 2024. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/life-in-exile-a-new-approach-to-russian-democrats-in-europe/>.
- Singh, Amitoj. 2024. 'Exiled Russian Opposition Leader Launches Blockchain-Based Referendum on Vladimir Putin's Election Win'. CoinDesk. 25 May 2024. <https://www.coindesk.com/policy/2024/05/10/exiled-russian-opposition-leader-launches-blockchain-based-referendum-on-vladimir-putins-election-win>.
- Talmon, Stefan. 1998. *Recognition of Governments in International Law: With Particular Reference to Governments in Exile*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Terekhov, Yury. 2023. 'A Survey of Russian Grassroots Anti-War Resistance'. *Kennan Cable*, no. 84. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Cable84_v3.pdf.
- The Bell. 2024. "'Reputation Whitewashing' Scandal Rocks Russian Opposition". The Bell. 9 October 2024. <https://en.thebell.io/reputation-whitewashing-scandal-rocks-russian-opposition/>.
- The UN. 1951. 'Geneva Refugee Convention and Protocol'. 1967 1951. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/geneva-refugee-convention-and-protocol_en.
- 'USRF – Free Enterprise Supporting Democracy'. n.d. USRF – Free Enterprise Supporting Democracy. Accessed 26 November 2024. <https://www.usrf.us>.

13. Germany's Stance on Russia

No Lessons Learned

Nikolai Klimeniouk*

Abstract

Germany's political landscape is currently being reshaped by its approach to Russia. Public opinion on support for Ukraine remains deeply divided, particularly on military aid, which is often seen through the lens of cultural and historical ties to Russia. A weak response to Russia's attack on Ukraine and annexation of Crimea has had a massive corrosive effect on German democracy. Political leaders are reluctant to acknowledge past policy failures, such as the appeasement that created energy dependency. While Chancellor Scholz described Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a turning point, concrete reforms to Germany's foreign and security policy have been slow to materialise. This reflects a broader hesitation to redefine Germany's role in European security and global geopolitics. Cultural narratives, political traditions, and economic interests complicate efforts to change Germany's strategic posture. Resistance to breaking with past practices, as well as the influence of pro-Russian sentiments in parts of the political spectrum, hinder decisive action. Calls for negotiation and diplomacy persist, often coupled with mischaracterisations of Russia's motives as rational or oriented toward peace. Ultimately, the challenges of dealing with Russian aggression underscore Germany's struggle to adapt to changing geopolitical realities while grappling with its historical legacies and entrenched perspectives.

Keywords: German politics, Russia's war against Ukraine, appeasement, *Zeitenwende*

How Russia Shapes Germany's Political Landscape

As Germany heads towards early elections in February 2025, the issue of Russia, and particularly its ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, looms large in the political debate. The very fact that the elections – originally

* Freelance Journalist, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*

scheduled for October 2025 – are being brought forward has to do with Russia: The decision was prompted by the collapse of the ruling ‘traffic light’ coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens, and Liberals (FDP), which could not find common ground on how to deal with the financial difficulties caused by the war.

Russia’s war against Ukraine has not only put a strain on Germany’s finances; it has also exacerbated domestic political tensions. On the one hand, there is broad public approval for providing financial aid to Ukraine, with recent polls showing steady support for such assistance. Military aid, on the other hand, is much more controversial, with the German public divided roughly down the middle. According to various polls, around 50% of Germans oppose sending weapons to Ukraine, while the other half are either in favour or unsure. News from the front lines and other factors can move the numbers significantly in either direction. In February 2024, support peaked at 62% (ZDF-Politbarometer 2024). In September, it was down at 38% (Statista 2024a).

The willingness to support Ukraine in its war against Russia is currently reshaping Germany’s political landscape across party lines. Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s (SPD) decision to rule out the supply of Taurus cruise missiles and SPD parliamentary leader Rolf Mützenich’s proposal to freeze the ‘conflict’ have won praise from the far-right AfD and the authoritarian left-wing, openly pro-Russian BSW while facing criticism from coalition partners and fellow Social Democrats.

The Greens, who remain in a minority government with the SPD, no longer adhere to any coalition discipline. Their top candidate, Robert Habeck, announced that he would supply Taurus missiles to Ukraine if he were elected head of government. Friedrich Merz, leader of the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU), and FDP politician Marcus Faber, chairman of the defence committee, are also in favour of supplying Taurus missiles. The public, however, has a different opinion: according to a survey carried out by the public broadcaster ARD in November 2024, 61% are against the prospect and only 27% support it unequivocally, including the permission to hit targets inside Russia (ARD-DeutschlandTREND 2024).

For years in Germany, the war that Russia launched against Ukraine in February 2014 was stubbornly referred to as a ‘conflict,’ as if Ukraine was somehow to blame. This reluctance to distinguish between right and wrong has also been seen in other contexts, such as the refugee crisis and the COVID pandemic. Russia was involved in these too, and the term ‘hybrid

war' became a household word in Germany. On the other hand, 'hybrid war' was very helpful in shifting responsibility. However, it was not Russian agents who repeatedly invited Russian lobbyists or Sahra Wagenknecht to talk shows on public television, despite all objections from experts. Wagenknecht knew how to play the media, and it was the German media that made her a major political player.

The new Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) is polling between 4 and 8 percent nationally, and according to an Allensbach survey in February 2024, the most frequently cited substantial motive (49%) for supporting the BSW was its stance on Russia (Petersen 2024). 24% of respondents consider the BSW a viable option, rising to 40% in eastern Germany. Wagenknecht and most of the key figures in her alliance are defectors from the Left Party, which has shown less unity in opposing support for Ukraine. After the BSW entered the scene in January 2024, the Left Party was catapulted into utter irrelevance. In July, the BSW won 6.2% of the vote in the European elections and an impressive 13.48%, 11.8%, and 15.8%, respectively, in regional parliamentary elections in the eastern states of Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia in September. The far-right AfD, which is not yet considered a legitimate coalition partner, won around 30% of the vote, forcing the democratic parties into coalition talks with the BSW. In these talks, the federal party leader Sahra Wagenknecht, contrary to German political tradition, personally led the negotiations and made foreign policy and defence issues, namely opposition to military support for Ukraine and the stationing of nuclear-capable US intermediate-range missiles in Germany, a condition for her party to join the regional governments.

For Wagenknecht, it does not really matter that regional political institutions have no say in foreign policy and defence. She clearly positions the BSW as a force with a very limited yet ambitious agenda: appeasement towards Russia and disarmament and withdrawal from NATO. As well, the opportunistic 'realpolitik' of its regional coalition partners, the SPD and CDU, gives her the desired leverage over federal politics. Faced with this pressure, Chancellor Scholz and his SPD have chosen to posture as considerate peacekeepers while branding all democratic contestants as reckless warmongers.

How the Annexation of Crimea Undermined German Democracy

These developments did not happen overnight. For years, the tacit acceptance of Russia's attack on Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea has deeply compromised German democracy in ways that remain insufficiently understood. While it has become a matter of routine to criticise the flawed policy towards Russia – such as sending the wrong signals that emboldened Russia's ruler Putin to launch a large-scale invasion – these same signals have also been received domestically. Leading newspapers featured reports from their correspondents detailing severe human rights abuses in Russia, including kidnappings, assassinations and torture, suppression of the free press, persecution of minorities, and widespread ideological indoctrination. Nevertheless, the same outlets also published opinion pieces and petitions advocating sympathy for Russia's actions and suggesting that Ukraine cede occupied territories in the interest of peace.

The decisions made by German politicians, the Minsk agreements imposed on Ukraine, and, most notably, the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, largely followed this line of argument. In Germany, actions associated with Russia somehow magically remain without consequences. The hacking attack in May 2015 brought the Bundestag to a standstill for several days, and a lot of sensitive data was stolen. Investigators suspected early on that it was an operation by Russian intelligence, but unlike the NSA affair, it did not cause a public outcry. It took the German government five years to officially accuse Russia and impose sanctions. Suspicion alone would have been enough to curtail cooperation. Instead, parts of critical energy infrastructure, namely a quarter of all German gas storage facilities, were sold to a Gazprom subsidiary in 2015. This project had previously been put on hold following the annexation of Crimea. Russia, too, has fallen back on its old tricks. In 2016, it attempted to incite riots across Germany by inventing a story of a rape of a Russian-German teenage girl by refugees, destroyed cities in Syria to save the dictator Assad from being toppled and drive even more people to flee to Europe, and carried out a hacking attack on the CDU party headquarters. In the same year, then Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), now in his second term as Federal President, criticised NATO for “sabre-rattling” (Reuters 2016) against Russia and called for more dialogue and cooperation:

“I believe that a look at the legacy of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik and policy of détente can help us to find answers. Not least because it was based on

his simple yet still valid observation that ‘Russia is our largest European neighbour’” (Auswärtiges Amt 2016).

There was no clearer message sent to German society that democratic values are negotiable, the countries between the “neighbours” Germany and Russia negligible, and that human dignity is not to be taken seriously—at least not when it comes to the dignity of others. This is most evident in the expectation that Ukrainians should voluntarily choose to live under tyranny rather than in a democracy, however imperfect. According to a recent survey by Statista, 52% of Germans think that Ukraine should give up the occupied territories and only 34% believe that Ukrainians should continue to fight for their liberation (Statista 2024b).

The Ukrainian artist Lia Dostlieva’s description of her conversations with German colleagues and visitors to art events is an unsparing summary of this attitude:

“In the eyes of Westerners, Ukrainians attempting to speak about the war in their country are not seen as people like them whose homes were invaded by Russian soldiers and rockets—they are exotic Others. This othering occurs by assigning trauma to the community and perceiving traumatic experiences as their sole identity. The exoticism of the Other revolves around its borderline nature and the inability to imagine their experiences and comprehend their suffering. The ability of this Other to endure such suffering even appears compelling and admirable [...] This traumatic exoticization neatly aligns with other existing stereotypes about Ukraine and Eastern Europe.

When someone from a ‘first-world’ country tells you, in a sympathetic manner, “I can’t imagine how you endure all that. I wouldn’t be able to,” what often remains unsaid is the ending of this sentence: “...but I know I don’t actually need to imagine that because this would never happen to me.” Like that woman who, commenting on the flood caused by the consequences of climate change, said: “You don’t expect people to die in a flood in Germany. You expect it maybe in poor countries but not here”. Wars and disasters happen in ‘rough spots’ on the outskirts of civilization. ‘Never again’ actually means ‘never again for us’” (Dostlieva 2024).

Despite all the declarations of solidarity with Ukraine, a large part of the German public still finds it difficult to see the war from the perspective of freedom and justice. In Poland or the Baltic states, the idea that Ukraine is defending not only itself but the whole of Europe is something of a given (Kuisz and Wigura 2023). In Germany, on the other hand, it comes across as impertinence – or even coercion. President Volodymyr Zelensky, who

asks for more weapons, is often portrayed as a shameless beggar. What is expected of Ukraine in return for military and financial aid is more than mere gratitude. Ukraine must constantly justify its existence and apologise for the inconvenience it causes.

How the German Empire Lives on in the Federal Republic

There are several reasons for this lack of empathy and inability to change perspectives. In the lifetimes of all German citizens and their not-so-distant ancestors, Germany has never fought a war of defence or a war of liberation, nor has it sided with countries that have done so. The only perspective from which German society can view a war is that of the aggressor, the only fighting party, which has the freedom both not to start the war and to end it unilaterally. Now, Germany is on the side of those who defend themselves, which is a new experience that has yet to be processed.

Years of reckoning with the past and ideological demilitarisation have led Germans to believe that not wanting war is the best way to prevent it. The focus on the National Socialism and, more recently, imported decolonial discourses, on the other hand, have obscured the view of Germany's past as an empire (which it remained until 1945) whose conquests took place mainly in Central and Eastern Europe. Until 1918, the Reich actually bordered on the Russian Empire and, from 1939, the Soviet Union. The idea that Ukraine should "give up some territory" for the sake of peace bizarrely echoes the late 19th-century perception that political differences between European countries, from republican France to the absolutist Russia, were non-essential at the level of 'ordinary people,' if one chooses to ignore all non-privileged groups, be they women or ethnic or religious minorities. Seen in this light, the outcome of a European war is a mere shifting of borders with little or no effect on the lives of the population, a change of jurisdiction rather than subjection to entirely new circumstances, and very likely, oppression, forced assimilation, and genocide. Or, in the words of Ukrainian human rights lawyer Oleksandra Matviichuk,

"Occupation is the same war, just in a different form. Occupation is not just changing the national flag from one to another. Occupation means enforced disappearances, rape, mass deportations, torture, forced adoption of your children, erasure of your identity, filtration camps and mass graves" (Matviychuk 2024).

However, the former imperial centre is highly suspicious of the mere desire for independence and self-determination and tends to regard it as a manifestation of nationalism, which in turn is rarely seen as an emancipatory movement but rather as an evil right-wing ideology, essentially related to National Socialism and in itself a cause of violence. This partly explains why so many Germans are unmoved by the fact that Russia's war against Ukraine is the first war of aggression waged by a dictatorship against a democracy in recent decades, preferring the convenient scheme of 'real country' vs. 'breakaway province.'

How Calls for Peace are not about Peace at All

Nothing reflects this attitude better than the numerous 'appeals for peace' published in the German media since 2014. One of the first such documents was also arguably one of the most impactful. The statement entitled "War in Europe again? Not in Our Name!" (Zeit-Online 2014), published in December 2014, eleven months into the war, was signed by 60 people, including Russia lobbyists, former Chancellor Schröder, former President Herzog, and a number of former ministers, heads of federal states, and other prominent figures in German politics. Ten years later, it reads almost like one of Putin's fuzzy, revisionist speeches: Russia's legitimate security concerns were ignored, and it was threatened by "the expansion of the West to the East." The text is replete with absurd geographical assertions, such as the mention of a European security order stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok, and outright falsehoods, like the claim that Russia's fears were justified after NATO invited Ukraine and Georgia to join in 2008. In reality, both countries' NATO applications were postponed indefinitely, and Russia invaded Georgia in that same year. With even a former chancellor and top security officials portraying the alliance as a terrifying threat, it is hardly surprising that the anti-NATO rhetoric of openly anti-Western political forces such as the AfD and the BSW finds a receptive audience among sections of the German electorate.

As one could expect, it was Sahra Wagenknecht (in collaboration with former feminist icon Alice Schwarzer) who initiated two of the most resonant appeals to stop arms deliveries to Ukraine. The first, addressed to Chancellor Scholz and entitled 'Manifesto for Peace,' was published in February 2023 and has since gathered almost a million signatures on Change.

org (Schwarzer and Wagenknecht 2023). Among the first signatories were a significant number of former high-ranking politicians and public figures. The document contains a half-hearted, obligatory phrase of solidarity ‘with the population of Ukraine,’ but otherwise it speaks mainly of the Germans’ own fear and clearly blames Ukraine for it. “President Zelensky makes no secret of his goal,” the manifesto says, “he wants even more weapons to defeat Russia across the board.” “A Ukrainian attack on Crimea” could trigger a world war. It almost sounds as if Ukraine had invaded its neighbour, and as if it was not Russia with its dictator, but the “warmongering” Zelensky, who threatens the world.

The document provoked much criticism, but its choice of words was not untypical of German discourse on Ukraine. The word ‘population’ suggests that there is probably no sovereign Ukrainian nation, as former Social-Democratic Chancellor Schmidt claimed in 2014 (Bild 2014), or that Russian-speaking Ukrainians do not belong to it. So persistent is this idea that the manifesto even mentions the ‘traumatised people’ in the same breath as the Russian death toll. The ‘attack on Crimea’ is only a little harsher than the usual formulations of ‘reconquest’ or ‘territorial win’; sometimes there is talk of Ukrainian territorial wins, sometimes of Russian ones, as if it were a game and territories were the prize. Framed in this way, the idea that the Ukrainians should be less fussy and give up a bit of land does not sound entirely wrong.

The latest manifesto, initiated by Wagenknecht and Schwarzer, was published on 4 December 2024 and bears the dramatic title “Appeal of the 38: One minute to twelve” (Emma 2024). In yet another stunning display of cynicism and fearmongering, it points to the dire situation of the Ukrainian army due to a shortage of weapons, only to demand that arms supplies be stopped altogether:

“Instead of doing everything they can to defuse the highly dangerous situation, the CDU, FDP and the Greens now want to supply Ukraine with Taurus missiles. This would enable Zelensky to launch pinpoint attacks on targets deep inside Russia. Since these missiles have to be programmed by Bundeswehr soldiers, the delivery of the Taurus would almost be tantamount to a declaration of war by Germany against the nuclear power Russia. It would almost certainly provoke a military response from Russia.

[...]

No side can or will win the war in Ukraine. If the weapons do not fall silent soon, we run the risk of losing all together. Never since the end of World

War II has the threat of a nuclear war in Europe been as great as it is now. We must avert it before it is too late.”

Recent German peace manifestos commonly advocate for negotiations but differ on who should be the negotiating parties. Perspectives on the war in Ukraine vary between viewing it as a proxy war between the US-led West and Russia or as a war in which Ukrainian nationalists refuse to give up territory to which Russia has a more or less legitimate claim. Either way, these assertions imply that there is a desire for peace on both sides, and that there is indeed a conflict over some reasonable interests that can be resolved peacefully. For this scheme to work, the proponents of diplomatic solutions attribute to Russia motives it lacks, such as genuine security concerns, an honest interest in peace, and an intention to avoid the loss of human life.

The argument for negotiation often includes the claim that weapons only prolong conflicts and that no war has ever been resolved by force. This perspective is particularly striking in Germany, a country that was defeated in two world wars, in both of which it was the aggressor. However, this kind of rhetoric is not confined to the political fringes. A prominent advocate of diplomacy in the political centre is Rolf Mützenich, one of the most influential figures in the Social Democratic Party. In his Willy Brand Lecture, a programmatic speech in the election campaign, after a sober analysis of the threats and an explicit mention of Putin's imperialist ambitions, he urged more negotiations:

“After three years of war (sic!), we have to recognise that the war is probably not being decided on the battlefield alone. In recent months, neither Russia nor Ukraine has been able to make significant territorial wins. At the same time, reports of the use of North Korean soldiers and Yemeni mercenaries show that the war is threatening to spread ever further.

The consequences of such an escalation would be devastating – not only for Ukraine and Europe, but for the entire world. Therefore, we must continue to intensify our diplomatic efforts to prevent a further escalation of the war – regardless of how ‘realistic’ it may currently appear” (Mützenich 2024).

Two years earlier, Mützenich had pleaded for more diplomacy in the hope that “the belligerents would agree on measures to make this war less cruel,” that “the countless dead Russian soldiers would trigger a rethink in Russia,” and that it would “come to realise that this war is a crime and a colossal mistake” (Reinecke 2022). Now that none of this has happened, instead

of recognising the fundamental failure of such efforts, Mützenich, firmly socialised in the concept of peace through dialogue, continues to cling to Willy Brandt's legacy of *détente*.

How the *Zeitenwende* Never Happened

In his recent speech, Mützenich explicitly referred to Chancellor Scholz's policy statement of February 2022. In it, Scholz described Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as *Zeitenwende*, a "turning point" or "watershed" in the world order (Scholz 2022). Rhetorically, although Scholz did not explicitly mention any mistakes, it was a departure from the policy of a cavalier attitude towards Russia's transgressions while at the same time creating economic interdependence in the spirit of *détente*. The Chancellor announced an impressive catalogue of measures to be taken immediately and declared the need for a strategic rethink. Despite his firm tone, Scholz left the door open for a possible return to the old ways by making it all about Putin:

"With the attack on Ukraine, Putin is not just seeking to wipe an independent country off the map. He is demolishing the European security order that had prevailed for almost half a century since the Helsinki Final Act. He is also isolating himself from the entire international community. [...] Our guiding principle remains the question of what will have the greatest impact on those responsible. The individuals this is about. And not the Russian people. Because Putin, not the Russian people, has decided to start this war. And so it must be clearly stated that this war is Putin's war! It is important to me to specify this. Because reconciliation between Germans and Russians after the Second World War is – and remains – an important chapter of our shared history."

That door has since turned out to be a portal. Understanding Russia as a long-term threat is the cornerstone of a new approach to national security and a prerequisite for substantial investment. While Russia has rapidly shifted to a war economy, Germany has failed to reform its security apparatus, significantly increase arms production, and provide financial guarantees to the defence industry. This is a failure of both decision-making and political communication. Putting Putin at the centre of the problem makes the solution cheaper and the dream of a strategic partnership with Russia seem closer. Oddly enough, this illusion of an inherently peaceful Russia is actively supported by the exiled leaders of the Russian opposition, such as Yulia

Navalnaya, Ilya Yashin, and Vladimir Kara-Murza, who continue to insist that military aggression is Putin's sole responsibility, turning a blind eye to Russia's highly militarised and chauvinistic society and without challenging Russian imperialism or calling for Russia's fundamental demilitarisation, let alone nuclear disarmament.

A real change in policy would also require an acknowledgement of past mistakes by both policymakers and the expert community. Nevertheless, it does not look like that is going to happen any time soon. It is much more attractive to talk about Putin's deception or even treason. In her recently published memoirs (Merkel 2024), former Chancellor Angela Merkel admits that her perception of Putin changed significantly after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Before that, she thought he was strategic and manipulative but did not see him as a "shameless liar." However, she does not criticise her past policies, such as opposing Ukraine's NATO membership in 2008 or Germany's dependence on Russian gas. Instead, she defends them as pragmatic and necessary.

Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who served as foreign minister in Merkel's government and as head of Chancellor Schröder's office, is equally unapologetic. At a ceremony at his residence to mark the 35th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, he was sharply criticised by the writer Marko Martin for his role in Germany's policy towards Russia and its handling of Eastern European affairs (Sternberg 2024). The speech also included pointed remarks about anti-Polish sentiment in East and West Germany in the 1980s and the marginalisation of Eastern European perspectives in modern EU decision-making. Steinmeier was reportedly outraged and undiplomatic, withholding applause and later confronting Martin directly. He accused the writer of failing to understand the complexities of policymaking, sparking a heated exchange described by those present as a "sharp polemic."

There is nothing in German social and political life to suggest that a *Zeitenwende* is actually taking place and that either politicians or their electorates have come to terms with the long-denied reality and learned their lesson. A clear understanding of the challenges posed by Russia is hampered by fear, greed, a sentimental attachment to Russian culture, fragile egos, and deeply rooted political traditions, both of imperial hubris and of the democratic cult of compromise.

References

- ARD-DeutschlandTREND. 2024. "Mehrheit gegen deutsche Taurus-Lieferung an die Ukraine." November 21, 2024. https://presse.wdr.de/plounge/tv/das_erste/2024/11/20241121_deutschlandtrend_taurus_lieferung.html.
- Auswärtiges Amt. 2016. "Rede von Außenminister Frank-Walter Steinmeier beim Deutsch-Russischen Forum / Potsdamer Begegnungen." May 30, 2016. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/160530-bm-deu-rus-forum/280904>.
- Bild. 2014. "Altkanzler Helmut Schmidt (95, SPD) über Europa und die Ukraine-Krise: 'Ich traue Putin nicht zu, dass er Krieg will.'" May 16, 2014. <https://www.bild.de/politik/inland/helmut-schmidt/bild-interview-altkanzler-europa-ukraine-krise-36003626.bild.html>.
- Dostlieva, Lia. 2024. "On the Hierarchy of Epistemic Injustice, Chickens, and Collective Trauma." In *We Who Have Changed*, edited by Daria Badior and Anastasia Platonova, 61-72. Leipzig: Spector Books.
- Emma. 2024. "Appell der 38: Eine Minute vor 12!" December 4, 2024. <https://www.emma.de/artikel/appell-der-38-fuer-friedensverhandlungen-341429>.
- Kuisz, Jarosław, and Karolina Wigura. 2023. *Posttraumatische Souveränität*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Matviychuk, Oleksandra. 2024. "Language for Understanding: The Search for Meaning in a Polarised World." Speech at the opening of the X Lviv Media Forum, May 16, 2024. <https://lvivmediaforum.com/en/page/language-for-understanding-the-search-for-meaning-in-a-polarised-world-oleksandra-matviychuks-speech-at-the-opening-of-the-x-lmf>.
- Merkel, Angela. 2024. *Freedom: Memoirs 1954 – 2021*. New York: Macmillan.
- Mützenich, Rolf. 2024. "Willy Brandt Lecture 2024." December 4, 2024. <https://www.rolfmuetzenich.de/rede/willy-brandt-lecture-2024>.
- Petersen, Thomas. 2024. "Russlandfreundlich, Links Und Rechts." Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach. https://www.ifd-allensbach.de/fileadmin/kurzberichte_dokumentationen/FAZ_Februar2024_BSW.pdf.
- Reinecke, Stefan. 2022. "SPD-Fraktionschef über Ukrainekrieg. 'Wir dürfen uns nicht damit abfinden.'" *TAZ*, December 25, 2022. <https://taz.de/SPD-Fraktion-schef-ueber-Ukrainekrieg/!5901087/>.
- Reuters. 2016. "German Minister Warns NATO of 'Sabre-Rattling' Against Russia." June 18, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/german-minister-warns-nato-of-sabre-rattling-against-russia-idUSKCN0Z40MA/>.
- Scholz, Olaf. 2022. "Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany." February 27, 2022. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.
- Schwarzer, Alice, and Sahra Wagenknecht. 2023. "Manifest für Frieden." February 10, 2023. <https://www.change.org/p/manifest-f%C3%BCr-frieden>.
- Statista. 2024. "Sollte die Ukraine auf von Russland besetzte Gebiete verzichten um den Krieg zu beenden?" December 2024. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/>

daten/studie/1428823/umfrage/umfrage-zum-verzicht-auf-besetzte-gebiete-zur-beendigung-des-ukraine-kriegs/.

Statista. 2024. "Was ist Ihre Meinung, sollte Deutschland weiterhin Waffen an die Ukraine liefern?" September 2024. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1454716/umfrage/umfrage-zu-waffenlieferungen-von-deutschland-an-die-ukraine/>.

Sternberg, Jan. 2024. "Steinmeier verärgert: Wutanfall nach kritischer Mauerfall-Rede." *RND*, November 9, 2024. <https://www.rnd.de/politik/steinmeier-eklat-marko-martin-sorgt-mit-mauerfall-rede-fuer-praesidialen-wutanfall-JEJIE362NFESHM2J7LUP6UO2SQ.html>.

Zeit-Online. 2014. "Wieder Krieg in Europa? Nicht in unserem Namen!" December 5, 2014. <https://www.zeit.de/politik/2014-12/aufruf-russland-dialog>.

ZDF-Politbarometer. 2024. "Mehrheit: Mehr Waffen für die Ukraine." February 23, 2024. <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/politbarometer-ukraine-waffen-bundeswehr-wirtschaft-100.html>.

14. Russia's Influence in Africa

Undermining France through Hybrid Means

Dr. Guillaume Lasconjarias*

Abstract

Recently, France has suffered a series of geopolitical setbacks over the African continent in countries that used to be part of its “*pré carré*”. In Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, Russian influence has been pivotal to destabilise Paris using a combination of hybrid means and renewed diplomatic ties between Moscow and the continent. For more than a decade, Russia has been pursuing a policy aimed at regaining the importance it once had. Playing on the narrative of decolonisation, anti-Western stances, and anti-French resentment, Moscow has been able to achieve some success, which serves its purpose of undermining the West in the Great Powers competition.

Keywords: France, Russia, hybrid warfare, Africa, disinformation.

Introduction

On 11 November 2024, Russia hosted the first Russia-Africa Ministerial Summit and issued joint statements on measures to create “a fair, transparent and equitable system of International Information Security; strengthening cooperation in the fight against terrorism; and current issues of exploration and use of Outer Space for peaceful purposes” (Russian MFA 2024). For the Kremlin, gathering representatives of all 54 African States not only demonstrates that Russia is not internationally isolated but that it can still boost its influence and its image at the expense of Western economic, political, and security interests. Since 2014 – yet with an acceleration after February 2022 – Moscow has repositioned itself on the African continent by renewing partnerships originally established during the Cold War and signing new agreements. The Russo-Ukrainian war has elevated Africa's importance in Russian foreign policy; while Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept included

* Dr. Guillaume Lasconjarias is the head, Research and Studies at the High Institute for Defence Studies (IHEDN), Paris, France.

minimal engagement with the continent, the 2023 version referred to Africa as a “distinctive and influential centre of world development” (Reva 2024). Being the continent with the most representatives at the United Nations General Assembly and the USSR having played an active past role in its decolonisation processes, Africa is an attractive arena for Russia in which to pursue its objectives at limited economic and political costs (Tony Blair Institute of Global Change 2022). One can recall the abstention of 16 African states when the United Nations General Assembly voted on the 02 March 2022 resolution demanding the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine, and most African states have opted for a cautious non-alignment thereafter.

Growing Russian influence on the continent – something that is also common to China or Türkiye – comes at the expense of France, seen as the archetype of a former colonial power which has been losing its former grasp of the region. Yet, in the case of Russia, what is at stake is not only the expression of great power competition but also a diminished role and importance of France specifically, which is achieved through various means. The most obvious one is undermining the role taken by Paris in the fight against terrorist groups and non-state actors, using disinformation methods and Russian private military companies. The succession of coups and radical changes in domestic policies has resulted in France's presence being either downsized or expelled from the Central African Republic, Mali, Niger, and more recently, Senegal and Chad – the latter not being immediately connected with a blatant Russian design.

Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa

During the Cold War, the African continent became a significant, albeit peripheral, theatre of the East-West confrontation. Moscow supported Nasser in Egypt, influenced regimes in Somalia and Ethiopia, and had a strong involvement in Angola. However, the end of the Soviet Union led the new Russian government to consider the African continent as a source of costly geopolitical adventures. In 1992, Moscow decided to shut down nine embassies, four consulates and thirteen cultural centres. By 1993, trade with Africa represented less than 2% of the country's foreign trade (Ferragamo 2023). Things changed with Putin taking office; in 2001, Algerian President Bouteflika signed a declaration of strategic partnership – the first such treaty signed by Russia with an African state (Mokhefi 2015). Data from the

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimated that Algiers imported 91% of its armaments from Russia and spent \$1.9 billion on Russian arms and military equipment in the early 2010s, and that Algeria was the second largest importer of Russian military equipments¹. The same strategy was adopted towards Libya in 2008: at that time, Russia cancelled a debt of \$4 billion in exchange for a major rail contract and installation facilities for Gazprom.

For a brief period, there was an idea that Russia was adopting the same playbook as other great powers. In 2008, Russia joined the European Union's military operation in Chad and the Central African Republic (EUFOR Tchad/RCA), meeting the ambitions of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1778. At the time, this military operation strengthened the European Union's cooperation with Russia in the context of international crisis management operations (*Journal Officiel de l'Union Européenne* 2008). Yet, this did not last, and Libya in 2011 was indeed a turning point. Moscow's influence did not diminish after the fall of Qaddafi, developing into two parallel tracks: providing support to Marshall Haftar as one leader more favourable to Moscow and securing dominant positions in local industries and infrastructure (Arnold 2020). This was helped by the direct implication of Russian private military companies (PMC), the Wagner Group being the most infamous. At the height of the battle of Tripoli in 2019, the number of Russian mercenaries was said to have fluctuated between 1,000 and 2,000. By January 2020, Wagner had also sent between 1,000 and 3,000 Syrian pro-regime mercenaries, recruited, transported, and paid through the organisation itself. Through force of arms, Russia effectively seized the dominant position in Libya's energy sector.

In fact, cooperation with Africa flourished. Medvedev had institutionalised a special representative with a focus on bilateral trade, which rose from \$9.9 billion in 2013 to over \$24 billion in 2024 (Abbasova 2024). The Kremlin offered both the possibility of increasing military cooperation (arms supply and training) and establishing economic agreements (energy, natural resources, grain exports, and so on). Yet, after the first round of sanctions in 2014, Moscow's ambitions and activities became more and more aggressive, spreading to the Central African Republic, Madagascar, Angola, and Sudan, with renewed security cooperation on the one hand, through bilateral defence agreements, strategic partnerships and the deployment of private military companies, and on media influence on the other. In the Central

¹ For reference, see: <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>,

African Republic, it led to the reinforcement of an already strong Russian Defence Ministry representation (Bissue Bi Nze 2021).

The Sochi summit in 2019 was the consecration of Russia's return to Africa; this first Russia-Africa summit brought together some 40 African heads of state and the proclamation of ambitious objectives. Russia signed agreements with twenty countries, the most important being those with Madagascar (October 2018), the Republic of Congo (May 2019) and Mali (June 2019). Most of these treaties focused on security and defence, providing for the training of officers in Moscow – the traditional lever of Russian influence in Africa – the delivery of military equipment or the maintenance of equipment already in service, training of regular and irregular governmental forces, joint exercises, the fight against terrorism and maritime piracy, and the opening of permanent military bases (as in the case of Sudan, the project being announced in 2020).

A Hybrid Competitor

If Russia's greatest success comes from bilateral security agreements, it does not wish to commit neither regular troops nor special forces to Africa. It, therefore, relies mainly on private military companies, such as the Africa Corps (AC) (and formerly Wagner Group), which has been active under its new appellation since 2023. Russian mercenaries conduct a wide range of missions, from close protection of the official authorities in Bangui to the violent suppression of the Sudanese uprising at the end of 2018. Ensuring presidential security helps to perpetuate authoritarian powers close to Russian interests, while the deployment of military or mercenary advisors around economic sites of interest to Russia ensures privileged access to resources deemed strategic.

The transformation of Wagner into AC came with a more direct link to the Russian MoD. AC is indeed part of an “assertive approach to expand its military presence in Africa to include Burkina Faso and Niger, and possibly Chad and other states in the region in the future” (Bryjka and Czerep 2024). Moreover, it aims at displacing Western (especially French and US) political influence from Africa. The most important direction has therefore become the Sahel, where AC is expected to help increase the capacity of a new anti-Western political bloc initiated by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) (*ibid.*).

Levers of Russian Influence in Africa	Examples
Military	Private Military companies Strategic partnerships and defence agreements (access or rent of military docks, training and exercises, arms exports, equipment maintenance) Participation in crisis management operations (EUFOR Tchad/RCA, MINUSCA, MINURSO, MONUSCO, UNISFA, MINUSS)
Economic	Exports of cereals and fertilizers Debt cancellation Construction of nuclear power plants
Diplomatic	Appointment of a special representative for cooperation with Africa Russia-Africa Summits Health cooperation (Ebola, Covid-19)
Informational	Media influence and disinformation operations Subversion

Table 1. A typology of Russian influence in Africa with select examples.

Table 1. outlines how Russia has chosen to wage a “hybrid war” in Africa combining conventional and non-conventional means. Official relations between the Kremlin and African counterparts exist and have even taken more importance since the launch of the war in Ukraine, as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s visits to African countries since 2022 demonstrate the Kremlin’s efforts to tilt Africa in its favour. In addition, the role of PMCs offers flexibility and deniability. As private companies, they cost the Russian treasury nothing – Wagner used to profit off access to local industries and natural resources. Even if these mercenaries/fortune fighters are regularly accused of being the source of multiple abuses (summary executions, abductions, torture, rape, kidnapping, looting, and any form of human rights violations) and worsening the security, human rights, and civilian protection situations in the country where they are deployed, this goes largely unpunished. For instance, in the Central African Republic, these abuses affect Muslim minorities suspected of supporting the rebels and, therefore, they are deliberately targeted by Central African governmental forces. In a country where access to justice is difficult, many in Bangui fear that the human rights violations attributed to the Russians will go unpunished. The

state of emergency and travel bans are also hampering investigations and the gathering of evidence (US Department of State 2024).

A Master in Disinformation Campaign

In many ways, Russia has also been highly effective in waging a true disinformation campaign. Apart from the military-security aspect, Russia's greatest success in Africa is to have improved the perception of its role and influence in the media and information world through disinformation operations. The BBC, for example, investigated Russian interference in the Malagasy elections and thus identified processes like those employed during the Brexit or the 2016 US presidential elections (BBC 2019). This policy of disinformation relies in particular on certain state media such as RT and Sputnik, which have managed to establish themselves as sources with a significant audience in many countries. Their editorial line emphasises the absence of Russia's colonial past in Africa, and pragmatic cooperation with no quid pro quo in terms of internal governance and democratisation (Audinet and Dreyfus 2022). By capitalising on geopolitical turmoil in Libya, the Central African Republic, and then in Mali and Niger, Moscow has been able to identify and exploit every loophole likely to destabilise or weaken Western alliances.

France has been a target of choice. Since President Macron's election in 2017, France has been once again redefining its links with its African partners. According to the Élysée, this new approach is a commitment to the process of renewing France's relationship with the African continent, which has been highlighted in the presentation of the 2022 *National Strategic Review*: "Our commitment alongside our partners in Africa must now be centred on a logic of cooperation and support for their armies. This should result in a lighter and more integrated footprint with them. (...) It is essential and it is one of the consequences that we draw from what we have experienced in recent years throughout the Sahel region" (Macron 2022). Macron's opinion is based on the fact that France has been losing ground since the first coup in Mali and the consequences that have led French and European forces to be expelled from most of the Sahel countries.

After a decade of French military presence in Mali, the country has been developing into a Russian platform for regional destabilisation, while Niger and Côte d'Ivoire, two states close to France, have been regularly the target

of attacks by pro-Russian influence networks. Through these networks, the discourse is relayed according to which France supports illegitimate and corrupt regimes, such as the Gnassingbé family in power in Togo since 1967 or the Déby family in Chad. Moscow has been permanently fuelling, via social networks in particular, the anti-French resentments which have been brewing since independence and are expressed increasingly regularly in West Africa, as illustrated by the demonstrations organised in Dakar (March 2021), Niamey, and Ouagadougou (September 2022). In each of these demonstrations, protesters brandished Russian flags and attacked the symbols of the presence of the former French colonial power: embassies, high schools, and institutes, French cultural centres, and so on.

Because of this reshuffle of the French presence, Paris has been eager to identify and respond, when possible, to this Russian interference. The most explicit case happened in Gossi and provides key elements on how to elaborate future manoeuvres against Russian disinformation and propaganda. In May 2021, after Mali's second putsch, thousands of Russian fighters deployed on Malian soil, precipitating the diplomatic rupture between Paris and Bamako. Against this backdrop, on 17 February 2022, Emmanuel Macron announced the withdrawal of French forces from Mali. On 21 April, a pro-Russian account on social networks accused the French army of having left behind a mass grave after its departure from the Gossi base, with images of corpses. The French military, fearing this kind of informational attack, had nevertheless taken precautions by filming the base using a Barkhane drone. The French military staff was thus able to provide evidence of the staging of the mass grave and of Wagner's manipulation operation, aimed at accusing France of war crimes in Mali. The Malian government reacted violently on 27 April, accusing the French army of espionage, subversion, and violating Malian airspace. Interesting is the fact that after the revelation of this massive disinformation campaign, there were limited consequences as if the Russians had understood their failure. The reason lies in the French army's new strategy, made public in 2021, that includes a very important section devoted to action in multidomain operations, including the field of perceptions and cognitive warfare (Danet 2023).

The French example is not only the story of a once great colonial power being expelled from former colonies with the help of Russia. It must be seen as a mixed way of waging warfare against Russia's competitors, in both the diplomatic and the military domain, using every possible means to reach its objectives. This calls for understanding that the impacts of the war in

Ukraine are far-reaching and the rest of the world is also a place for unlimited and unrestricted competition. In many African countries, where Russia has been rather active – but also in others such as South Africa – governments and some representatives of the society vouch in favour of Moscow; at the minimum, they claim their neutrality with regard to the conflict in Ukraine, and in some extreme case, for instance, Eritrea and Sudan, it can be a more supportive part when it comes to expressing real support at the UNGA. Some reports also mention the presence of African soldiers serving in the Russian military in exchange for citizenship.

For France, this policy has been way more aggressive, leading to a coming rearticulation of the network of military bases (Senegal and Chad being the last countries to denounce former military agreements). Paris has chosen to adapt to this new geopolitical reality by the recent appointment of a Special Envoy for Africa Jean-Marie Bockel, in a move that is part of a broader review of the diplomacy of influence on the continent. In this context, France focuses on a policy aimed at broadening its range of crisis management tools by integrating measures broader than the security aspect, essentially targeting the economy, education, and health in order to gradually dry up the sources of recruitment for armed groups. If the model of out-of-area military operations has largely dominated the last three decades of French military engagement in Africa, the end of Operation Barkhane in the Sahel offers France the opportunity to rethink the regional security architecture and clarify the purpose of its military presence on the continent.

However, European member states cannot and should not consider Africa as something remote and of limited interest but continue their investments in Africa to deter Russia. If hybrid warfare aims at undermining European credibility, assets, and actions, Russia might be pursuing its covert operations against other Allies. France is not the only country to be threatened; the Niger junta also revoked the military agreement with the United States (Allen, Machain, Flynn 2024).

References

- Abbasova, Vusala. 2024. "Russia-Africa Trade Reaches New Heights with \$24.5 Billion Turnover." *Caspian News*, November 15, 2024. <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/russia-africa-trade-reaches-new-heights-with-245-billion-turnover-2024-11-12-38/>.
- Allen, Michael, and Carla Martinez Machain, Michael Flynn. 2024. "The US is Losing Access to its Bases in Niger – Here's Why that's a Big Deal." *The Conversation*, April 16, 2024. <https://theconversation.com/the-us-is-losing-access-to-its-bases-in-niger-heres-why-thats-a-big-deal-227632>
- Arnold, Thomas D. 2020. "Exploiting Chaos: Russia in Libya." *CSIS Blog*, November 23, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/exploiting-chaos-russia-libya>.
- Audinet, Maxime, and Emmanuel Dreyfus. 2022. *La Russie au Mali: Une Présence Bicéphale. Étude 97, IRSEM*, September 2022.
- BBC. 2019. "Did Russia Meddle in Madagascar's Election?" April 8, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-47830161>.
- Bissue Bi Nze, Archange. 2021. "Centrafrique: La Russie dans le Pré Carré Français." *Recherches Internationales* 121: 83-100.
- Bryjka, Filip, and Jędrzej Czerep. 2024. "Africa Corps: A New Iteration of Russia's Old Military Presence in Africa." *PISM*, May 2024. https://www.pism.pl/web-root/upload/files/Raport/PISM%20Report%20Africa%20Corps_.pdf.
- Danet, Didier. 2023. "Cognitive Security: Facing Cognitive Operations in Hybrid Warfare." *Proceedings of the 22nd European Conference on Cyber Warfare and Security, ECCWS 2023*. <https://papers.academic-conferences.org/index.php/ec-cws/article/download/1442/1160>.
- Ferragamo, Mariel. 2023. "Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa." *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 28, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-growing-footprint-africa>.
- Journal Officiel de l'Union Européenne. 2008. "Accord entre l'Union européenne et la Fédération de Russie sur la participation de la Fédération de Russie à l'opération militaire de l'Union européenne en République du Tchad et en République centrafricaine (EUFOR Tchad/RCA)." November 18, 2008. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:307:0016:0020:FR:PDF>.
- Macron, Emmanuel. 2022. "Présentation de la Revue Nationale Stratégique." *Toulon*, November 9, 2022. <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2022/11/09/a-toulon-le-president-de-la-republique-presente-la-revue-nationale-strategique>.
- Mokhefi, Mansouria. 2015. "Alger-Moscou: Évolution et Limites d'une Relation Privilégiée." *Politique étrangère* 3: 57-70.
- Reva, Denis. 2024. "Russia's Growing Influence in Africa Calls for More Balanced Partnerships." *ISS*, June 26, 2024. <https://issafrika.org/iss-today/russia-s-growing-influence-in-africa-calls-for-more-balanced-partnerships>.
- Russian MFA. 2024. "Joint Statement of the First Ministerial Conference of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum." November 10, 2024. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/russia_africa/1980876/.

Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. 2022. Security, Soft Power and Regime Support: Spheres of Russian Influence in Africa. Report, March 23, 2022. <https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/security-soft-power-and-regime-support-spheres-russian-influence-africa>.

US Department of State. 2024. Les Atrocités Commises par le Groupe Wagner en Afrique: Mensonges et Vérité. February 8, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/les-atrocites-commises-par-le-groupe-wagner-en-afrique-mensonges-et-verite/>.

15. Poland and Ukraine

Sharing Borders and Threats

Dr. (Col. Ret.) Zdzislaw Sliwa*

Abstract

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has shaken European security and the stability enjoyed by Western societies. Security in conventional military terms was back on the agenda of political debates. The Eastern European nations bordering Russia recognised the growing threat and spirit of Moscow's attempts to recover lost prestige and territory; Ukraine has been just a step on this path. Poland's location on the European map and its activity in support of Ukraine are founded by recognising the threat of separating this nation from a democratic and free world. The chapter argues that the Ukrainian geostrategic location makes its victory against Russia of existential importance to Poland. It will discuss Poland's support to Ukraine in political and military domains, which could lead to the desired end state, which is the restoration of Ukrainian pre-war borders, although recognising the complexity of such an outcome.

Keywords: Russian aggression in Ukraine, Poland, military support, European security

If this had not been so, and if Poland had been a state capable of making a defence, the three powers would not so readily have proceeded to its partition, and those powers most interested in maintaining its integrity, like France, Sweden and Turkey, would have been able to co-operate in a very different manner towards its preservation. But if the maintenance of a state is entirely dependent on external support, then certainly too much is asked.

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Book VI Defence, Chapter VI. Extent of the Means of Defence, Translation 1874.

* Dean, Baltic Defence College.

Introduction

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has reminded Polish society that this hostile and violent nation has been a threat and will continue to be in the short and long term. It is based on an assessment that there are two different objectives during the war: for Russia, it is an imperial territorial conflict, but for Ukraine, it is an existential struggle for its sovereignty. The annexation of Crimea was a warning to Poland that Russia was not changing its imperial ambitions; the military aggression against Ukraine just enhanced the threat perception. Ukrainian defeat would cause a comparable threat to Poland, so its victory is essential for Poland, to be followed by Kyiv's integration with the democratic world, by opening the door to membership in NATO and the European Union. Investment in Ukrainian security is also an investment in Polish national security. This chapter argues that the Ukrainian geostrategic location makes its victory against Russia of existential importance to Poland. Therefore, the location of Poland is to be mentioned followed by an examination of Warsaw's activities to support Ukraine politically and militarily. In parallel, it will consider Polish decisions and activities to prepare the nation for the unknown future alone and in line with NATO and European Union partners. The quote above is applicable even now, reminding Poland's complex history.

Geography as a Critical Strategic Factor

Poland's geostrategic location relates to security, given it shares borders with Kaliningrad (210 km), the Russian vassal state of Belarus (418 km) and Ukraine (525 km). Therefore, any subordination of Ukraine to Russia encompasses a threat to Poland, and it extends the entire NATO Eastern Flank. Consequently, independent Ukraine supports Poland's security as a buffer zone, parallel flanking Belarus as a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. Its territory could be used during large-scale exercises as 'Zapad' threatening other nations through belligerent scenarios; the incoming 'Zapad 2025' is planned to be located next to NATO Eastern Flank nations, causing concerns about hostile intentions (Бооне 2024).

Bordering Russia creates security implications for Poland as of the militarised Kaliningrad Oblast. Past cross-border business relations were recognised by the Kremlin as a danger of promoting the Western style of life and

by Poland as an opportunity to infiltrate border regions, spread propaganda, uphold espionage, and recruit agents of influence. Consequently, the border traffic was suspended (Kotowicz 2016, 145-146), and Poland decided in 2023 to replace the Russian name 'Калининград' (Pol. Kaliningrad) with Polish 'Królewiec' (Ministry of Economic Development and Technology 2023). It has been a political message, criticised by Moscow, which caused NATO concerns about the 'Suwalki Corridor' (or 'Gap'), and led to Russian stated plans to deploy nuclear weapon systems there (NATO codename SS-26 Stone) covering Poland, the Baltic states and Germany (Deutsche Welle 2016). In parallel, the possible deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus warned Poland not to support Ukraine and to "deter NATO's direct involvement" (Bowen 2023). Hence, Poland has decided to reinforce the 16th Mechanised Division and to build the 'Shield-East' to secure their borders alongside Kaliningrad and Belarus (Kapusta 2024). Poland is monitoring Kaliningrad and Belarus to recognise any indicators and warnings, as, although limited, the 11th Army Corps and Baltic Fleet next to A2/AD capabilities, possess strike capabilities ready to merge with Belarusian armed forces. Even now, Russian missiles are threatening Poland's territory, landing just across the border, if it were allowed to shoot them, the air defence shield would cover Western Ukraine and vitally important supply lines. However, it is not only a national decision.

The border with Kaliningrad and Belarus is a source of hybrid threats as the migration crisis along the Polish–Belarusian border is inspired and financed by Belarus and supported by Russia. There are estimates that such an asymmetric threat could originate from Kaliningrad (Kowalska-Sendek 2022). Other hostile factors are jamming GPS signals, cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, espionage, and sabotage. Those are proving the comeback of the Stalinist and Cold War methods using security services¹ to "intimidate Western societies and decision-makers, thereby weakening their willingness to continue providing military assistance to Ukraine" (Bryjka 2024). Hostile reconnaissance of military objects, airfields, railway lines, border crossing points, and information warfare are common (Głodowska 2024).

The land border with Poland has been vital for the delivery of military support to Ukraine. The economic aspect of Russia blocking Black Sea ports has increased bilateral exports and imports (Kacprzak 2024; PAP 2024). An

¹ Including the Federal Security Service (FSB), Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (formerly the Main Intelligence Directorate G.U. or GRU).

estimated 80% of Western aid to Ukraine passes through Poland making it a vital logistical hub and target of hybrid attacks and sabotage by Russia (Bryjka 2024, 2). Next, open borders were critical for war refugees as well as initially staunch support from the Polish population. However, according to the opinion polls in 2024, this support has deteriorated (Bounaoui 2024; Maciejewska-Mieszkowska 2023, 223, 228-229). Geographic proximity will play a role in the future reconstruction of Ukraine, increasing the volume of exports/imports will allow for the rebuilding of the economy after the war. In general, Poland and Ukraine will share the border for good or bad.

Poland's Political Support to Ukraine

The reminiscence of the Budapest Memorandum's failure to guarantee Ukraine's sovereignty was reminiscent of Poland facing German aggression alone in 1939, even if they were a part of a military alliance. Therefore, utilising international organisations, Poland has commenced many initiatives related to supporting Ukraine. Polish support in the political arena when discussing Ukrainian membership in NATO and the European Union has been of utmost importance. It was expressed by Minister Sikorski, who, ahead of the NATO Summit in Washington, explained, "Ukraine is a functional ally. It defends Europe against Putin's attempts. It deserved NATO membership" (TVP Info 2024). However, he was clear that it would not happen soon. The statement was in line with the 2024 Washington Summit Communique, which endorsed "an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree, and conditions are met" (NATO 2024). Nonetheless, although most members are supportive, there are nations that will not underpin it; these dynamics are similar to those of the European Union, where some members are blocking or delaying Ukraine-related decisions. Nevertheless, military support, coordinated by the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU), and non-military supplies, based on the Comprehensive Assistance Package, are continued, and Poland is highly active in those entities. Poland's presidency of the Council of the European Union will be an opportunity to promote the European integration of Ukraine, which will be a remarkable change compared to the Hungarian presidency. It will be a chance for Poland to highlight its role as one of the key actors within Europe, possibly in relation to changes precipitated by the US elections. Poland's dedication to preserving active support for Ukraine was mentioned

during the 79th UN General Assembly session in September 2024. Minister Sikorski, “emphasised the need for further support for Ukraine over Russia’s invasion” stressing that a Ukraine Peace Formula is not a solution and “freezing the war is not an option” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). He condemned Russian propaganda targeting Ukraine and Poland. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024).

The challenge is the weaker position of regional groupings limiting Warsaw’s role and abilities to promote Ukraine’s interests. Among them, there is a challenge amid the ‘reactivation’ of the Weimar Triangle. In March 2024, three leaders agreed that Ukraine must be supported to defend itself, but without consensus on how to respond, although all three leaders “spoke with one voice, above all, about the security of our continent” (Kirby 2024). However, Poland was not invited to a meeting of the US, UK, German, and French leaders in October 2024, causing disappointment; Minister Sikorski stated that it would be better if Poland were invited (Onet 2024). This is a pity, as the extension of military cooperation based on French-German-Polish combined strategy would serve as a robust deterrence and defence posture on the Eastern Flank, but it must be underpinned by political will. The United Kingdom and Germany’s bilateral defence pact and deepening military cooperation between Germany and France are further symptoms of limiting Warsaw’s role. Parallel, the deteriorating position of the German Chancellor and French President after the last election is making European leadership weaker, especially when facing future strong USA leadership. The President-elect’s views on NATO, EU, Germany, and France will be translated into policy, which could shape the outcome of war and the future of Ukraine.

The Visegrad 4 is another regional grouping not supporting Poland’s role and dedication to helping Ukraine, as “strategic differences reduced the Visegrád 4 to effectively a V2 +2, with only Warsaw and Prague still unequivocally committed to the Ukrainian cause” (Beck 2024). Poland’s Prime Minister Tusk stated that Brussels “does not have Ukraine fatigue, it has Orbán fatigue”; Czech Minister Dvořák, indicated that “the V4 brand is now toxic in Europe” with no power to participate in Ukraine-related negotiations (Beck 2024). The four nations present a disunited understanding of the Russian threat and promote diverging options on how to secure Europe. It is not promising as those are the NATO ‘front line’ nations, facing hostile Kremlin imperial ambitions, expressed now by hybrid attacks, which seem

to be relentless. The diversity of political agenda does not enable the V4 to play a significant role in the broader European context.

An interesting option is cooperation with the security formats of the Nordic and Baltic countries (NB8)² and the Nordic countries (N5), as those nations share similar security concerns and support the Ukrainian war effort, providing military support and being a Kyiv voice on the international fora. They are also within the Russian zone of interest and are targets of hybrid warfare. These options have become more attractive after Finland and Sweden joined NATO, which created new opportunities for cooperation. Warsaw is now in contact with those organizations (Poland's top diplomat meets with ambassadors of Nordic and Baltic countries 2024). It was enhanced by Premier Tusk's participation in the Summit of heads of government from the Nordic and Baltic countries in November 2024. The topics included transatlantic relations, the Baltic Sea region security and long-term support for Ukraine, highlighting that "Russia remains the most significant and direct threat to our security in the long term" (Latvian Public Broadcasting 2024). All those topics are important agenda themes from the Polish perspective as antagonistic Russia is notifying the importance of Poland's geostrategic location (Prime Minister's Office 2024). In a broader spectrum, there is a role for smaller groupings, as their joint voice is essential but only based on consensus-based statements. Poland is looking for such an option directly bordering Ukraine and the threat posed by Russian, but recognising some obstacles, it is actively looking for other fora to support Ukraine, seeing its victory as essential for national sovereignty and European/world stability.

Military and Hybrid Factors

Poland is not only a transfer route between West and Ukraine but also a logistics hub. It is becoming a regional military power supporting the security of the Eastern Flank in partnership with other NATO nations within the obligations of Article V. Ukrainian territorial integrity is important for Warsaw as a natural buffer zone, so the recovery of lost Ukrainian territory is essential in this sense. Therefore, military support matters; Poland is one

² Nordic and Baltic countries (NB8) – Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Lithuania, Latvia, Norway, and Sweden. Nordic 5 (N5) – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

of the major providers of weapon systems and supplies; estimated support to Ukraine reached some 3,23 billion Euro (14 billion PLN) (Zajac 2024). It was delivered from the beginning of the war when it was highly desired as both quantity and timeframe of deliveries were crucial. The data about supplies could be found in reports; according to estimates, supplies included at least 14 MiG-29 fighters, 11 Mi-24 attack helicopters, some 320 tanks (T-72, PT-91, Leopard 2A4), combat fighting vehicles, 54 155mm howitzers 'Krab', other artillery and air-defence systems, ammunition, and many other categories (Tarociński and Wilk 2023; Ciślak 2024). Poland has provided medical treatment for soldiers, training for troops using national training areas, and the maintenance of equipment. There were claims that Poland delivered old or outdated combat platforms, but it was a donation allowing their deployment immediately without additional training. It was vital during the first months of the war to allow Ukrainian units to stop the enemy and recover lost territory during a counteroffensive. In parallel, it was the impetus for the build-up and modernization of the Polish armed forces.

The threat assessment and lessons identified have influenced the capabilities of Poland's armed forces. After gaining 2% GDP for military expenditure in 2016, the country reached some 4.7% in 2024, investing intensively into specific combat systems. It is making Poland a leader among NATO nations and could be an argument recognised and appreciated by the President-elect of the USA. The military build-up is partially linked to the threat of 'frozen conflict' or protracted war. It will allow the creation of new divisions in east Poland and independent brigades and regiments based on the procurement of modern weapon systems. This could make the country a regional military power with professional soldiers supported by the territorial defence forces. Next, the revitalisation of the military industry capacity is a critical factor. A good example was the creation of a consortium of four companies to produce ammunition, allocating 3 billion PLN. All the above-mentioned aspects will pay off, supporting deterrence and respect among NATO and EU partners seeing Poland as a reliable partner. Nevertheless, recognising the growing capabilities of Polish armed forces, Allied support and assets are still required in specific areas: air defence, long-range artillery and missile systems and radio-electronic warfare supplemented by reinforced enhanced Forward Presence capabilities.

Opportunities and Challenges toward Ukrainian Victory

A Ukrainian victory is not easy to achieve; it requires enhanced support for the nation, especially military support. Poland could serve as an example, as recognised by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, who expressed his gratitude for such an effort (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). The West must make a choice. To underpin a Ukrainian victory more must be done in military, economic and budgetary terms, putting pressure on European nations and the European Union. The previous delays were counterproductive, enabling Russia to achieve territorial gains; for example, delays in the permission to use long-range systems to attack military targets within Russian territory such as operational and strategic reserves, airfields, logistic hubs, operational level and strategic command posts or even specific combat and reconnaissance systems, etc. (Komornicki 2023). The delivered capabilities will not only deny Russian offensive capabilities but it would also create an anti-access/area denial shield. Military assistance must be continuous to ensure the stability of military operations including planning offensive actions that would deny enemy operational pauses for regrouping or deploying new units to strike again. Combined with the mobilization of citizens, it will create options to build reserve units equipped and trained by NATO. Again, lack of supplies and broken continuity, just to mention ammunition, was a reason for delaying tactical and operational actions. Diplomacy and strategic communication should underpin it; there is a Polish role, not to allow the war to be treated as business as usual by the international community.

The aggression will continue, as both nations cannot achieve their strategic goals. Russia has already shifted to a military economy and has bigger manpower reserves for a protracted war. Support from friendly nations, like Iran and North Korea or dual-use equipment from China, could be future game changers. It requires stronger sanctions against Russia, which will be effective in the long term. Therefore, enhanced Western military support is critical as time is not on the Ukrainian side. It will allow them to fight Russian combat units and defend the population and critical infrastructure, targeted by Russia daily to break Ukraine's will to defend their country and undermine their trust in political and military leadership. A spirit of helplessness in society will limit trust in the West, playing well into the enemy's hands. There are already symptoms of tiredness among the civilian population and war fatigue among military ranks, weakening national solidarity, the spirit of resilience, and determination to contribute to the war

effort. There is a need to deliver humanitarian support for the population in all required areas. Such a comprehensive approach is the proper way to maintain the morale of the population in backing the military effort. These elements, combined with the bravery and determination of the Ukrainian people, can contribute to success in the war; but the word 'success' has many meanings for different actors.

Conclusions

The Russian aggression in Ukraine presents many lessons for Poland, especially the effective resistance that is fighting incompetent invaders who are committing war crimes daily. Whatever the outcome of the war, realistically, the East European nations will live in an atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty coming from hostile Russia. A 'frozen conflict,' like the Georgian scenario, is not the preferable scenario for Poland, but it is the most likely one given the current international situation. Ukraine does not have the capabilities to restore its territorial integrity, and such a situation locates Russian troops closer to the Polish border. Parallely, Russia will have time to rebuild its military power, being assured that aggression achieved its aim, encouraging it to continue expansion in Ukraine and beyond. As there will be no UN Security Council Resolution to create a demilitarization zone with UN troops, due to a Russian or Chinese veto, optional NATO presence to control it could be used as another explanation for Russian propaganda to advance to protect national sovereignty. It would just be a matter of time. It could lead to the worst scenario, subordination of Ukraine; however, as for now, Russia does not possess the capabilities to do so. Ukrainian victory and their regaining lost territory would be the perfect scenario, although most unlikely and fully dependent on the West's support. The latter is directly connected with Warsaw's support for Kyiv, as its victory could push the Russian threat away from national borders. The threat is of existential importance in years to come. Of note, the partition of Ukraine, proposed lately by Russia, like the Zhirinovsky model, is not acceptable for Poland.

Russian territorial gains and frozen conflict could be seen as a prize for the regime, allowing the rebuilding of military capabilities to expand national borders once again. Such a development could legitimise similar actions in the eyes of other autocratic regimes as a proper strategy – just 'take' what you want and 'keep' it. Poland is in a unique geostrategic situation,

which must be seen in the context of limitations within political, economic, and military domains, pushing the country to make focused and purposeful strategic decisions. The perception of the Russian threat must build consensus among the Polish political elites internally and build solidarity within NATO and the EU based on bilateral cooperation with the United States. Already, the presence of other NATO members' troops in Poland is a deterrence factor that presents a readiness to defend the country arm-in-arm with other NATO partners. Additionally, society resilience must be a priority along with the whole-of-government approach to face "threats, including hybrid ones, ensure the universal nature of civil defence and protection of the population as well as build-up and maintain the capacity to recover the necessary resources" (National Security Bureau 2020, 15-17). Such an approach is valid as Poland has received many antagonistic warnings advancing Moscow's plans and 'dreams' very often and always in connection with a hostile narrative. The anti-Polish propaganda, fake news, disinformation, special services operations, and agents of influence are already trying to destabilise Poland internally and are trying to isolate it on the international forum. Ukraine and Poland share history and a border, which requires the continuity of joint actions to support each other, especially now to ensure Kyiv's war effort to achieve the desired end state of their fight for national sovereignty.

References

- Beck, Robert. 2024. *The Visegrád Four: Disunity in Central Europe*. Analytical reports, Philadelphia: The Foreign Policy Research Institute. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/02/the-visegrad-four-disunity-in-central-europe/>.
- Boone, Mara. 2024. *Joint Military Exercises of Russia and Belarus “Zapad-2025”: What to Expect?* 23 October. Accessed October 25, 2024. <https://eukraine.eu/en/2024/10/23/spilni-vijskovi-navcannya-rosii-i-bi/>.
- Bounaoui, Sara. 2024. *Relacje polsko-ukraińskie. Sondaż wskazuje niepokojący trend*. 1 November. Accessed November 10, 2024. <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/relacje-polsko-ukrainskie-sondaz-wskazuje-niepokojacy-trend-7087825939172064a>.
- Bowen, Wyn. 2023. *Russian harassment of NATO aircraft and escalation risk*. 20 April. Accessed October 25, 2024. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/russian-harassment-of-nato-aircraft-and-escalation-risk>.
- Bryjka, Filip. 2024. *NATO Members On Guard Against Russian Sabotage*. Analytical Report, Warsaw: The Polish Institute of International Affairs.
- Ciślak, Jarosław. 2024. *Jaki sprzęt Polska przekazała Ukrainie? [OPINIA]*. Raport, Warsaw: Defence24.
- Deutsche Welle . 2016. *Russia moves nuclear missiles into Kaliningrad*. 10 August. Accessed October 25, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-moves-nuclear-missiles-onto-natos-doorstep/a-35997378> Accessed 23 April 2024.
- Głodowska, Karolina. 2024. *Rosyjska dywersja coraz większym problemem w Polsce. Komunikat ABW*. 25 October. Accessed November 13, 2024. <https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/kraj/news-rosyjska-dywersja-coraz-wiekszym-problemem-w-polsce-komunika,nId,7843612>.
- Kacprzak, Izabela. 2024. *Badanie: Polacy są przerażeni wojną i zmęczeni pomocą uchodźcom*. 6 November. Accessed November 10, 2024. <https://www.rp.pl/spoleczenstwo/art41401931-badanie-polacy-sa-przerazeni-wojna-i-zmeceniu-pomoca-uchodzcom>.
- Kapusta, Paweł. 2024. *Tarcza Wschód. Eksperti mówią, co Polska powinna zrobić w pierwszej kolejności*. 28 May. Accessed October 25, 2024. <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/tarcza-wschod-eksperti-mowia-co-polska-powinna-zrobic-w-pierwszej-kolejnosci-7032421328091840a>.
- Kirby, Paul. 2024. *Ukraine war: Europe split clouds Macron talks with Scholz in Berlin*. 15 March. Accessed November 05, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68573441>.
- Komornicki, Leon. 2023. *Gen. Komornicki: Warunki strategiczne dla zwycięstwa Ukrainy w wojnie z Rosją [OPINIA]*. Opinion, Warsaw: Defence24. Accessed November 13, 2024. <https://defence24.pl/polityka-obronna/gen-komornicki-warunki-strategiczne-dla-zwyciestwa-ukrainy-w-wojnie-z-rosja-opinia>.
- Kotowicz, Wojciech. 2016. “Traffic Between Poland and Russia – Political and Security Dimension.” In *Kaliningrad: its internal and external issues*, by Arkadiusz Arkadiusz Żukowski and Wojciech Modzelewski, 145-146. Olsztyn: University of Warmia and Mazury.
- Kowalska-Sendek, Magdalena. 2022. *Na granicy z obwodem kaliningradzkim wojsko działa prewencyjnie*. 28 November. Accessed October 26, 2024.

- <https://polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/38534?t=Na-granicy-z-obwodem-kaliningradzkim-wojsko-dziala-prewencyjnie>.
- Latvian Public Broadcasting. 2024. "Nordic-Baltic 8 countries meet in Sweden." *Latvian Public Broadcasting*. 27 November. Accessed November 28, 2024. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/diplomacy/27.11.2024-nordic-baltic-8-countries-meet-in-sweden.a577962/>.
- Maciejewska-Mieszkowska, Katarzyna. 2023. "Eskalacja wojny w Ukrainie jako czynnik determinujący poczucie zagrożenia bezpieczeństwa Polski w ocenie społecznej." *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne*. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssp.2023.2.12>.
- Ministry of Economic Development and Technology. 2023. *Zmiana nazwy. Królewiec zamiast Kaliningrad*. 10 May. Accessed October 24, 2024. <https://www.gov.pl/web/rozwoj-technologia/zmiana-nazwy-krolewec-zamiast-kaliningrad2>.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2024a. *Minister Radosław Sikorski talks with new NATO Secretary General*. 2 October. Accessed October 29, 2024. <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/minister-radoslaw-sikorski-talks-with-new-nato-secretary-general>.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2024b. *Minister Sikorski takes part in high-level week of 79th UN General Assembly session*. 27 September. Accessed October 18, 2024. <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/minister-sikorski-takes-part-in-high-level-week-of-79th-un-general-assembly-session>.
- National Security Bureau. 2020. *The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland*. National Strategy, Warsaw: The President of Poland Office.
- NATO . 2024. *Relations with Ukraine*. 3 October. Accessed November 8, 2024. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37750.htm.
- Onet. 2024. *Polska nie dostała zaproszenia do Berlina. Radosław Sikorski reaguje*. 21 October. Accessed November 5, 2024. <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/polskanie-dostala-zaproszenia-do-berlina-radoslaw-sikorski-reaguje/hm524f0>.
- PAP. 2024. *Polacy sądzą, że wojna w Ukrainie zagraża ich bezpieczeństwu? Wypowiedzieli się w sondażu*. 9 April. Accessed November 10, 2024. <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/polacy-sadza-ze-wojna-w-ukrainie-zagraza-ich-bezpieczenstwu-wypowiedzieli-sie-w-sondazu>.
- Poland's top diplomat meets with ambassadors of Nordic and Baltic countries*. 6 March. Accessed November 23, 2024. <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/polands-top-diplomat-meets-with-ambassadors-of-nordic-and-baltic-countries>.
- Prime Minister's Office. 2024. *Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson to host Nordic-Baltic Summit at Harpsund*. 11 November. Accessed November 23, 2024. <https://www.government.se/press-releases/2024/11/prime-minister-ulf-kristersson-to-host-nordic-baltic-summit-at-harpsund/>.
- Sword, Keith. 1990. *Sikorski: Soldier and Statesman*. London: Orbis Books.
- Tarociński, Jacek, and Andrzej Wilk. 2023. *Dostawy broni – konieczność dla Ukrainy, wyzwanie dla Zachodu*. Commentary, Warsaw: Center of Eastern Studies.

- TVP Info. 2024. *Ukraina w NATO? Minister Sikorski: Zasłużyła [WIDEO]*. 9 July. Accessed October 16, 2024. <https://www.tvp.info/79225432/ukraina-w-nato-szef-msz-sikorski-przed-szczytem-nato-zasluzyla-wideo>.
- Zajac, Łukasz Zajac. 2024. *Bankier.pl*: „Polska przekazała Ukrainie pomoc militarną o wartości ponad 14 mld złotych”. 25 November. Accessed November 25, 2024. https://defence24.pl/polityka-obronna/poniedzialkowy-przegląd-mediów-ważny-general-zdymisjonowany-za-klamstwa-polska-pomoc-militarna-warta-14-mld-złoty-ch-tajna-bron-putina?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=codzienny%20&__ca__chat=ncutczk.

16. Unfulfilled Potential of the Polish-British-Ukrainian Trilateral Cooperation

A Perspective from Poland

Dr. Przemysław Biskup^{*}

Abstract: The chapter aims to present and analyse the concepts that contributed to the signing of the joint statement by the foreign ministers of Poland, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine on 17 February 2022, the shape that the cooperation of the three countries took after the outbreak of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the new ideas that were brought by political changes in Poland between late 2023 and 2024, and the obstacles for its further dynamic development. The paper was developed on the basis of the analytical project implemented between spring 2022 and spring 2024 by the Polish Institute of International Affairs, Council on Geostrategy and Ukrainian Prism. It concludes that fulfilling the trilateral cooperation's potential needs recognition by all three countries of the scale of the Russian challenge and the will to confront it in a consequent and steady fashion, especially despite competing domestic policy and spending priorities.

Keywords: Poland, United Kingdom, Ukraine, trilateral cooperation, defence and security

Introduction

Poland, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine have a long history of bilateral relations, particularly in respect of the Polish-Ukrainian side of this triangle. Nonetheless, close collaboration of the three countries as a grouping is not the most intuitive concerning the new emerging security architecture of Central Europe and of the continent more broadly. However, after studying the interests, aims, and potentials of the three countries, the vision for their closer collaboration does not seem abstract either. Together with Poland's democratic and market-economy transition since the 1990s, and Ukraine's

^{*} Senior Analyst, The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM); Adjunct Professor, The Warsaw School of Economics (SGH)

independence in 1991 and then the gradual buildup of pro-Western course marked by the 2004 Orange Revolution, 2013 Euromaidan, 2014 association agreement with the European Union and 2022 EU accession application, these two countries started to develop a common geopolitical framework joining them with Britain. Despite different historical trajectories before the 21st century, the three countries adopted a converging set of democratic values, participated in the security system built around NATO membership – or an aspiration for accession – and maintained a vivid interest in an open economic system, free from both obstacles to the flow of goods, and from hostile dependencies (e.g., in the field of energy). Consequently, this chapter aims to present and analyse the concepts that contributed to the signing of the joint statement by the foreign ministers' of Poland, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine on 17 February 2022, the shape that the cooperation of the three countries took after the outbreak of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the new ideas that were brought by political changes in Poland between late 2023 and 2024, and the obstacles for its further dynamic development. This chapter draws from the research and findings of the trilateral analytical project implemented between spring 2022 and spring 2024 by the Polish Institute of International Affairs, Council on Geostrategy and Ukrainian Prism (The Trilateral Initiative 2024).

The Trilateral's Genesis

The Polish-British-Ukrainian trilateral initiative of 17 February 2022 emerged as a response to the geopolitical instability posed by growing Russian revisionism since 2008, which led to direct threats to Ukraine and indirect ones to the post-Communist and post-Soviet countries formulated in late 2021 (Putin 2021; Pifer 2021). They closely followed the pattern of Russia's aggressive policy established by the armed intervention in Ukraine since 2014, including the annexation of Crimea as the first armed acquisition of a territory in Europe since the Second World War. The joint statement was intended as an element of a diplomatic strategy aimed at discouraging Russia from implementing its full-scale war plan, which included American and British disclosure of intelligence and diplomatic missions to Russia undertaken by Western leaders. Additionally, it was meant to define the scope for the broadly understood security cooperation, especially in case of the Russian attack. Hence, the joint statement provided the basis for a much

more detailed memorandum of understanding and indicated that trilateral cooperation should cover broadly understood security fields including cyber and energy security, strategic communication to counter Russian disinformation, and support for the International Crimea Platform.

The document outlined the foundational goals of the Polish-British-Ukrainian trilateral initiative. Recognising the vulnerabilities exposed by Russian cyberattacks and energy dependencies, the memorandum emphasised collaborative efforts to fortify critical infrastructure and safeguard against digital threats. It also sought to enhance strategic communication to combat Kremlin-backed propaganda, which undermines democratic institutions and public trust across Europe. The document proposed a cohesive approach to shared security challenges, providing diplomatic support to the International Crimea Platform, which aimed to consolidate international efforts to restore Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea and counteract Russia's attempts at normalising its illegal annexation.

Poland, deeply invested in regional security due to its proximity to Ukraine and historical tensions with Russia, sought to supplement its existing cooperative frameworks, such as the Lublin Triangle and the Visegrád Group, while drawing the UK closer to Eastern European affairs. For the UK, this partnership complemented its post-Brexit realignment, reinforcing its influence in Central and Eastern Europe and projecting strategic leadership in European security. The trilateral format thus became a link that bridged the Baltic and Black Seas and addressed critical gaps in the European security framework. For Ukraine, the initiative offered a platform to strengthen its strategic alliances amidst challenges to join NATO and the EU. By partnering with two Alliance members (including a nuclear power and a key player on NATO's Eastern Flank), Ukraine aimed to bolster its defence and secure tangible support in case of aggression.

Importantly, the trilateral cooperation officially launched on 17 February 2022 was intended to extend beyond the immediate wartime needs of Ukraine. The project built upon growing British engagement in Ukraine since 2014, culminating in 2020 with the bilateral Political, Free Trade and Strategic Partnership Agreement, a number of strategic contracts covering energy sector and reconstruction of the Ukrainian navy, and re-emphasised collaboration with Poland in the security and defence field after Brexit, which was signified by the bilateral Treaty on Defence and Security Cooperation in 2017 (GOV.UK 2018; 2020). In parallel, Poland and Britain were increasingly engaged in training missions in Ukraine, and Poland has

been deepening its economic and social ties with its eastern neighbour. The substantial Polish community in the UK also provided a unique societal link to both countries. By 2022, there was a growing sense in the three countries that the trilateral initiative not only presented a collective commitment to counter Russian aggression and build stability in a region marked by historical volatility, but that it could also serve as a cornerstone for addressing long-term security challenges, enhancing economic and infrastructural connectivity, and redefining Europe's security architecture in a favourable way to their interests.

Trilateral Cooperation in the Face of Russian Invasion

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine launched on 24 February 2022 immediately escalated the need for effective cooperation amongst the three countries. Poland and the UK coordinated bilateral weapon deliveries to Ukraine, including ammunition and advanced defence systems. These early efforts highlighted the urgency of supporting Ukraine's resistance. By April 2022, Poland and the UK established a Joint Commission to streamline arms transfers, ensuring efficient delivery of critical supplies. Trilateral discussions continued, with foreign ministers meeting on the sidelines of key international forums, such as the UN General Assembly in September 2022, to coordinate long-term objectives. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to conclude that trilateral cooperation played an indispensable role in arming Ukraine in the first year of the conflict (e.g., the fundamental role of Polish armour and munitions supplies) and breaking taboos around different weapons systems (e.g., Britain's supplies of Western tanks and cruise missiles, Poland's of MiG jets).

At later stages of the conflict, Poland and the UK kept playing crucial roles by mobilising Western allies in support of Ukraine and its bids to join NATO – especially regarding the 2023 Vilnius and 2024 Washington summits – and the EU. Moreover, since 2022, Poland has been playing a fundamental role as an international support logistical hub.

Nonetheless, despite early momentum, the trilateral initiative faced significant challenges in the second and third years of the conflict. Frequent changes in leadership in London between 2022-23 disrupted continuity. The appointments of new Conservative British prime ministers, foreign secretaries, and defence secretaries amidst domestic political controversies diverted

British attention from foreign policy priorities. Despite continuing declaratory support for Ukraine, the change of the ruling party to Labour after the 2024 General Election also complicated the trilateral cooperation because of deep changes in general policy priorities of the new government, which prioritised socio-economic reforms over security and defence, as well as the unavoidable loss of practical knowledge of the realities of the conflict accumulated by the Conservative administrations. Meanwhile in Poland, the relative stability of the United Right governments was negatively offset in the Polish-Ukrainian relations in 2023 by the growing conflict concerning economic interests (opening of the EU single market to Ukrainian agri-food exports and road haulage) and policies of historical memory (especially in respect of the 1943 Volyhnia massacre and role of UPA in Ukraine's reshaping identity). The change of Poland's ruling coalition in December 2023 following the general election in September 2023 also had a slowing effect on bilateral cooperation with Ukraine for reasons similar as to the British case.

Despite the challenging relations within the trilateral format, its perceived relevance continues. For example, the outgoing conservative governments in Poland and Britain strongly emphasised in their final major agreement the importance of Ukraine and trilateral cooperation. The UK–Poland 2030 Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration signed on 5 July 2023 outlined a multi-dimensional approach to supporting Ukraine in terms of immediate assistance, long-term rebuilding, and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures (GOV.UK 2023). Both countries pledged unwavering political, economic, and military support for Ukraine to sustain its defence against Russian aggression. Poland and the UK committed to coordinating military aid and ensuring that Ukraine has access to critical resources, weapons, and training for operational effectiveness. Additionally, they planned to bolster Ukraine's resilience through intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and strategic coordination.

The UK-Poland 2030 Strategic Partnership Declaration also emphasised the reconstruction of Ukraine's infrastructure and economy. Poland and the UK aim to work closely with international partners to ensure that Ukraine recovers from the destruction caused by the conflict. They committed to supporting refugees and displaced populations, facilitating safe returns, and enabling Ukrainian citizens to contribute to rebuilding efforts.

The declaration also underscored the importance of supporting Ukraine's pathway to NATO membership and strengthening its democratic institutions. By aligning Ukraine's defence strategies with NATO standards, both

nations wanted to integrate Ukraine more closely into Euro-Atlantic structures. The process should also help Ukraine transition to NATO-standard equipment, increasing interoperability with NATO forces.

The loss of the trilateral momentum, which became visible in 2023, was also due to broader NATO and EU coordination mechanisms overshadowing the cooperation of the three countries as a grouping. For instance, the Ukraine Defence Contact Group (UDCG, commonly known as the Ramstein Group) became a primary vehicle for mobilising military aid, reducing the unique role of the trilateral framework (US Department of Defence 2024). Beginning from October 2023, events in the Middle East diverted media and policy focus away from Ukraine, complicating efforts to sustain international attention and support.

Trilateral Cooperation's (Yet) Unfulfilled Potential

The trilateral cooperation has the potential to transform Europe's post-war security architecture. By supporting Ukraine's NATO aspirations and fostering regional military collaboration, the initiative strengthens deterrence against future Russian aggression. Efforts include expanding NATO's eastern flank and integrating Ukraine into Euro-Atlantic defence structures. The initiative's emphasis on resilience, defence-industrial cooperation, and hybrid warfare strategies can help prepare the region to counter a range of security challenges, including cyber threats and disinformation campaigns. Moreover, by advocating for Ukraine's full integration into European frameworks, the trilateral partnership reinforces the principles of national sovereignty and democratic governance. This leads to the trilateral cooperation's great potential in coordinating defence production, from advanced munitions to naval capabilities. Examples include Polish production of Krab howitzers and British contributions to Poland's and Ukraine's naval modernisation.

Importantly, the trilateral initiative also offers significant economic and infrastructural benefits. The extensive damage inflicted on Ukraine's critical infrastructure presents an opportunity to modernise it and align with EU standards. Trilateral efforts can drive projects such as rebuilding energy grids, transportation networks, and urban centres. Moreover, Ukraine's green agenda aligns with both Poland's and the EU's renewable energy initiatives and the UK's Net Zero targets. Joint research and development in

sustainable technologies could accelerate the transition to greener energy systems, enhancing energy security and resilience.

The initiative has a great potential to enhance north-south transport links between the Baltic and Black Seas, especially as since the outbreak of the present conflict, Poland has become the principal hub and transportation corridor for international military and civilian assistance for Ukraine. Further developing the infrastructure can facilitate trade, improve military mobility, and boost regional economic integration across the Baltic-Black Sea region. Proposed projects include high-speed railways connecting Warsaw and Kyiv and modernised logistics hubs in seaports. Another promising area for trilateral collaboration is maritime infrastructure development, especially considering that both Poland and Ukraine independently chose the UK as its leading partner in the development of maritime infrastructure, naval capacity, and offshore wind generation even before the Russian full-scale aggression. The UK's expertise in naval systems, Poland's advanced port facilities, and Ukraine's strategic Black Sea access can converge to ensure secure and efficient maritime connectivity. Joint efforts could also address the restoration of freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, critical for global trade and regional stability.

The Significance of the Bilateral Agreements for Security Cooperation

To a great extent, the long-term future of the trilateral project will be dependent on the bilateral British-Ukrainian and Polish-Ukrainian agreements intended – within the G7-agreed framework of international bilateral guarantees – to provide the attacked country with stable assistance. The significance of these documents lies not only in their contents but also in their omissions.

Britain and Ukraine signed their Agreement on Security Co-operation on 12 January 2024 (GOV.UK 2024). The rationale behind the UK's decision to sign the agreement with Ukraine was that the G7 countries were committed to providing long-term military and financial support for Ukraine's defence against the Russian invasion and for its post-war reconstruction. It was agreed by the G7 that these commitments would be formalised in a package of bilateral security cooperation agreements between the G7 countries and Ukraine. In the early days of August 2023, the United States was the first to initiate

discussions with Ukraine regarding the potential conclusion of an agreement, followed a few days later by the UK and then by the other G7 countries.

The British-Ukrainian agreement, which is to be in effect for ten years, provides for extensive military and financial support to the attacked country in its efforts to fully restore and subsequently defend its territorial integrity, including Russian-occupied Crimea. The agreement formalises existing British assistance in the form of arms supplies, advice, and training to the Ukrainian army, with particular emphasis on naval support. It also includes plans to enhance intelligence collaboration, defence industry cooperation, support for the protection of Ukraine's critical infrastructure, and assistance with post-war reconstruction and state reform. Furthermore, the UK has pledged to provide immediate assistance to Ukraine in the event of a renewed Russian attack, offering supplies of modern military equipment, financial support, and imposing sanctions on Russia.

The UK-Ukraine agreement was the first agreed by a G7 country and provided a framework for Ukraine's future agreements, including those with non-G7 countries (Szeligowski 2024). Its signing had a positive impact on the consolidation of the international coalition of countries supporting Ukraine, especially in the context of the protracted process in the US of adopting a new Ukraine aid package. It is also likely that this will create political pressure on the other G7 countries to accelerate their own negotiations with Ukraine on analogous agreements. It could be argued that a package of agreements with G7 countries will pave the way for Ukraine to deepen its military-industrial cooperation with other partners, allowing them to engage with Ukraine under the umbrella of the US and major European countries (Lorenz 2024).

However, the document did not contain mutual defence guarantees similar to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and, as a consequence, made it more likely that other agreements negotiated by Ukraine with the other G7 countries would not include such a clause either. It is worth noting that the agreement, while offering comprehensive military support in the form of modern weapons, did not explicitly commit the UK to the direct defence of Ukraine against Russia. However, for internal purposes, Ukrainian authorities have presented the agreement as Western security guarantees. It is worth noting that the UK-Ukraine agreement is reciprocal in nature, stipulating that Ukraine will also provide military support to the UK in the event of an attack (Szeligowski 2024).

The security cooperation agreement with Ukraine was intended to provide it with the long-term military and financial support it needs during the transition period before joining NATO and to assist it in achieving readiness for Alliance membership through comprehensive reform of its armed forces and increasing their interoperability with those of NATO countries. However, since there has not been a consensus among NATO member states regarding Ukraine's future membership, the bilateral agreements with the G7 countries and other partners (initiated by Britain) could serve as a substitute (Lorenz 2024).

The Polish-Ukrainian Agreement on Security Co-operation, signed on 8 July 2024, ensured Poland's commitment to assist in Ukraine's self-defence and impose political and economic costs on Russia (Chancellery of the Prime Minister 2024). The agreement also provided for immediate bilateral consultations within 24 hours to determine necessary measures in case of escalated Russian aggression as well as allows for consultations with other states under the G7 framework to coordinate broader responses to aggression. Poland committed to improving Ukraine's defence forces to counter Russian aggression and ensure interoperability with NATO. The agreement also included provisions for sharing military practices and lessons learned, emphasising joint efforts in preparation for Ukraine's NATO membership. Specific contributions by Poland include providing advanced weaponry and technology.

Poland also committed to aiding in Ukraine's reconstruction as a sovereign and democratic state, supporting infrastructure development, and fostering Ukraine's integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. Emphasis was placed on energy security and other strategic sectors to ensure long-term stability. The governance mechanisms to oversee the agreement's implementation include joint committees and task forces to monitor progress, resolve disputes, and adapt the agreement to evolving circumstances, particularly in alignment with Ukraine's agreements with international partners.

In the light of bilateral tensions growing from spring 2023 over the scale of assistance to Ukraine (from the Polish perspective, often talked down by the Ukraine side), Ukrainian access to the EU common market, and the disturbing effect it has been having on Poland's agrifood and haulage sectors, as well as over historical memory issues, lasting throughout the general elections campaign and continuing after the change of ruling coalition in December 2023, the agreement contained (in its Chapter III) the most detailed

description of the aid packages and their value already delivered to Ukraine up to that point. This signified the shift in Poland's policy towards Ukraine which gave much higher priority to Poland's own rearmaments over the deliveries to Ukraine when compared to 2022-23. While Poland has remained one of Ukraine's staunchest political allies, it was not ready – like the UK, US, and other G7 nations – to commit to mutual defence obligations.

Conclusions

The Polish-British-Ukrainian trilateral initiative represented a forward-looking approach to addressing both immediate and long-term challenges in European security. Its contributions extended beyond military aid to encompass economic recovery, infrastructural modernisation, and the promotion of shared democratic values. By leveraging their collective strengths, the three nations wanted to redefine Europe's security order, ensuring stability and prosperity in the post-war era. The basic assumptions that stood behind the initiative have not been disproven, while the enhanced cooperation of the three countries in the first year of the war has proven critical to Ukraine's survival.

However, fulfilling of the trilateral cooperation's potential – as has been becoming increasingly clear by 2024 – needs recognition by all three countries of the scale of the Russian challenge and the will to confront it in a consequent and steady fashion. The loss of the momentum, to a great extent, was caused by competing domestic funding priorities other than defence and security, particularly in the UK and increasingly in Poland since 2023. This effectively limited the scale of continued military assistance to Ukraine after the pre-existing stockpiles had been exhausted and there was a need to actively rearm. The trilateral's economic potential will also be very difficult to exploit without enabling Ukraine to end hostilities on favourable terms. Hence, the future of the trilateral will be primarily determined by the efforts of the upcoming Donald Trump administration to end the fighting in Ukraine.

References

- Biskup, Przemysław, Maria Piechowska, Marcin Terlikowski, Alexander Lanoszka, James Rogers, and Hanna Shelest. 2024. "The Trilateral Initiative: How Britain, Poland and Ukraine Can Shape a Post-War Europe." PISM – Council on Geostrategy – Ukrainian Prism. 2024. <https://pism.pl/publikacje/the-trilateral-initiative-how-britain-poland-and-ukraine-can-shape-a-post-war-europe>.
- "Fact Sheet on Efforts of Ukraine Defense Contact Group – National Armaments Directors." 2024. U.S. Department of Defense. 2024. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3897721/fact-sheet-on-efforts-of-ukraine-defense-contact-group-national-armaments-direc/>.
- Lorenz, Wojciech. 2024. "Bilateral Security Agreements with Ukraine – Opportunities and Challenges." Pism.pl. 2024. <https://pism.pl/publikacje/dwustronne-umowy-o-bezpieczenstwie-z-ukraina-szansy-i-wyzwania>.
- Office, Commonwealth. 2018. "UK/Poland: Treaty on Defence and Security Cooperation [TS No.3/2018]." GOV.UK. July 24, 2018. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ts-no32018-ukpoland-treaty-on-defence-and-security-cooperation>.
- Office, Development. 2020. "UK/Ukraine: Political, Free Trade and Strategic Partnership Agreement [CS Ukraine No.1/2020]." GOV.UK. November 9, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukukraine-political-free-trade-and-strategic-partnership-agreement-cs-ukraine-no12020>.
- Office, Development. 2023. "UK–Poland 2030 Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration on Foreign Policy, Security and Defence." GOV.UK. July 6, 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-poland-2030-strategic-partnership-joint-declaration-on-foreign-policy-security-and-defence/624441e3-7f06-4f18-88fc-ca2ca4f1036b>.
- Pifer, Steven. 2021. "Russia's Draft Agreements with NATO and the United States: Intended for Rejection?" Brookings. December 21, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russias-draft-agreements-with-nato-and-the-united-states-intended-for-rejection/>.
- "Polsko-Ukraińskie Porozumienie W Dziedzinie Bezpieczeństwa – Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów – Portal Gov.pl." 2023. Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów. 2023. <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/polsko-ukrainskie-porozumienie-w-dziedzinie-bezpieczenstwa>.
- Putin, Vladimir. 2021. "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." President of Russia. Kremlin. July 12, 2021. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.
- Szeligowski, Daniel. 2024. "UK Signs Security Agreement with Ukraine." Pism.pl. 2024. <https://www.pism.pl/publications/uk-signs-security-agreement-with-ukraine>.
- "UK-Ukraine Agreement on Security Co-Operation." 2024. GOV.UK. January 12, 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-ukraine-agreement-on-security-co-operation>.

17. Shared Values, Diverging Paths

British and American Strategy in the Russo-Ukrainian War

J. C. Ellis*

Abstract

The Anglo-American relationship, built on shared institutions, overlapping interests, and a history of cooperation, has become more complex as the war in Ukraine exposes differing strategies between the United Kingdom and the United States. This paper explores the distinct approaches of the UK and the US to the conflict, emphasizing how geopolitical, domestic political, and resource-driven considerations have shaped their responses. While both countries initially aligned in supporting Ukraine, differences emerged, particularly over the transfer of advanced weaponry and escalation tolerances. These divergences are not simply a result of idiosyncratic leadership but reflect deeper structural factors, including the UK's proximity to the conflict, its reliance on NATO, and its focus on the Russian threat, compared to the US's broader global commitments and strategic dilemmas. This paper argues that understanding these differences through a structural lens provides insights into how the Anglo-American relationship may evolve, particularly under future administrations.

Keywords: Anglo-American relationship, escalation risk management, structural considerations, strategic decision-making

Introduction

The Anglo-American relationship is defined by shared institutions and values, overlapping geopolitical interests, and a history of cooperation on the global stage. The British and Americans fought alongside each other in two major wars in the first half of the twentieth century, moved in lockstep

* J.C. Ellis is a doctoral candidate with the Centre for Geopolitics at the University of Cambridge. His research focuses on post-Cold War international history, European geopolitics, and Anglo-American strategy. He is a research associate at the Marathon Initiative and previously worked as a researcher at the U.S. National War College and the George C. Marshall Center.

throughout much of the Cold War—save for key disagreements over decolonization—and were critical partners in the construction of Europe’s post-Cold War security architecture. Despite being a regular target of derision, the concept of a “special relationship” is bolstered by a remarkable history of strategic harmony.

However, as the war in Ukraine demonstrates, symmetry between the two powers is not complete. Over the past three years, Britain and America have pursued distinct approaches to key questions related to the conflict. The United Kingdom has positioned itself as Western Europe’s foremost supporter of Ukraine. London is often the first to act in providing Kyiv with advanced weapon systems and has remained a steadfast advocate of its political objectives. By contrast, the United States has pursued a more cautious policy, often subordinating Ukraine’s battlefield needs to broader political imperatives or escalatory concerns.

This divergence is not merely a function of idiosyncratic differences between leaders or administrations but reflects deeper structural factors. The United Kingdom, by nature of its proximity to the conflict, dependence on NATO’s credibility for its own security, and fixation on the Russian military threat, has pursued its interests in ways that the United States, with its perch in the Western Hemisphere and multi-theatre commitments, would not. This paper begins by examining these divergences in Anglo-American strategy. It traces its roots to distinct geopolitical, domestic political, and resource-driven calculations. It argues that understanding differences in strategy through a structural lens provides a clearer view of why the two powers have diverged over Ukraine and how they may approach the war in the future.

Anglo-American Fissures

In the immediate aftermath of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, British and American leaders responded with echoing condemnations of Moscow’s aggression. Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared that “President Putin of Russia has unleashed war in our European continent” and warned against allowing Ukrainian freedom to be “snuffed out” (Johnson 2022). President Joe Biden similarly denounced Russia’s “brutal assault” and vowed that “Putin’s aggression... will end up costing Russia dearly—economically and strategically” (Biden 2022).

In the early months of the war, the two nations aligned closely in their military support for Ukraine. Both supplied critical anti-armour and anti-aircraft missiles and, by mid-year, coordinated the provision of multiple-launch rocket systems (UK Government 2022; Blinken 2022). At year's end, the US and UK were the largest contributors of military aid to Ukraine, underscoring their shared commitment to supporting Kyiv against Russian aggression (Bushnell et al. 2022).

Significant differences began to emerge in 2023, particularly over the transfer of advanced weaponry. The UK was the first NATO member to pledge Western battle tanks to Ukraine, announcing on 14 January its decision to send fourteen Challenger 2 tanks (Colchester & Hinshaw 2023). Whitehall's calculus was clear: equipping Ukraine with heavy armour would augment its offensive capabilities, allow it to recapture territory, and strengthen any future negotiating position. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak framed the move as vital for Ukraine to "press their advantage, win this war, and secure a lasting peace" (Sunak 2023).

By contrast, the United States initially hesitated to provide Abrams tanks, focusing instead on managing intra-NATO tensions, particularly Germany's reluctance to provide offensive weapons without American cover. Berlin's insistence that it would not "go alone" in providing tanks underscored the challenges Washington faced in maintaining alliance cohesion (Reuters 2023). Only after sustained diplomatic pressure did the US agree to send thirty-one Abrams tanks, facilitating Germany's approval of Leopard 2 transfers (Biden 2023).

This pattern of divergence continued in early 2023 over the issue of long-range missiles. At the Munich Security Conference, Prime Minister Sunak announced that the UK would be the first to send Kyiv long-range missiles. In doing so, he urged the West to adopt a "military strategy for Ukraine to gain a decisive advantage" (Sunak 2023). British officials viewed long-range weapons as crucial for degrading Russian forces before they reached the frontlines. London signalled a willingness to accept the attendant escalation risks, framing the decision as proportional to Moscow's targeting of civilian infrastructure. As one Whitehall official put it, "There is definitely a different risk tolerance among different countries. We're often in an earlier place" (DeYoung 2023). The United States, however, declined to provide similar systems for months, citing concerns about escalation and the need to conserve stockpiles for contingencies in other theatres (Austin and Milley 2022; McLeary 2023).

As the war entered its third year, this variance in escalation tolerances resurfaced regarding strikes inside Russian territory. In May, Ukraine called on NATO partners to permit strikes on Russian weapons depots and logistics hubs (Zelensky 2024). The UK was the first to support these strikes, with its foreign secretary affirming Ukraine's right to use British-supplied Storm Shadow missiles for operations deeper into Russian territory (Hunder 2024).

However, implementing this policy required US approval due to its control over key targeting inputs. American officials resisted loosening restrictions throughout the summer and autumn, citing risks of escalation and potential divisions within the alliance. In September, during a bilateral meeting at the White House, Sunak urged Biden to approve Storm Shadow strikes deeper into Russia but failed to secure an agreement (Cursino 2024). Persistent lobbying by UK officials, allied governments, and congressional leaders eventually bore fruit in November, when the Biden administration authorised US-supplied long-range missile strikes inside Russian territory (Entous 2024).

These episodes reveal two overarching themes. The first is a subtle but perceptible divergence in strategic aims. Throughout the conflict, British strategy has prioritised battlefield gains and the consolidation of Ukraine's military position. Its provision of Western tanks and advanced missile capabilities, coupled with support for strikes inside Russia, was designed to shift momentum in the conflict and open pathways for a more advantageous settlement. The United States, on the other hand, frequently subordinated Ukraine's military needs to broader political and diplomatic imperatives. America's provision of military aid was often justified by the need to stave off a collapse in Ukrainian lines, and not necessarily the reacquisition of its territory. When the provision of advanced weapon systems risked fracturing the Western coalition or framing the United States as escalating the conflict, the Americans opted for a more gradual approach.

The second is a pronounced difference in risk tolerance toward Russian escalation. While the British were reticent to allow Moscow to dictate the terms of Western support, the Americans were far more cautious about crossing what they perceived as Russia's red lines. Where the UK was able to act independently of the US, such as with the transfer of tanks, it assumed a greater proportion of the escalation risks. Where American enablers were required, London applied political pressure on Washington to adopt a more forward-leaning posture.

Structural Drivers of Strategic Divergences

Attributing divergences between American and British policies to idiosyncratic aspects of particular leaders, as some have suggested, misses the broader geopolitical, electoral, and material considerations shaping both states' strategies. It is not simply that British leaders aspire to the mantle of Churchill, or that President Biden has a personal "obsession with restraining front-line allies" (Grygiel 2024). Rather, the variances between these close allies are best understood as a product of distinct structural forces.

Geopolitical Considerations

The United States' hesitancy to adopt a forward posture on arming Ukraine stems partly from its leadership role within NATO and its wider positioning in the international system. As the ordering power within NATO, Washington must navigate diverse risk tolerances among its members when shaping its Ukraine policy. Not all allies share the same appetite for confronting Russia. Germany, as previously illustrated, has at times signalled discomfort with the ratcheting up of tensions between NATO and Russia (Dempsey 2022). Meanwhile, some Central and Eastern European states with complex historical and economic ties to Moscow harbour deep scepticism about NATO's growing involvement in the war (Jenkins 2023). For the Americans, adopting a more aggressive posture would run the risk of fracturing the alliance, thereby weakening the systems and structures undergirding the stability of the rest of Europe.

Moreover, the US has a vested interest in preventing any direct NATO-Russia confrontation. Washington's two primary objectives in Ukraine are preventing a Russian victory and preserving Kyiv's ability to resist aggression. These do not necessarily comport with pursuing maximalist goals – such as rapid Ukrainian territorial gains – especially if those gains are likely to provoke a horizontal or vertical escalation in the conflict. American policymakers also recognise that escalation in Ukraine could undermine US geostrategic interests elsewhere. A direct Russian attack on a NATO member in response to events in Ukraine would trigger Article V commitments, requiring a massive deployment of American military power to Europe. Given competing priorities, particularly in the Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis China, the US seeks to avoid committing significant resources to a theatre it views as secondary to global geopolitical competition.

The UK's assertive strategy toward Ukraine reflects its more circumscribed regional and global role. Unlike the United States, Britain is not constrained by the responsibilities of leading NATO and can pursue a forward posture to shape alliance policy indirectly. By acting decisively to arm Ukraine, the UK aims to set a precedent for other member states, encouraging like-minded partners to follow its lead and gradually shifting NATO's collective stance.

Britain also has a more direct stake in Ukraine's success. While the US benefits from a degree of insulation from European disorder – due to its geographic separation by the Atlantic – the UK is deeply reliant on NATO's credibility to maintain stability in its home region. A Ukrainian defeat would not only undermine NATO's effectiveness but could embolden further Russian aggression against key British interests in the Baltic, Nordic, and Arctic regions. The UK's strategy thus has a dual geopolitical purpose: weakening Russia while reinforcing NATO's standing. Moreover, Britain's willingness to take on greater risks is enabled by its reliance on the US security backstop, which provides a measure of protection against potential retaliation from Russia. The US, on the other hand, has no higher power to appeal to for security.

Domestic Political Calculations

America's reluctance to escalate the conflict in Ukraine is also shaped by domestic political considerations, particularly in the context of the 2024 presidential election. During the campaign, the Biden administration was cautious about taking risks that could fuel accusations from the Trump campaign that Biden was fomenting international chaos. During the heat of the presidential campaign, the administration was acutely aware that any misstep could weaken Biden's standing in the election, and it took precautions against any dramatic shifts in the military situation. The timing of certain policy shifts also illustrates how electoral pressures influence America's strategy. For example, Biden's decision to allow Ukrainian strikes against Russian targets came just days after Trump's election. This shift suggests that, once the immediate electoral pressures had eased, the administration had greater room to support Ukraine assertively.

In the UK, electoral calculations played a significant role in shaping the country's energetic approach toward Ukraine. For the Conservative Party, strong support for Ukraine became an essential component of their political strategy, helping successive prime ministers – Johnson, Truss, and

Sunak – project an image of international statesmanship. This was particularly important for the Tories, who had faced significant challenges over domestic issues and were eager to bolster their reputation on the global stage. By positioning themselves as staunch supporters of Ukraine, the Conservative Party tried to appeal to a domestic electorate that valued strong leadership in foreign affairs. Demonstrating such support not only helped strengthen their domestic standing but also provided a counter-narrative to their reputation for economic mismanagement.

The British public's widespread solidarity with Ukraine reinforced the political logic driving British strategy. Thus far, the British public has welcomed over 240,000 Ukrainian refugees, the largest in Western Europe, and has given the second-highest approval rating for President Zelensky outside of Ukraine (UN 2024; Fagan 2024). This public backing made it politically advantageous for the government to play up its support for Kyiv. Notably, even under Labour leadership, there has been significant continuity in the UK's approach to Ukraine. This underscores the broader political and electoral advantages of supporting Ukraine, with both major political parties eager to align with public sentiment and ensure their standing on the international stage.

Military Resource Constraints

The aminating challenge for American strategists is the need to manage deterrence across three principal theatres: Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific. The imperative to balance commitments accentuates the risks of military overstretch and has propelled calls to economise America's geopolitical footprint to prioritise strategic competition with China (Mitchell et al. 2023). Within this framework of great power competition, Europe is widely seen as a secondary theatre. Chinese power continues to exert a stronger gravitation pull on American policymakers, while strategic engagement in Asia is generally viewed as the precondition for American economic dynamism in the 21st century (Colby 2022). Resource constraints were particularly evident in America's approach to providing Ukraine with air defence systems and medium-to-long-range strike capabilities – systems critical for Ukraine's defence but also central to deterring threats in Asia and the Middle East (Jones 2023). While the US has been Ukraine's largest military aid provider, its hesitancy to transfer these systems illustrates how America's higher-order military priorities shape its approach to supporting Kyiv.

Britain's assertive posture toward arming Ukraine is rooted in its limited geopolitical footprint and prioritisation of the Russian threat above all other challenges. Despite the global nature of British interests, it is not a key deterrence provider in any region outside the European continent. The UK's willingness to expend its capabilities in Ukraine reflects its understanding that Ukraine is the front line in defending the vital interests that British military resources are designed to protect. The prime minister emphasised this point in February 2024, asking, "What is the purpose of these stockpiles? If the weapons are degrading Russian armed forces, that is increasing our security" (DeYoung 2023).

While the UK does face its own resource constraints, these stem less from competing geopolitical demands than from the dilapidated state of its military-industrial base. Decades of curtailed defence spending and insufficient investment in arms production are the principal challenges facing planners in Whitehall as it designs its military aid policies (Wallace 2021).

Prospects for US and UK Strategy

Looking ahead, the future of US and UK strategy towards Ukraine is likely to be shaped by continuity rather than radical departure. This is not to imply that changes in the external environment cannot affect significant strategic developments or that analysts should adopt an overly deterministic lens to the conflict. Rather it suggests the foundations of both countries' strategies are rooted in durable calculations about interests and trade-offs. Personalistic factors, such as Trump's return to the White House, can gradually alter structural considerations; however, it would be hasty to assume that they will produce immediate and drastic changes to the overall trajectory.

For a future Trump administration, preventing a Russian strategic victory that leaves Ukraine at risk of collapse and preserving NATO's military credibility will remain paramount to US interests, as a breakdown in these areas would severely undermine American influence in Europe. Despite some of President Trump's rhetoric, the US has no rational interest in facilitating a Russian victory or destroying the very security architecture it helped create. Moreover, the gradual prioritisation of East Asia is consistent with the past three US administrations and will be facilitated through intensified efforts toward European burden-sharing.

Material constraints – exacerbated by ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and the challenge posed by China – make it unlikely that a Trump administration will adopt a strategy of radical intensification of its support for Ukraine to coerce the Russians to the negotiating table, as some have suggested (Ryan 2024). Rather, American diplomatic efforts will likely focus on achieving a negotiated settlement that freezes the line of conflict, allows Ukraine to maintain at least partial territorial and political integrity, and bolsters deterrence along NATO's eastern flank. Such objectives are broadly consistent with the strategic calculations underpinning Biden's approach. Electoral politics are likely to play a secondary role in the development of strategy, as Trump is barred from pursuing a third term in office. However, division over Ukraine in the Republican party is likely to hamstring the passage of additional multi-billion-dollar aid packages through Congress.

Barring any dramatic changes in the battlefield dynamic, British strategy will also likely continue on its current trajectory. Britain's fundamental interest in preventing a Russian victory and maintaining NATO's credibility remains unchanged. Consequently, London is likely to continue its forward-leaning approach, providing military support to Ukraine and seeking to help fill any leadership void left by the US within NATO. The most salient structural challenge for the UK's current strategy will be its dwindling defence resources. Without sufficient military capacity to independently stimulate Ukrainian gains, the UK will likely focus on enhancing coordination with European partners and improving its defence industrial policy to mitigate its limitations.

Viewed together, the US and UK strategies are likely to remain complementary despite persistent differences in approach. These differences, rooted in distinct geopolitical priorities and structural constraints, are unlikely to provoke a rupture in the bilateral relationship. Rather, they highlight the nuanced ways in which these close allies pursue distinct grand strategic objectives while working together toward complementary goals.

References

- Biden, Joseph. 2022. "Remarks by President Biden on Russia's Unprovoked and Unjustified Attack on Ukraine." *The White House*, February 2024. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/24/remarks-by-president-biden-on-russias-unprovoked-and-unjustified-attack-on-ukraine/>
- Blinken, Anthony J. 2022. "\$100 Million in Additional U.S. Security Assistance for Ukraine." *US State Department*, April 5. <https://www.state.gov/100-million-in-additional-u-s-security-assistance-for-ukraine/>.
- Bushnell, Katelyn, et al. 2022. "Ukraine Support Tracker." *Kiel Institute for the World Economy*, Accessed December 31. <https://web.archive.org/web/20221231033253/https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>
- Colby, Elbridge. 2022. *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*. Yale University Press.
- Colchester, Max and Drew Hinshaw. 2023. "U.K. Is First Country to Agree to Send Western Battle Tanks to Ukraine." *Wall Street Journal*, January 14. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-k-becomes-first-country-to-pledge-western-battle-tanks-to-ukraine-11673712045>
- Cursino, Malu. 2024. "No new pledge on Ukraine missiles after Starmer-Biden talks." *BBC News*, September 14. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cnvdyd4nnzro>
- Dempsey, Judy. 2022. "Why Germany Is Undermining NATO Unity on Russia." *Carnegie Europe*, January 26. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/01/why-germany-is-undermining-nato-unity-on-russia?lang=en>
- DeYoung, Karen. 2023. "Britain prepares to send long-range missiles to Ukraine." *The Washington Post*, May 9. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/05/08/britain-ukraine-long-range-missile/>
- Entous, Adam, et al. 2024. "Biden Allows Ukraine to Strike Russia with Long-Range U.S. Missiles." *The New York Times*, November 17. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/17/us/politics/biden-ukraine-russia-atacms-missiles.html>
- Fagan, Moira, et al. 2024. "Confidence in Zelenskyy and support for Ukraine." *Pew Research Center*, July 2. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/07/02/confidence-in-zelenskyy-and-support-for-ukraine/>
- Faulconbridge, Guy. 2022. "Putin warns United States against supplying Ukraine longer range missiles." *Reuters*, June 5. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-warns-west-russia-will-strike-harder-if-longer-range-missiles-supplied-2022-06-05/>
- Grygiel, Jakub. 2024. "Biden's Escalation Fears Have Dangerous Consequences." *Foreign Policy*, May 9. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/05/09/putin-nuclear-russia-biden-ukraine-israel-iran-war-escalation-retaliation-missiles/>
- Hunder, Max. 2024. "Britain's Cameron, in Kyiv, promises Ukraine aid for 'as long as it takes.'" *Reuters*, May 3. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britains-cameron-kyiv-promises-ukraine-aid-as-long-it-takes-2024-05-02/#:~:text=%22Ukraine%20has%20that%20right.,Reuters%20outside%20St.%20Michael's%20Cathedral.>

- Jenkins, Brian Michael. 2023. "Consequences of the War in Ukraine: NATO's Future." *RAND*, March 2. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/03/consequences-of-the-war-in-ukraine-natos-future.html>
- Johnson, Boris. 2022. "Prime Minister's address to the nation on the Russian invasion of Ukraine." *Prime Minister's Office*, February 24. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-address-to-the-nation-on-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-24-february-2022>
- Jones, Seth. 2023. "America's Looming Munitions Crisis." *Foreign Affairs*, March 31. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-looming-munitions-crisis>
- Lloyd, Austin and Mark A. Milley. 2022. "Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army General Mark A. Milley Hold a Press Conference." *US Department of Defense*, July 20. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3100301/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-and-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-sta/>
- McLeary, Paul. 2023. "U.S. tells Ukraine it won't send long-range missiles because it has few to spare." *Politico*, February 13. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/02/13/u-s-wont-send-long-range-missiles-ukraine-00082652>
- Mitchell, Wess, et al. 2023. "Getting Strategic Deprioritization Right." *The Marathon Initiative*, June 26. https://themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Marathon-Initiative_Getting-Strategic-Deprioritization-Right96.pdf
- "Remarks by President Biden on Continued Support for Ukraine." 2023. The White House. January 25. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/01/25/remarks-by-president-biden-on-continued-support-for-ukraine/>
- Reuters. 2023. "Scholz: Berlin Will Not Go It Alone as Pressure Mounts to Supply Kyiv Tanks." *Voice of America*, January 9. <https://www.voanews.com/a/scholz-berlin-will-not-go-it-alone-as-pressure-mounts-to-supply-kyiv-tanks-/6911594.html>
- Ryan, Mick. 2024. "Trump may surprise us on the Ukraine war." *Lowly Institute*, August. <https://interactives.lowlyinstitute.org/features/2024-us-presidential-election/donald-trump/article/trump-and-ukraine/>
- Sunak, Rishi. 2023. "PM speech at Munich Security Conference." *Prime Minister's Office*, February 18. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-at-munich-security-conference-18-february-2023>
- UK Government. 2022. "UK to bolster defensive aid to Ukraine with new £100m package." *Ministry of Defense*, April 8. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-bolster-defensive-aid-to-ukraine-with-new-100m-package>
- "UK to give more multiple launch rocket systems and guided missiles to Ukraine." *Ministry of Defense*, August 11. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-give-more-multiple-launch-rocket-systems-and-guided-missiles-to-ukraine>
- UN. 2024. "Ukraine: Over 6 Million Refugees Spread Across Europe." *United Nations*, September 11. <https://unric.org/en/ukraine-over-6-million-refugees-spread-across-europe/>

- Wallace, Ben. 2021. "Defence and Security Industrial Strategy." *UK Government*, March. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60590e988fa8f545d879f0aa/Defence_and_Security_Industrial_Strategy_-_FINAL.pdf
- "We're accelerating our support to Ukraine..." 2023. X, January 16. <https://x.com/RishiSunak/status/1615040865398816789>
- Zelensky, Volodymyr. 2024. "Read a Transcript of Volodymyr Zelensky's Interview With The Times." *The New York Times*, May 21. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/21/world/europe/zelensky-interview-times-transcript.html>

18. Enforcing the Sanctions against Russia

The Case of Canada

Dr. Anton Minkov

Mitchell Clarke*

Abstract

Canadian or foreign-owned shell companies continue to facilitate, wittingly or unwittingly, the transfer of sensitive components originating from the United States or from other countries to Russia. This is due, among other things, to the weaknesses in the Special Economic Measures Act (SEMA) regime, the sheer volume and nature of trade between Canada and the United States, the lack of enforcement, the complexity of trading relationships and the ease of setting up shell companies in Canada. Data is lacking about the volume of sanctions evasion in Canada; however, Canada is not unique and other western nations are also being exploited by Russian networks. Despite recent improvements to Canadian legislation to combat sanctions evasion, more needs to be done to prevent the Russian military-industrial complex (RMIC) from accessing sensitive components for the war in Ukraine.

Keywords: Russian sanctions, RMIC, Canada sanctions regime, sanction evasion

Introduction

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 has united most Western countries in their efforts to assist Ukraine through military and financial aid as well as preventing the Russian military-industrial complex (RMIC) from keeping the war machine going. Despite these efforts, the RMIC was able to maintain and in many cases increase production. For example, in 2023, according to official Russian data, production of ships and aircraft rose by 67 percent from the previous year, motor vehicles increased

* Defence Research and Development Canada, Centre for Operational Research and Analysis

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not represent, or otherwise reflect, any official opinion or position of the Government of Canada, or any of its departments and agencies.

by 46 percent, electronics by 43 percent, and “other goods” (possibly including ammunition) by 23 percent (“The dynamics of industrial production in July 2023” 2023). Another analyst, also citing official Russian data, states that “more than fivefold growth was recorded in communications equipment, means of destruction (missiles), electronic warfare and reconnaissance equipment; threefold growth in armoured armaments, twofold growth in aviation equipment, and twofold growth in unmanned aerial vehicles.” (Inozemtsev 2024). A significant challenge and vulnerability for the RMIC is its extensive dependence on Western countries sourced components for its high-end systems, such as missiles and drones. Recognising this weakness, the United States (US), Canada, the European Union, the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and other countries have imposed 19,535 sanctions on Russia since the beginning of the war (“Russian Sanctions Dashboard” 2024). Nevertheless, in the first 9 months of 2023, Russia imported military-grade chipsets from leading US and European manufacturers worth one billion USD (“Most of Russia’s War Chips Are Made by US and European Companies” 2024). Therefore, sanctions enforcement is one of the most important tools enabling Ukrainian victory.

In Canada, the sanctions regime preventing key dual-use “high-priority” goods¹ (“High Priority Items List Subject to Export Controls” 2023) from being sent to Russia is housed in two key statutes. These are the Special Economic Measures Act (SEMA) (2024) and the Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act (JVCFOA) (2024). Currently, Canada has sanctioned over 1,400 Russian individuals and 650 companies and entities under SEMA and 34 individuals under JVCFOA (“Consolidated Canadian Autonomous Sanctions List” 2024). Yet, media (McGregor 2023; Makuch and Woloshyn 2024), research reports (Bilousova et al. 2024) and Russian customs data² indicate that Canadian or foreign-owned shell companies, wittingly or unwittingly, continue to facilitate the transfer of sensitive components originating from the US or from other countries to Russia.

The objectives of this paper are to explore what makes Canada an expedient jurisdiction for trafficking of export-controlled goods to Russia, what factors in Canada prevent vigorous sanctions enforcement, and to recommend how to make sanctions against Russia more effective in order to tip the scales in favour of Ukraine.

¹ High-priority export-controlled items refer to dual-use products and materials that are essential for manufacturing weaponry like missiles, drones, and tanks by Russia.

² Based on a 2023 dataset available to the authors.

Weaknesses of the SEMA regime

The responsibilities for Canadian sanctions are divided among several agencies and departments. Global Affairs Canada (GAC) is responsible for the overall administration of SEMA and maintaining the sanctions list, while the monitoring function is undertaken by two agencies: Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) for exports, and the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre (FINTRAC) for financial flows. Sanctions evasion investigations and the recommendation of criminal penalties are conducted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) (“Update on the reporting of frozen assets under the Special Economic Measures Act” 2024).

By contrast, the US sanctions regime is centrally coordinated by the US Treasury Department. It coordinates and integrates four major functions: targeting, implementation, monitoring and enforcement. In this sanctions regime, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) maintains a list of sanctioned individuals and entities, based on in-house economic intelligence from two agencies: the Office of Intelligence and Analysis (OIA), and the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FINCEN), which integrates intelligence from the US financial sector (Saunders 2022, 4).

In Canada, the need to designate individuals and entities to the sanctions list implies that it needs to have some sort of sanctions targeting function. However, GAC does not have such a capability, nor do the two Canadian intelligence agencies – Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and Communications Security Establishment (CSE), as they are not listed in the SEMA. In reality, Canada compiles its sanctions list by using information provided by our allies, which means the list is missing important Canadian context (Saunders 2022, 8). In terms of implementation, again, there is a big difference between Canada and the US. Canadian sanctions list includes only a name and a birthdate, while OFAC has, in addition, addresses, aliases and even ID numbers. The lack of information in Canada makes it difficult for the financial institutions to identify sanctioned individuals.

Another important factor militating against SEMA’s effectiveness is the amount of resources available to enforce it. For example, the number of people responsible for analysis of trade data at CBSA is no more than 20, while in the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS), part of the US Department of Commerce and responsible for export controls, that number is in the hundreds.³ Furthermore, BIS’ agents not only monitor and investigate possible

³ Authors’ conversation with a BIS representative.

sanctions evasion, but also have the power to arrest individuals responsible for the latter, which in Canada is given to RCMP under the SEMA regime. It is not clear, moreover, how much resources RCMP can dedicate to fulfil that function.

Recent amendments to the FINTRAC mandate allow for an enhanced monitoring capacity related to sanctions evasion, as well as new self-reporting requirements for Canadian industry when undertaking financial transactions that could involve sanctions evasion (Sosnow and Little 2024). Based on the new amendments, FINTRAC has issued guidance to the Canadian financial institutions to start reporting suspicious transactions related to sanctions evasion (“Special Bulletin on financial activity associated with suspected sanctions evasion” 2024). These self-reporting requirements are reinforced by increased penalties up to \$2 million or 5 years’ imprisonment (Aboud and Dillon 2024). However, the Russian customs dataset reveals that many of the transactions listed in it do not meet FINTRAC’s \$10,000 threshold and thus are unlikely to be reported and investigated. Furthermore, FINTRAC’s analytical unit is not currently in possession of the dataset, which reveals the ad hoc nature of information sharing among the agencies responsible for implementing SEMA.

In addition to FINTRAC, the Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions (OSFI) is another Canadian agency that collects financial information and regulates Canadian and foreign financial institutions with offices in the country. Potentially, it could also play a role in the SEMA regime by providing information to GAC. Despite its focus, OSFI is not listed in SEMA and thus not mandated to share information with GAC (Saunders 2022).

A positive development may be seen in the future creation of the Canada Financial Crimes Agency (CFCA), which is going to be Canada’s lead enforcement agency against financial crime. First announced in 2022, the 2024 Budget allocates \$1.7 million over two years to the Department of Finance to finalize the design and legal framework of the CFCA (Saunders 2022). It is not clear, however, how long it will take for the CFCA to be stood up, and if its creation will have any effect on decreasing Russia’s ability to illegally procure critical technology from Canada.

Trade volume between Canada and the United States

A major facilitating factor for dual-use goods re-export through Canadian channels is Canada's close proximity to the US. The latter is Canada's largest trading partner, accounting for 77 percent of Canadian trade exports and 63 percent of the imports in 2023 ("State of Trade 2024: Supply chains" 2024).

Some CAD 484 billion worth of goods was imported into Canada across the Canada-US land border in 2023. Items identified on the Common high-priority list (CHPL), including semiconductors, drone parts, GPS and antenna components accounted for CAD 8.5 billion (or 2.1 percent of all imports from the US) in 2023 ("Trade Data Online" 2024).⁴ The high volume of CHPL components being imported into Canada from the United States in a tariff-free regime creates conditions ripe for exploitation by foreign and domestic actors. Russia can then employ established tactics of sanctions evasion used since the time of the Soviet Union and by other heavily sanctioned states, such as Iran and North Korea. For example, much as today, a CIA report from 1977 listed the use of transit countries in Western Europe, dummy corporations, and false shipping documentation as the means of the USSR's acquisition of controlled technologies ("The Illegal Acquisition by the USSR and PRC of Western Technology and Equipment" 1977). Russia also emulates Iran, which employs front companies to proliferate, almost always located in Hong Kong or UAE, with some entities located in India, Malaysia and Singapore. As soon as some of these entities are sanctioned, others are set up in a near-endless cycle requiring constant vigilance (Keatinge 2023). Just recently, on October 30, the US sanctioned a number of companies in India, Malaysia, Singapore, and UAE facilitating Sanctions evasion for Russia's benefit ("New Measures Targeting Third-Country Enablers Supporting Russia's Military-Industrial Base" 2024).

Complexity of Trade

There are six major strategies of sanctions evasion identified by FINTRAC currently used by Russia in Canada and the United States – use of intermediary jurisdictions to mask the true nature of trade transactions; evasion of import and export controls; use of opaque corporate structures in

⁴ Trade statistics for Tiers 1 to 4 of CHPL Harmonized system (HS) codes were drawn from the ISED trade database.

transactions; non-resident banking, where Canadian banks are used as a transit point for illegitimate financial flows; use of proxies or enablers of illicit transactions; and finally, trade facilitated with virtual currencies (Bitcoin, Ethereum, etc.), or alternative financial channels (“Special Bulletin on financial activity associated with suspected sanctions evasion” 2024; “Department of Justice, Department of the Treasury, and Department of Justice Tri-Seal Compliance Notice” 2024).

From the list above, the most important factor that facilitates Russian sanctions evasion in Canada is the complexity of trade networks involved with transactions. Trade in dual-use goods is sent through third-party countries or by transshipment through multiple countries. This method effectively masks the final export destination (“Special Bulletin on financial activity associated with suspected sanctions evasion” 2024). China and Hong Kong are the most active third-party countries as 78 percent of battlefield goods destined to Russia go through them (Bilousova et al. 2024). Other countries identified as among the most active intermediary jurisdictions for dual-use exports that ultimately reach Russia are Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (states of the former Soviet Union) (“Special Bulletin on financial activity associated with suspected sanctions evasion” 2024). Even the tiny nation of Gabon was used in 2023 to transfer USD 1.5 billion worth of aircraft parts to Russia (“Gabonese Firm Supplied \$1.5 Bln in Aircraft Parts to Russia in 2023” 2024).

Foreign-owned Shell Companies in Canada

In addition to routing export-controlled goods through third countries, another factor that makes Canada attractive to Russian networks is the ease of setting up shell companies and the opacity of their corporate structure. Canada was identified in the 2016 Panama Papers as a key jurisdiction to set up anonymous shell companies (Hutchins 2016). It takes only a few days to set up a federal shell company in Canada under the *Canada Business Corporations Act* (CBCA) (1985). As in the case of SEMA, Canadian enforcement is lacking compared to the US and other Western nations. Despite the revelations in the Panama Papers, no criminal cases have been laid against Canadian shell corporations (Dubinsky and Zalac 2021).

Especially worrisome are cases where Canadian shell companies are set up but are not owned by Canadians, i.e., set up by third-country citizens,

including Russian citizens, as a front. For example, based on open-source information, the authors have identified a Canadian company, which has exported electronics directly to Russia, or through a company in Dubai, UAE, operating from a hotel room (according to its address). The company's Russian connection is evident by a simple observation of its website, where its location map was clearly lifted from the Russian version of Google Maps. A Google search revealed that its CEO is a Russian citizen with links to the RMIC and is wanted in Europe for exporting millions of electronics to Russia.

Following a global push in other countries to set up shell-company ownership registries, Canada is also making efforts to reform the law and increase transparency. Bill C-42 introduced legislation for the federal shell-company disclosure and set up of registry, which passed into law in November 2023 ("CBCA businesses must soon start to file information on individuals with significant control" 2023). As of January 2024, CBCA corporations (those incorporated federally) must start to file information on "individuals with significant control," i.e., individuals who control the shell company ("Individuals with significant control" 2024). However, many shell-companies are registered as provincial corporations and are subject to provincial law; thus, they are exempt from ownership disclosures under CBCA.

Is Canada's Case Unique?

In reality, Canada is only one of several Western countries targeted by Russian networks. For example, 59 percent of western-source parts found in Russian missiles used in Ukraine come from reputable US companies, such as Analog, Texas Instruments, AMD and Intel (Baker and Krasnolutska 2024). Thousands of European companies have also continued to supply Russia using legislation loopholes, third-party countries and subsidiaries ("European Companies Sidestep Sanctions: US Criticism Fails to Deter Business as Usual with Russia" 2024). Like in Canada, European sanctions against Russian are similar to those of the US but also suffer from considerable deficiencies ("European Companies Sidestep Sanctions: US Criticism Fails to Deter Business as Usual with Russia" 2024). A Moody's investigation showed that there are 46 thousand companies in the European Union (EU) with at least 40 percent Russian ownership – the largest number based in the Czech Republic (12,480), followed by Bulgaria (9,581), Germany (4,296),

Latvia (3,338) and Italy (2,539) (“EU reporting requirements for outgoing Russian-owned transactions: Moody’s identifies key entities and countries” 2024).

Sanctions Enforcement in Canada Not at Same Scale as Other Countries

In the US and European jurisdictions, active sanctions enforcement is a top priority. In the US, from March 2022 to March 2023, the Department of Justice (DOJ) has seized USD 700 million in assets and has charged 70 individuals and 5 corporations (“FACT SHEET: Supporting Ukraine and Imposing Accountability for Russia’s Invasion” 2024). In Lithuania, to take one example from Europe, there are over 50 ongoing investigations related to sanctions evasion (“Lithuania – more than 50 currently-ongoing sanctions investigations” 2024). Unlike these jurisdictions, investigations under Canada’s sanctions regime operate on a smaller scale, most likely due to staffing inadequacies (Makuch and Woloshyn 2024). So far, in 2024, CBSA has detained 70 shipments for examination and has prevented the export of close to \$1 million of goods (Makuch and Woloshyn 2024). However, only \$50,000 of goods were seized due to sanctions violations, and no one has been charged. The requirement of private industry self-reporting can create situations where companies may unwittingly complete transactions involving high-priority dual-use items that end up in Russia (“Report suspected sanctions evasion” 2024). This may stem from a lack of awareness among Canadian companies, or because goods’ final destinations are masked through third-party countries before ending up as key RMIC inputs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite not having a full picture of the extent of Russian sanctions evasion in Canada, and while it may comparatively be at a much smaller scale than in the US and other western countries, it is clear that Canada is being exploited by Russian networks to gain access to dual-use goods needed by the RMIC.

The main reason is the divided responsibilities of Canada’s sanctions monitoring and enforcement regime, which creates a patchwork dynamic, where separate institutional siloes are constrained in their information

sharing. In the past, this has prevented a unified approach to the enforcement of sanctions. Having tariff-free access to the US market, the complexity of global trade, and the ease of setting up shell corporation in Canada are also facilitating factors.

Despite recent improvements to Canadian legislation to counteract sanctions evasion, more needs to be done to prevent the RMIC from accessing goods of Canadian origins or being assisted by Canadian individuals or companies to support the war in Ukraine. For example, the creation of a dedicated sanctions targeting unit in GAC, or enhancing the mandate of CSIS and CSE by listing them in SEMA would help situate the latter in the Canadian context. Investing more resources in monitoring and enforcing of sanctions in the other responsible agencies, such as FINTRAC, CBSA and RCMP, is also likely to make a significant difference. A centralized approach, as that in the US, is also preferable to effectively combat sanctions evasion.

References

- Baker, Stephanie, and Krasnolutska, Daryna. "Russian Missiles, American Chips." *Bloomberg*, October 2, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2024-russian-missiles-us-tech-ukraine/?leadSource=verify%20wall>.
- Bilousova, Olena, Benjamin Hilgenstock, Elina Ribakova, Nataliia Shapoval, Anna Vlasyuk, and Vladyslav Vlasiuk. "Challenges of Export Controls Enforcement." January 2024, <https://kse.ua/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Challenges-of-Export-Controls-Enforcement.pdf>.
- "Canada Business Corporations Act (1985)". Government of Canada <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-44/INDEX.HTML>.
- "CBCA businesses must soon start to file information on individuals with significant control." Innovation, Science and Economic Development (ISED) Canada. October 12, 2023. <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/corporations-canada/en/cbca-businesses-must-soon-start-file-information-individuals-significant-control>.
- "Consolidated Canadian Autonomous Sanctions List." Government of Canada. last updated on September 17, 2024. https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/international_relations-relations_internationales/sanctions/consolidated-consolide.aspx?lang=eng.
- "Department of Justice, Department of the Treasury, and Department of Justice Tri-Seal Compliance Notice." US Department of Commerce. March 2, 2023. <https://www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/documents/enforcement/3240-tri-seal-compliance-note/file>.
- Dillon, Emilie, and Aboud, Malcom. "Budget 2024 proposes new reforms to combat financial crime in Canada." *Osler LLP*, April 18, 2024. <https://www.osler.com/en/insights/blogs/risk/budget-2024-proposes-new-reforms-to-combat-financial-crime-in-canada/>.
- Dubinsky, Zach, and Zalach, Frederic. "CRA has found 35 cases of tax dodging in the Panama Papers leak, 5 years later." *CBC News*, 3 April 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/cra-panama-papers-audits-5-years-1.5974690>.
- "EU reporting requirements for outgoing Russian-owned transactions: Moody's identifies key entities and countries." *Moody's*, August 19, 2024. <https://www.moody's.com/web/en/us/kyc/resources/insights/eu-reporting-requirements-for-outgoing-russian-owned-transactions-moodys-identifies-key-entities-and-countries.html>.
- "European Companies Sidestep Sanctions: US Criticism Fails to Deter Business as Usual with Russia." *Kyiv Post*, October 2, 2024. <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/39921>.
- "FACT SHEET: Supporting Ukraine and Imposing Accountability for Russia's Invasion." Undated. Department of Justice. Retrieved 2024. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/media/1339326/dl?inline>.
- "Gabonese Firm Supplied \$1.5 Bln in Aircraft Parts to Russia in 2023." *Moscow Times*, March 28, 2024. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/03/28/gabonese-firm-supplied-15-bln-in-aircraft-parts-to-russia-in-2023-a84667>.
- "High priority items list subject to export controls." Government of Canada. September 26, 2023. <https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/>

- international_relations-relations_internationales/sanctions/2023-09-26-russia-items-list-articles.aspx?lang=eng.
- Hutchins, Aaron. "How easy is it to buy a secret shell company in Canada? Very." *MacLean's*. April 9, 2016. <https://macleans.ca/news/canada/how-easy-is-it-to-buy-a-secret-shell-company-in-canada-very/>.
- "Individuals with significant control." Innovation, Science and Economic Development (ISED) Canada. January 22, 2024. https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/corporations-canada/en/individuals-significant-control?utm_campaign=ised-isde-cc-isc-23-24&utm_medium=link&utm_source=notice.
- Inozemtsev, Vladislav. "Another year of crisis for Russia's military-industrial complex?" *Riddle*, January 17, 2024. <https://ridl.io/ru/ochednoj-god-krizisa-ros-sijskogo-vpk/>.
- "Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act (Sergei Magnitsky Law)." Government of Canada. October 14, 2024. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/j-2.3/index.html>.
- Keatinge, Tom. "Developing Bad Habits: What Russia Might Learn from Iran's Sanctions Evasion." Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) occasional papers. June 3, 2023. <https://static.rusi.org/developing-bad-habits-what-russia-might-learn-from-irans-sanctions-evasion.pdf>.
- "Lithuania - more than 50 currently-ongoing sanctions investigations." Duane Morris LLP. *Lexology*, August 14, 2024, <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=1b9dbe4c-b4d5-4636-af30-6c412de01333>.
- Makuch, Ben, and Woloshyn, Roxanna. "Canada made it illegal to ship microelectronics to Russia. So why isn't the law being enforced?" *CBC News*, October 3, 2024. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/microelectronics-russia-canada-1.7338853>.
- Makuch, Ben, and Woloshyn, Roxanna. "Why a Canadian address showed up on \$80M in war-goods shipments to Russia." *CBC News*, June 26, 2024. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/russian-sanctions-canada-equipment-china-1.7246038>.
- McGregor, Janyce. "U.S. sanctioned 2 Montreal companies for supporting Russian 'war effort.'" *CBC News*, March 6, 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/montreal-companies-russia-us-export-restrictions-1.6769094>.
- "Most of Russia's War Chips Are Made by US and European Companies." *Bloomberg*, 23 January, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-25/russia-s-war-machine-powered-by-chips-from-intel-amd-infineon-stm>.
- "New Measures Targeting Third-Country Enablers Supporting Russia's Military-Industrial Base: Fact Sheet." US Department of State. October 30, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/new-measures-targeting-third-country-enablers-supporting-russias-military-industrial-base/>.
- "Report suspected sanctions evasion." FINTRAC. September 3, 2024. https://fintrac-canafe.canada.ca/guidance-directives/transaction-operation/sanctions/sanctions-eng?trk=public_post_comment-text.
- "Russian Sanctions Dashboard." 2024. Castellum AI. September 24, 2024. <https://www.castellum.ai/russia-sanctions-dashboard>.

- Saunders, Michael. "Capabilities and gaps in the Canadian special economic measures act regime." *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, November 28, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2022.2145323>.
- Sosnow, Clifford, and Little, Christopher. "New Measures to Combat Sanctions Evasion: Key Takeaways." *Fasken LLP*, 11 July 2024. <https://www.fasken.com/en/knowledge/2024/07/new-measures-to-combat-sanctions-evasion-key-takeaways>.
- "Special Bulletin on financial activity associated with suspected sanctions evasion." FINTRAC. June 2024. <https://fintrac-canafe.canada.ca/intel/bulletins/sanctions-eng>.
- "Special Economic Measures Act." Government of Canada. October 14, 2024. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/s-14.5/page-1.html>.
- "State of Trade 2024: Supply chains." Global Affairs Canada. 25 June 2024, Table 1.2., https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/state-trade-commerce-international/2024.aspx?lang=eng#1_4.
- "The Illegal Acquisition by the USSR and PRC of Western Technology and Equipment." CIA. March 2, 1977. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP81B00401R002500150008-4.pdf>.
- "Trade Data Online." Innovation, Science and Economic Development (ISED) Canada. 2024. <https://www.ic.gc.ca/app/scr/tdst/tdo/crtr.html?&productType=HS6&lang=eng>.
- "Update on the reporting of frozen assets under the Special Economic Measures Act." RCMP. 14 May 2024. <https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/news/2024/update-the-reporting-frozen-assets-the-special-economic-measures-act>.
- Федеральная служба государственной статистики [Federal State Agency of Statistics], „Динамика промышленного производства в июле 2023 года [The dynamics of industrial production in July 2023],” August 23, 2023, <https://rosstat.gov.ru/folder/313/document/215316>.

19. How Russia Capitalises on the Israel-Gaza Crisis in Its Information Warfare Against the West

Dr. Ksenia Poluektova-Krimer*

Abstract

Russian propaganda has been spectacularly successful in capitalising on the 7 October Hamas-led attack on Israel and the information chaos it has created. The slaughter and kidnappings of Israeli civilians and the Israel's concomitant war against Hamas in Gaza has sent shock waves through most of the world, which spilled into massive demonstrations and campus protests, some of them violent, a spike in the number of antisemitic incidents all across the western world, as well as a deluge of dis- and misinformation, hate speech, and information-laundering globally. Russia has been able to successfully exploit the polarisation of public opinion over the Israel-Hamas war, divert attention from its own ongoing military aggression against Ukraine, and claim leadership in the Global South where it fights against 'American hegemony' and 'neo-colonialism' and exposes 'Western hypocrisy' and 'double standards' in dealing with various conflicts. Russian propaganda does not hesitate to tap into antisemitic conspiracies that activate anti-Jewish sentiment on all sides of the political spectrum. In so doing, it draws on the rich repertoire of demonisation narratives of the Soviet anti-Zionist campaign, which repackaged classic anti-Semitic tropes in the guise of a respectable 'ideological critique of Israel' and exported them to the rest of the world.

Keywords: antisemitism, anti-Zionism, Russian propaganda, Russian disinformation campaigns, Israel-Hamas war

Nicholas Tenzer has coined the term "horizontal strategy" to describe Russia's aspiration "to incite and exploit every source of global tension in order to place the West under unsustainable pressure," and this strategy has by now escalated into a real horizontal war waged on several fronts: Ukraine,

* Research Fellow with the ERC Research Project "Perestroika from Below" at the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam (ZZF Potsdam).

Georgia, Belarus, Armenia, Africa, the Middle East, and beyond (Blank 2023). The Kremlin's weapons of choice are disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda. Some of its techniques and strategies are new, based on cutting-edge digital technologies, others are straight out of the Soviet-era playbook, but all are designed to destabilise, deceive, widen existing social and ideological divides, and make the pursuit of truth and moral clarity seem irrelevant and unattainable.

Blue Stars, Yellow Stars

In late October 2023, just weeks after the Hamas-led attack on southern Israel, blue Stars of David graffiti began appearing on buildings across the 10th and 14th districts of Paris and the city suburbs, numbering 250 tags in all. By this time, European and North American cities had become the scene of massive demonstrations, some of them violent, and the number of reported antisemitic incidents (personal attacks, insulting graffiti, desecration of Jewish symbols, etc.) had risen sharply. Against the backdrop of escalating tensions, hundreds of Stars of David stencilled on random walls in and around the French capital sent a confusing message. Could they be an expression of solidarity with the country's half a million Jews, who have clearly been going through an emotionally challenging time since 7 October? Indeed, the argument went, antisemitic graffiti could have conveyed its offensive message in a more obvious way, and the "Jewish star" would have been yellow,¹ not blue as it is on the Israeli flag. There was also no obvious connection between the buildings stencilled and Jewish residents or communal institutions either – the traditional Jewish quarter of Paris, Le Marais, was not affected by the graffiti spree.

Or, perhaps, others feared, were the stencils part of a rising tide of anti-semitic acts manifesting themselves on both quality and fringe social media platforms, and even more worryingly, in the actual streets (Rose et al. 2024)? After all, shortly before the Paris incident in the week following the Hamas

¹ The "yellow star" or "yellow patch" has been used in different ways throughout history in different societies, both Muslim and Christian, to denote Jewish religious and later ethnic identity. The use of the yellow star as a key marker of Jewishness remains one of the best-known Nazi policies, which has since been appropriated for various political purposes, most recently by the anti-vaccine movement and COVID denialism. However, in Nazi occupied Poland, the Jews were obliged to wear a white armband affixed with a blue six-sided star, identical to the design of Paris stencils.

attack, photos of hand-painted Stars of David on doors of apartment buildings in Berlin (most if not all had Jewish residents) began circulating on social media and were unequivocally interpreted by the German public as chilling reminders of the Nazi-era intimidating graffiti drawn on the doors and windows of Jewish homes and businesses meant to 'out' the Jews and to discourage Aryan patrons from visiting their shops and establishments.

The French police soon identified the perpetrators: two married couples, both Moldovan nationals, and arrested one of them. They were caught speaking Russian on the phone with their alleged handler: a certain Anatoly Prizenko, a self-described entrepreneur from Moldova. He had been once affiliated with the Eurosceptic pro-Moscow Party of Socialists (PSRM) and an active member in 2014-2015 of the People's Movement for Customs Union, a pro-Russian structure that rallied for the Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia to join the Moscow-led Eurasian Union and was later merged with the PSRM. A man of many trades, before reinventing himself as a political activist and a business-coach, Prizenko used to be an official representative of the notorious Russian Ponzi scheme company MMM in Moldova and was sentenced to prison for financial fraud. At some point of his career, he was also involved with the network-marketing company Oriflame, selling discounted beauty products, and published a newspaper in the breakaway republic of Transnistria, internationally recognised as part of Moldova. What do the Jews have to do with any of that?

When the French daily *Libération* tracked Prizenko down and questioned him about the purpose of the graffiti spree that he had allegedly financed, Prizenko claimed that all he wanted was "to support the Jews of Europe" (Pezet and de La Roche Saint-André 2023). He blamed French politicians for misunderstanding his true intention and for "creating a wave of fear and panic in society": "I feel like asking them: how aren't you ashamed of comparing the symbol of the shield of David ... with the fascist yellow star or other anti-Jewish symbols!" He urged European Jews to place Magen Davids on their homes, shops, and cars to assert their identity proudly and fearlessly and claimed to be acting on behalf of a certain European Jewish community organisation that reporters were unable to identify.

A closer examination of Prizenko's social media (his Facebook and X accounts are both in Russian) reveals no trace of any pro-Jewish sentiment or connection on his part that would have explained this sudden surge of sympathy for the French Jews. Instead, one finds a predictable mix of anti-vaccination rants, Soviet-era patriotic songs and symbols posted every 23

February and 9 May, the two most important militaristic dates of the Soviet calendar, and plenty of business coaching mantras. However, *Libération's* CheckNews reporters have also discovered the now-deleted 2014 reposts of a viral blog entry “Jews who support Nazis are the ultimate abomination” written by a certain “Aristarkh Rabinovich.”² In it, the author claimed that a number of prominent Ukrainian politicians, from Poroshenko to Timchenko and Klichko, have Jewish roots, and accused Ukraine’s prominent Jewish public figures (or ‘*Zhidobanderovtsy*,’ Kike-Banderites, to use his own term) of promoting “Ukrainian neo-Nazism.” Israel, argued “Rabinovich,” in an article that Prizenko eagerly shared, is but an American colony and always acts in its interests.

There is already plenty in this story that checks all the boxes in a classic Russian psyop how-to list. First, the deliberate ambivalence of the graffiti operation, designed to produce a deep sense of insecurity and fear, particularly among French Jews, but also in society at large, while simultaneously arousing indignation at the authorities’ perceived failure to defend them. It claims to combat antisemitism and encourage French Jews to openly embrace their identity in the face of growing public hostility while effectively intimidating them and opening the floodgates to all kinds of antisemitic attacks – the police found pro-Palestinian slogans, such as “*De la mer au Jourdain, la Palestine sera libre*” written next to some of the Star of David tags in Vanves and Fontenay-aux-Roses as well as in Aubervilliers and Saint-Ouen. The end result: a profound sense of confusion, fear and mistrust, deepening social divisions, (with the left accusing the far-right, and the right accusing France’s sizeable Muslim community or the pro-Palestinian left), and a widely shared perception of the political elites as weak and indecisive and democratic institutions as ineffective or failing.

Also, note Prizenko’s reference to a non-existent Jewish communal organisation that had allegedly authorised the graffiti spree, and his repost of an antisemitic text by a certain “Rabinovich,” who is or masquerades as a Jew, which is supposed to lend more legitimacy to the conspiracies

² It is not clear whether “Aristarkh Rabinovich” is an actual person or not, hence the quotation marks. The surname is an almost clichéd Jewish name in Russia, the first name more Russian Orthodox. “He” describes himself as a native of Kyiv currently based in Israel. “Rabinovich” was active as a blogger in the Russian-language segment of LiveJournal till 2018, where “he” published extensively on various American-orchestrated conspiracies, denied the existence of authentic Ukrainian language, culture, and identity, and accused public Jewish figures (who he calls “the new biological species, the Jews of the Maidan”) of supporting ultra-nationalism in Ukraine.

and antisemitic slander that he peddles. The use of what in Germany is aptly called ‘*Alibijuden*’ or the ‘official,’ ‘useful’ Jews who are called upon to publicly attack Israel or decry various Jewish transgressions “*because of course they know their own people better and what they are capable of!*”, is certainly not an exclusively Russian know-how. Today, Western and especially North American progressives often invoke the criticisms of Israeli policies voiced by well-known Jewish public figures, from Judith Butler and Noam Chomsky, Gabor and Aaron Maté, Deborah Feldman, Yuri Slezkine, Amy Goodman, Masha Gessen, or Adam Shatz, in order to deflect accusations of antisemitism, which is deeply embedded in much of the anti-Israel rhetoric. In the late 1970s, the Soviets enlisted well-known Jewish cultural figures to hold press conferences for the foreign press, denying any suggestion that Soviet Jews might be unhappy in the Soviet Union and prevented from leaving. Seeking to improve their international standing after years of virulent ‘anti-Zionist’ (read: antisemitic) campaigning and persecution of Soviet Jewish activists, they institutionalised this practice by creating the notorious Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Public (1983), essentially an anti-Zionist propaganda tool entrusted to prominent Jewish figures. Some of the materials produced by the AZCSP were so vicious that they were later used by ultra-nationalist groups, including *Pamyat*’.

Shortly after 7 October 2023, one of Russia’s most cynical but subtle propagandists, Ksenia Sobchak, interviewed Yuri Slezkine, a renowned anthropologist and historian who had a distinguished academic career in the United States before moving to Latvia, “*because I always felt like returning to Russia... and I recognize everything here, the forest and all...*” (Ostorozhno: Sobchak 2023). Slezkine has repeatedly participated in events organised by the Valdai Discussion Club, the soft-power effort to enlist Western intellectuals in the service of Russian foreign policy goals. Sobchak structured their two-and-a-half-hour conversation (which, for all the chauvinism and ideological dogmatism on display from both sides, deserves its own in-depth analysis) around some of the most tendentious and simplistic talking points in the anti-Israel discourse, framing them as assertions rather than questions: “Israel always uses disproportionate force,” “Israel owes its legitimacy to the Holocaust and this symbolic capital has already been used up,” “Zionism is apartheid,” etc. Instead of refuting or complicating Sobchak’s statements or providing background knowledge, as academics should, Slezkine drove them even deeper, until they both agreed that Israel is remarkably similar to Russia in that both “abuse the memory of past

suffering and victimhood” to justify their current policies. As for the loss of symbolic power and consensus around the memory of the Holocaust, the Baltic countries are to blame for that with their obsessive insistence on the competing narrative of Soviet occupation.

Slezkine is perhaps the only Western academic of such calibre to put himself at the service of Russian propaganda – all for the dubious privilege of living near familiar looking Russian forests, – but he is certainly not alone. The Kremlin has long had a soft spot for loyal celebrities of Jewish descent, who have been used to demonstrate Putin’s alleged philosemitism but also to bear witness to the authenticity of Russia’s portrayal of Ukraine as a country deeply tainted by xenophobia and racial prejudice. In lengthy interviews, those of them who came from Ukraine (e.g., singer Larisa Dolina, the late Iosif Kobzon, Lolita Milyavskaya, or comedian Klara Novikova), spoke at length about the bullying and discrimination they experienced there in their childhood and denounced Euromaidan as an expression of Ukraine’s deep-seated nationalism and xenophobia.³ In a statement that echoed both a classic line “I am not an anti-Semite, I have Jewish friends” and Karl Lueger’s notorious dictum “*Wer ein Jud’ ist, bestimme ich!*” – “I decide who is a Jew”, Putin claimed to “have always had a lot of Jewish friends since childhood” and then used them to justify his attack on Zelensky: “They say that [he] is not Jewish, that he is a disgrace to the Jewish people.”

On some deep cultural level, this propagandistic construct of ‘a Jew’ as a witness, as someone who lends legitimacy and authenticity to propagandistic narratives, is reminiscent of the early medieval doctrine of Jewish witness, developed by Augustine of Hippo among others, which shaped medieval Christian attitudes towards the Jews. Christian theology interpreted Jewish survival as a distinct group as evidence of the Old Testament’s legitimacy that the Jews preserved and authenticated with their very existence. Their suffering and dispersion were seen as evidence of divine punishment for their refusal to recognise Jesus as a Messiah. The Jews were thus to be *tolerated*, never completely destroyed, because at the end of the days they will finally accept the Gospel and fulfil prophecies about universal salvation and the triumph of Christianity.⁴

³ See, for example, Ekaterina Gordeeva’s interviews with Dolina and Novikova.

⁴ To extend the metaphor to the other side of the equation, for the Jews engaged in these performative public roles in the service of propaganda, attacks on Israel appear to be the conceptual equivalent of nineteenth-century conversion to Christianity in the illusionary hope of gaining social acceptance and combating anti-Jewish prejudice.

It is hardly accidental, then, that the first and one of the most blatant propagandistic state-funded films produced in Russia about its war against Ukraine, is titled *The Witness* (2023). It tells a story of a Belgian Jewish violinist, a certain Daniel Cohen (styled to resemble Adrian Brody in Polansky's 2002 Holocaust classic *The Pianist*), who witnesses "Ukrainian atrocities" (rapes, sexualised violence, the Bucha massacre, etc. – all textbook Russian crimes in Ukraine) and makes it his mission to bring his "testimony" to the world.

Out of Soviet Playbook and into the Digital Space

Prizenko's case and the staple propagandistic narratives he shared on his social media also highlight important continuities between the present-day Russian propagandistic ideologemes and practices on the one hand and the Soviet-era propagandistic warfare on the other. Among the most important are the portrayal of Israel as a 'tool' of American imperialism in the Middle East, an anomaly rather than a legitimate state (note the similarity with the portrayal of Ukraine as a fiction, a Western proxy, etc.), and the rhetorical fusion of Zionists and Nazis, a legacy of the Soviet anti-Zionist campaign.

The Soviets also routinely manipulated the issue of antisemitism to undermine or discredit Western societies or to sow discord among various minority groups, and they were not averse to staging racist incidents for this purpose. For example, the papers of Vasili Mitrokhin, an archivist for the KGB's Foreign Intelligence Service who defected to the UK in 1992, document several provocations staged by the KGB in 1970 to stir up racial animosity between the Black and Jewish communities in New York. They planted a delayed-action explosive device in one of the Black neighbourhoods and then staged calls to African American organisations claiming responsibility on behalf of Rabbi Meir Kahane's far-right religious Jewish Defense League. They distributed fake JDL leaflets containing racial slurs and mailed fake letters and pamphlets (Andrew and Mitrokhin 2005).

In his revelatory and, unfortunately, still very relevant study *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (2020), Thomas Rid describes an earlier campaign, code-named Operation Zarathustra. In late 1959, the KGB orchestrated the painting of anti-Jewish slogans ("Deutsche fordern Juden raus" – "The Germans demand: Jews out" or simply "Juden raus") and red swastikas on synagogues first in Cologne and then all across Western Germany – a total of 833 antisemitic incidents

involving at least 321 perpetrators. By January 1960, these hate crimes, graffiti, and antisemitic attacks had become a global phenomenon, manifesting itself literally all across the world, from London and Berlin to Venice, Oslo, Cape Town, Montreal, Rhodesia, Hong Kong, Tel-Aviv, and Mexico City. In the United States, hundreds of students and faculty members who used one of University of Maryland's parking facilities one day found their cars pinned with pamphlets that promised that "Jews Are Thru in '72." At the time, it was widely assumed that the global rise in anti-Jewish attacks was caused by the intense media coverage of the first incident in Cologne, which allegedly "inspired" other copycats. Hence, Germany found itself under a lot of international pressure that included mass rallies in front of German embassies, boycotts of German goods, and even the sacking of some Germans who worked abroad.

Eventually, it transpired that the global swastika and graffiti epidemic was a joint Soviet bloc *active measure* carried out at the behest of the KGB – the term widely used in the Soviet intelligence establishment and among its Eastern bloc satellite agencies to denote subversive disinformation operations against the West (Rid 2020). In conversations with the author many years after the fact, former KGB officers admitted to have "translated hate letters from Russian into German in order to mail them to Jewish families in West Germany" while others arranged the desecration of Jewish cemeteries (ibid. 197-8). These 'active measures' were meant "to maintain anti-Semitism" so as to discredit and weaken West Germany by portraying it as an unrepentant society still riddled with neo-Nazis in order "to alienate it from its British, American and French allies and occupying authorities, delay or prevent German rearmament, paralyze the political debate, and drive a wedge into NATO" (ibid. 196).

Thomas Rid recounts a smaller test-run operation that the KGB's Department D staged before executing the red swastika plan on the large-scale to gauge the possible effect of their planned provocations on the affected communities. A group of intelligence officers travelled to a small village in the vicinity of Moscow and under the cover of the night defaced a local cemetery with antisemitic slogans, toppling Jewish tombstones and daubing swastikas on them. They reported back to the Centre that while most villagers were appalled by the vandalism, there were those who felt emboldened by the public display of anti-Jewish sentiment to follow suit. The KGB-orchestrated provocation ignited their deeply held prejudices and turned them into "anti-Jewish activists" (ibid. 197).

***Doppelgänger*: Creating Information Chaos**

But the Prizenko story does not end there. For all the continuities and similarities between Soviet era “active measures” and their modern analogues, there was another crucial warfare at work in Paris that one is almost thankful the KGB did not yet have at its disposal: the digital. According to *Le Monde* (Albertini et al. 2023), both couples who stencilled Stars of David were accompanied by a photographer who immediately uploaded the images to the social media accounts and media platforms that are believed to be linked to the *Doppelgänger* network (Bernhard et al. 2024).

As the name suggests, since 2022 this aggressive covert influence operation has been producing fake duplicates of legitimate media websites (e.g., *The Guardian*, *Daily Mail*, *Der Spiegel*, *BILD*, *WELT*, *FAZ*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, etc.) and clones of official diplomatic pages, notably the French Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs and Germany’s Interior Ministry, filled with pro-Russian and otherwise fake content, including fake NATO press-releases (Ronzaud et al. 2023). The campaign has been found to employ generative AI to create ‘alternative’ pro-Kremlin news items and thousands of bot accounts on X and inauthentic or dormant Facebook or Instagram pages that spread links to fake articles and websites. Part of the operation is another Russian company launched after the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine: RRN, its acronym originally stood for “Reliable Russian News” but was later changed to “Reliable Recent News.” It is essentially a “typosquatter” and has registered more than 300 domain names that look similar to real media domain names and websites but have a slightly different extension (www.theguardian.com instead of www.theguardian.co.uk) or a misspelled URL that leads unsuspecting users to fake pages (“Pro-Kremlin Network Impersonates Legitimate Websites and Floods Social Media with Lies” 2022).

In its report on this influence operation released in April 2024 and tellingly titled “No Embargo in Sight: Meta Lets Pro-Russian Propaganda Ads Flood the EU,” AI Forensics shows how *Doppelgänger* exploits loopholes in the moderations on Meta platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Messenger) to overwhelm close to 40 million users with covert political ads that Meta fails to promptly identify and remove (Bouchaud et al. 2024). Besides their impressive outreach and ability to take advantage of Meta’s moderation glitches, the messages spread by *Doppelgänger* are extremely adaptable to the quickly changing political and social contexts and can promptly respond to specific events. Thus, two days after the Hamas-led attack on Israel on

7 October, an explanatory narrative appeared across these cloned websites and accounts accusing President Zelensky of embezzling weapons supplied to Ukraine by the West to enrich himself by reselling them to third parties. It was these “Ukrainian” weapons, they charged, that Hamas used against Israeli civilians – “*because the Jews are always after money.*” According to AI Forensics, in Germany and France alone hundreds of propaganda ads that mentioned Israel and misconstrued Hamas attack reached a total of 2,758,986 accounts (ibid.). Photographs of Stars of David in Paris were similarly spread through the very same network of fake accounts in order to amplify polarisation within the French society over the war in Gaza and try to provoke tensions.

It would have been tempting and simplistic to imagine the workings of this hybrid threat network in classic conspiratorial terms: animated by a singular evil will that alone designs and pulls the strings of various subversion campaigns in a top-down, dictatorial fashion, personified either by Putin or by his chief propagandists, court ‘ideologues,’ or secret services. Instead, investigative reporting into the backgrounds of the individuals (Kupfer 2024) and companies (Thomas 2024) behind *Doppelgänger* and other Russian disinformation initiatives reveals this ecosystem to be a malicious, perverse impersonation of civil society. Multiple actors with various backgrounds in IT, AI, corporate law, political strategy, and media management in addition to con-artists, fringe political activists, political technologists, and privately-owned tech and media companies pitch ideas for such campaigns and compete for grants and commissions from various government agencies, from the secret services to *Rossotrudnichestvo* and *Pravfond* (a foreign ministry foundation “for support and protection of the rights of compatriots living abroad”) (Leloup et al. 2024) to Sergey Kiriyenko’s political bloc of the presidential administration and beyond. They report on the successes of their operations, citing Western press coverage as proof that the desired effect of disinformation and confusion has been achieved, and vie for even more funding, thereby setting a vicious circle in motion. The exposure actually makes them more powerful as they receive more state funding for meeting their KPIs.⁵ The higher purpose to which they lend their expertise

⁵ Thomas Rid warns about the dual dangers of under-reporting Russian disinformation campaign and over-exposing and exaggerating their real scope and outreach as both can help the adversary. *Lawfare Daily Podcast*: “Making Sense of the Doppelgänger Disinformation Operation, with Thomas Rid”, October 16, 2024. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/lawfare-daily--making-sense-of-the-doppelganger-disinformation-operation--with-thomas-rid>.

can be summarised as a set of memes or hashtags that express the typical Russian viewer's responses to difficult news: #everybody lies, #we'll never know the whole truth, #it's complicated.

The Echo Chamber Triad of Russia, Iran, and Venezuela in Hispanic America

However, for all the obvious damage it has done, *Doppelgänger* is just one piece of the puzzle, a cog in the sprawling disinformation machine that Russia has been running across multiple social media platforms and through its own and partner (China, Iran, Venezuela, etc.) media outlets at home, in the West, and especially in the Global South, which is often overlooked in Euro-centric analyses of its propaganda (Applebaum 2024). Parenthetically, *Doppelgänger* has recently expanded its operation from Europe into Latin America, which has its own long history of anti-Americanism that Russia is eager to leverage for its own advantage. Emanuele Ottolenghi at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies describes the media synergy of Russia, Iran, and Venezuela's Maduro regime that contaminates Hispanic American mediascape with conspiracy narratives, antisemitism, whataboutism, fake news, and moral relativism (Ottolenghi 2022). The three main Spanish language media outlets – Actualidad RT (RT *en Español*), Iran's HispanTV, and Venezuela's Telesur – not only share their score-sheet of (pseudo) anti-imperialist grievances, but also sleek studio spaces in different capitals across the continent, producers, reporters, anchors (most of them local journalists), distribution networks, and much more. They cross-reference each other on their social media platforms to magnify their messaging and create an extremely impactful Spanish-language echo chamber for millions of viewers across the continent and also in the United States. Russian embassies across Latin America (but also in Spain) operate some of the most engaged-with X accounts that amplify Spanish-language disinformation disseminated by Kremlin media outlets (@DFRLab 2022).

Despite the irony of anti-colonial narratives coming from an aggressive imperialist power that is currently waging a brutal war against its neighbour and has for years meddled in democratic processes across the world, from Georgia and Belarus to Niger and Mali, this messaging finds a very receptive audience in many countries on the continent. For half of the 20th century, plenty of regimes there was aligned with the Soviet Union and inhabited the

same ideological space, and more recently, in the 2000s and 2010s, Hispanic America has been swept by Bolivarianism, which has given new impetus to anti-liberal, anti-imperialist, and anti-globalist rhetoric. Throughout the 1960s and 1980s, the Soviets used a variety of channels – TASS and *Novosti* information agencies, multilingual publications like *Voprosy Mira i Sotsializma* [Questions of Peace and Socialism], academia, cultural diplomacy, local communist parties and leftist movements, books and publications, etc. – to export their ideological framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which they embedded in a broader Marxist critique of Western capitalism and imperialism to the so-called Third World countries that they courted. In Latin America and elsewhere, they appealed to local intellectuals, journalists, politicians, and activists who were already sympathetic and willing to identify with anti-colonial struggles (Chaguaceda and Rouvinski 2024).

Soviet support for the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and its armed factions translated into direct and indirect funding, arming, ideological guidance, and military training carried out through proxy networks in friendly states, most notably Castro's Cuba and Nicaragua during the rule of the Sandinista government in the 1980s. These Soviet efforts have gone a long way towards positioning the Palestinian cause at the very centre of today's most urgent and resonant discourses of anti-colonialism and Global South solidarity that also set the terms for the self-perception, struggles, and grievances of many Hispanic American nations.

The Legacy of the Soviet Anti-Zionist campaign

But the Marxist framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not the only ideological export that the Soviet regime spread across the world. Another was anti-Zionism. In late 1960s, angered by the humiliating debacle suffered by their Arab allies in the 1967 Six Day War, the Soviets launched their infamous anti-Zionist campaign, one of their most toxic ideological legacies, which continues to influence the global polarisation over the Gaza war today by supplying it with ideologemes, imagery, and demonisation templates. In the post-World War II era, when blatant antisemitism was no longer acceptable in Western societies, Soviet 'Zionologists' found a way to fuse long-standing anti-Jewish tropes into a discourse driven by hatred and conspiratorial thinking, camouflaged as respectable and purely ideological thus allowing the regime to vehemently deny all accusations of antisemitism.

They hid the word “Jew” behind a new code word “Zionist” in the same penchant for euphemism that had produced the term “rootless cosmopolitan” at the height of Stalin’s anti-cosmopolitan campaign (1948–1953) two decades earlier.

It could not have been possible for tiny Israel to inflict such devastating military losses on Egypt (then the United Arab Republic), Syria, and Jordan, tripling its size and consolidating control over areas of strategic importance, the argument went. There must have been some all-powerful and omnipresent perfidious global force at play, lurking behind the curtains and somehow linked to Israel and its main ally, the United States... World Zionism! In the months and years after the Arab defeat, especially from 1974 onward, Soviet propaganda used every media possible, both at home and abroad – books, newspapers, academic journals, films, radio, television, cultural productions, lecture halls – “to equate Zionism with every conceivable evil: racism, imperialism, capitalist exploitation, colonialism, militarism, crime, murder, espionage, terrorism, prostitution, even Hitlerism” (Korey 1995, 14; see also Frankel 1984).⁶

Historians of the campaign have convincingly shown that, for all the diversity of themes and narratives spun by the propagandists, it drew its core structure directly from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a notorious Tsarist forgery and one of the classic conspiratorial texts. The anti-Zionist campaign repeated the *Protocols*’ central tropes: the existence of an international Jewish conspiracy (Cabal) that aspires to world domination; the use of manipulation and conspiratorial means; control of the banking system; control and manipulation of the press and infiltration of Masonic lodges (Korey 1995, 4). More importantly, however, the *Protocols* deliberately misinterpret the Jewish religious concept of the “Chosen People” (chosen by G-d to worship and serve only Him) to claim that Jews see themselves as racially superior, more intelligent and cunning than all the other peoples who they seek to subjugate and exploit. The Soviet anti-Zionist campaign jumped on that falsehood to portray Zionism as a form of racism and to equate it with Nazism, the greatest evil incarnate.

Again, although the impetus for the campaign came from the state – the KGB, the Department of Propaganda and Agitation of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and the Middle East section at the CPSU – it relied heavily on creative input of various ideologically driven

⁶ See also Jonathan Frankel’s *The Soviet Regime and Anti-Zionism: An Analysis*. Issue 55 of Research paper, (Jerusalem: Soviet and East European Research Centre Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1984).

or opportunistic actors who produced most of its content: journalists, publishers, writers, translators, academics specialising in Arabic Studies, and Komsomol functionaries. Many members of this so-called “anti-Zionist circle” were part of the larger nationalist movement of the late 1950s, which coalesced around Russian nationalism, ethnic xenophobia, and antisemitism. Collectively, they published hundreds of articles and books (one of the foundational texts of the campaign Yuri Ivanov’s 1969 book *Beware, Zionism!* sold some 800,000 copies in the Soviet Union alone and was later translated into more than a dozen languages, including English and Arabic), gave public lectures, wrote scripts for propaganda films on the dangers of Zionism, and developed the pseudoscientific discipline of ‘Zionology’ that the Soviet Union exported through various channels.⁷

Soviet ‘Zionologists’ not only drew parallels between Nazis and Zionists, accusing Israeli soldiers committing every brutality possible. They accused the Zionists of collaborating with the Nazis during the war to ensure the creation of the Israeli state. Some, like Vadim Bolshakov and Dmitry Zhukov, even claimed that Hitler borrowed his ideas from Theodore Herzl as both Zionists and Nazis allegedly sought to establish their own ethnic group as superior to and dominant over all others. Interestingly, some of the most vicious anti-Zionist books and films even repurposed Nazi propaganda against the Jews. For example, the 1973 documentary *Secret and Explicit: The Aims and Acts of Zionists* recycled Nazi newsreels to pass them off as footage of Israeli brutality, and Vladimir Begun repeatedly plagiarised *Mein Kampf*, substituting the word “Jew” for “Zionist” (Cherkizov 1987).⁸ No wonder then, that when the historian, educator, and *refusnik* Ruth Okuneva set out to analyse Soviet anti-Zionist discourses and compare them side by side with the statements made by the tsarist-era Black Hundred organisation and prominent Nazi ideologues, her findings filled 87 pages. She titled her report “A Few Pages of Analogy” and sent it to Brezhnev but received no reply (Korey 1995, 80).

⁷ For the detailed and data-driven discussion of the apparatus of Soviet anti-Zionist campaign, the narratives and techniques it used at home and abroad, see Baruch A. Hazan, *Soviet Propaganda: A Case Study of the Middle Eastern Conflict* (London and New York: Routledge, 1976). Among the elements of this propagandistic ecosystem that he discusses are TASS and *Novosti* information agency, cultural agreements, Friendship societies, Soviet radio and foreign broadcasting, performing arts, foreign press, sports, literature, tourism, etc.

⁸ During Perestroika, Vladimir Begun, one of the most prolific “Zionologists”, lost a court case to a journalist who discovered seven instances of Begun plagiarising from Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.

In 1975, the Soviets sponsored the notorious UN resolution no. 3379 equating Zionism with racism and used its influence on Third World countries to secure its adoption. It could now invoke the authority of the UN to de-legitimise Israel and to legitimise its own antisemitic campaign for domestic and foreign audiences. The resolution was revoked in 1991, but its legacy lingers on. The discursive legacy of the anti-Zionist campaign can be found on the posters of pro-Palestinian demonstrations across the world that routinely place Jewish stars next to Nazi swastikas to make the familiar equation between Zionism and Nazism or in the ubiquitous uses of the word “Zionism” as the term of violent political abuse. It can also be found in the unsupported claims that “Zionists have always plotted a genocide of the Palestinians,” in the convergence of anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric that portrays Israel as a tool of American neo-colonialism in the Middle East, or in accusations of the IDF’s deliberate brutality towards Palestinian children and claims that “the Israelis treat the Arabs the way the Nazis treated the Jews” that are broadcast by both legacy and fringe media (Tabarovsky 2019).

It is this highly charged and toxic discursive legacy that Iran’s HispanTV in close collaboration with Venezuela’s Telesur network taps into as it feeds its millions of Spanish-speaking viewers conspiracy narratives such as “The new coronavirus is the result of a Zionist plot” (19 March 2020 headline) or “Jews dominate Hollywood” (10 April 2017) (Diálogo 2024). It is also reproduced when – on the other side of the world – Sputnik India reports on the Gaza hospital bombing, accusing the United States of supplying Israel with the aerial bomb to blow up the Al Ahli hospital, which was later proven to have been destroyed by a misfired Palestinian rocket (“Who’s to Blame for Gaza Hospital Bombing? Sputnik Explores Contrasting Theories” 2023).

Key Narratives

For more than a year since the Hamas attack, the Institute for Strategic Development has been taking stock of the various manifestations of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy fantasies across various social media platforms and analysing the nature of online conversations around the war in Gaza. In several successive reports, its researchers have described the rise of hate speech, misinformation, extremism, conspiratorial thinking, and the many ways in which Russia (as well as China, Iran, and other actors) have exploited the crises to advance their own narratives “Capitalising

on crisis: Russia, China and Iran use X to exploit Israel-Hamas information chaos” 2023; “Temporarily overcast: The effects of three months of war between Israel and Hamas on pro-Kremlin discourse about the war in Ukraine” 2024; “Mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories about the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel” 2024).

One of most wide-spread tropes, the classic tool of whataboutism, is the accusation of “double standards” that Russia routinely levels against the West for its alleged failure to condemn Israeli war in Gaza the same way it has condemned Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁹ This rhetorical strategy is often used to delegitimise Western criticism of Russian military aggression or human rights abuses, appealing both to nationalist audiences at home and to non-Western countries that are likely to harbour their own grievances against Western hegemony. The “double standards” trope projects onto the West the Kremlin’s own legal nihilism and cynicism about the existence of universal standards or rules and an obligation to respect them. It reflects a specific understanding of national sovereignty rooted in absolute moral relativism. For Putin’s regime, to be truly sovereign means to be above and beyond any moral or legal norms. By withdrawing from a number of international treaties and multilateral institutions, Russia has explicitly disregarded both the authority of supranational institutions and the binding obligations of international legal frameworks, pretending that it has no knowledge of such frameworks because they have allegedly been inconsistently applied in the past. As Russia’s veteran Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov put it in Doha in December 2023: “The rules were never published, were never even announced by anyone to anyone, and they are being applied depending on what exactly the west needs at a particular moment of modern history” (“Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s statement and answers to media questions following the 21st Doha Forum, 10 December 2023” 2023).

The second common narrative, which is spread by diplomatic accounts on various social media platforms and state-run media outlets, portray Russia as an important geopolitical player in the Middle East that promotes peace and a two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestine conflict. This narrative obscures not only Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine but also its protracted and disastrous intervention in the Syrian civil war and blames the West for the escalation of violence. Corollary to this is the false accusation

⁹ For a comprehensive discussion of its uses vis-à-vis Russia’s war against Ukraine and Israel-Hamas war see Sylvia Sasse, “#Doppelstandard”, *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, June 23, 2024, <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/doppelstandard/>.

that either president Zelensky personally or the Ukrainian government have sold NATO weapons to Hamas (Khatsenkova 2023).

Then there is Grayzone in a category of its own, an outlet with alleged ties to both Russia and Iran, whose coverage of the war in Gaza has been replete with dis- and misinformation, conspiratorial fantasies, and relativisation. Its founder and editor, Max Blumenthal, who regularly appears on Russian television and has even travelled to Moscow for a RT event, has been promoting a conspiracy narrative that Israel killed its own citizens on 7 October (Weinthal 2024).

Even a cursory look at the Grayzone's website reveals a denialist, conspiratorial slant of its coverage of Gaza that runs contrary to the most basic established truths of the Hamas attack and deliberately misinterprets findings from media investigations, including coverage of mass rapes of Israeli women by Hamas terrorists. Headlines include "October 7 testimonies reveal Israel's military 'shelling' Israeli citizens with tanks, missiles," "Israeli army gassed my son 'like Auschwitz,' mother of slain Israeli soldier says," "Israeli propagandist behind Hamas 'mass rape' narrative exposed as grifter, fraud," "State Dept downplays reports of Israeli soldiers sexually abusing, slaughtering Palestinian women," etc. Similar to the classic Russian propaganda line accusing Ukrainians of the most notorious atrocities that Russians have committed, from Bucha to the bombing of the maternity ward in Mariupol, Grayzone inverts narratives of the atrocities that came from southern Israel on 7 October to shift the blame for them to the Israelis and the complicit West.

The deeply entrenched demonisation patterns developed by Soviet 'Zionologists' to equate Zionists with Nazis are remarkably like how today's Russian propaganda portrays Ukraine, a "state run by Nazis." Both Israel and Ukraine are described as anomalies: not authentic, artificially created ("Ukraine owes its existence to Lenin who invented it," etc.), with no legitimate claim for their lands. Both are seen as proxy states or "puppets" of Western countries, especially the United States. Both are accused of committing past and present "genocides" (Naqba and Gaza, the massacre of Poles in Volhynia, and the "genocide of Russian speakers in the Donbas") that allegedly delegitimises their rights for national statehood. Both are portrayed as ethnically exclusionist, homogenous communities filled with a sense of their own superiority despite their actual multi-cultural, multi-ethnic demographics. The same pattern of inversion, of mis-assigning responsibility for crimes, past and present, is at work in blaming Israelis for

the Holocaust or the Hamas attack, and Ukrainians – for bombing their own cities and blowing up Kakhovka Dam. In both cases, the objects of such propaganda are framed as ontologically different (satanic), inherently deceitful and manipulative, capable of every moral depravity – in short, “the Nazis.”

References

- @DFRLab. 2022. "RT and Sputnik in Spanish Boosted by Russian Embassy Tweets and Suspicious Accounts." *Medium*, March 17, 2022. <https://medium.com/dfrlab/rt-and-sputnik-in-spanish-boosted-by-russian-embassy-tweets-and-suspicious-accounts-3a24ded7ef57>.
- Albertini, Antoine, Damien Leloup, and Florian Reynaud. 2023. "Stars of David Graffiti in Paris: Russian Interference Suspected." *Le Monde*, November 7, 2023. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2023/11/07/stars-of-david-graffiti-in-paris-russian-interference-suspected_6235378_7.html.
- Andrew, Christopher, and Vasili Mitrokhin. 2005. *The Battle for the Third World: Newly Revealed Secrets from the Mitrokhin Archive*. New York: Basic Books.
- Applebaum, Anne. 2024. "The New Propaganda War." *The Atlantic*, May 6, 2024. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/china-russia-republican-party-relations/678271/>.
- Blank, Stephen. 2023. "Russia's Role in Gaza War." *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, October 2023. <https://jstribune.com/blank-russias-role-in-the-gaza-war/>.
- Bouchaud, Paul, Marc Faddoul, and Raziye Buse Çetin. 2024. "No Embargo in Sight: Meta Lets Pro-Russian Propaganda Ads Flood the EU." *AI Forensics*, April 2024. https://aiforensics.org/uploads/No_Embargo_in_Sight_AI_Forensics_Report_ad7ede416b.pdf.
- "Capitalising on Crisis: Russia, China and Iran Use X to Exploit Israel-Hamas Information Chaos." 2023. *ISD's Blog Digital Dispatches*, October 25, 2023. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/capitalising-on-crisis-russia-china-and-iran-use-x-to-exploit-israel-hamas-information-chaos/.
- Chaguaceda, Armando, and Vladimir Rouvinski. 2024. *Russia's Capture of Intellectual Elites in Latin America*. Kennan Institute, September 10, 2024. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/russias-capture-intellectual-elites-latin-america>.
- Cherkizov, Andrey. "O podlinnykh zennostiakh i mnimyykh vragakh (On True Values and Imaginary Enemies)." *Sovetskaya kultura*, June 18, 1987
- "Diálogo. Iran's HispanTV Promotes Anti-Semitism and Disinformation in Latin America." 2024. *Diálogo Americas*, November 18, 2024. <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/irans-hispan-tv-promotes-antisemitism-and-disinformation-in-latin-america/>.
- Ferragamo, Mariel. 2023. "Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa." *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 28, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/background/russias-growing-footprint-africa>.
- "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Statement and Answers to Media Questions Following the 21st Doha Forum, 10 December 2023." 2023. *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1920028/.
- Frankel, Jonathan. *The Soviet Regime and Anti-Zionism: An Analysis*. Issue 55 of *Research Paper*. Jerusalem: Soviet and East European Research Centre, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1984.

- Hazan, Baruch A. 1976. *Soviet Propaganda: A Case Study of the Middle Eastern Conflict*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Journal Officiel de l'Union Européenne. 2008. "Accord entre l'Union européenne et la Fédération de Russie sur la participation de la Fédération de Russie à l'opération militaire de l'Union européenne en République du Tchad et en République centrafricaine (EUFOR Tchad/RCA)." November 18, 2008. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:307:0016:0020:FR:PDF>.
- Khatsenkova, Sophia. 2023. "Fact-Check: Has Ukraine Supplied Hamas Militants with NATO Weapons?" EuroNews, October 19, 2023. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/10/19/fact-check-has-ukraine-supplied-hamas-militants-with-nato-weapons>.
- Korey, William. 1995. *Russian Antisemitism, Pamyat, and the Demonology of Zionism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kupfer, Matthew. 2024. "Investigation: Who is Ilya Gambashidze, the Man the US Government Accuses of Running a Kremlin Disinformation Campaign?" VOA News, May 9, 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/investigation-who-is-ilya-gambashidze-the-man-the-us-government-accuses-of-running-a-kremlin-disinformation-campaign-/7604052.html>.
- Leloup, Damien, Thomas Eydoux, Lucas Minisini, and Maxime Vaudano. 2024. "Pravfond, the Discreet Slush Fund for Russian Spies and Their Foreign Legal Woes." *Le Monde*, June 2, 2024. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/pixels/article/2024/06/02/pravfond-the-discreet-slush-fund-for-russian-spies-and-their-foreign-legal-woes_6673513_13.html.
- "Mis- and Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories About the October 7 Hamas Attack on Israel." 2024. ISD's Blog Digital Dispatches, October 7, 2024. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/mis-and-disinformation-and-conspiracy-theories-about-the-october-7-hamas-attack-on-israel/.
- Ostorozhno: Sobchak. Interview with Yuri Slezkin, aired on November 13, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axr14QM9d4&t=620s>.
- Ottolenghi, Emanuele. 2022. "The Kremlin's Latin American Echo Chamber." *The Dispatch*, April 4, 2022.
- Pezet, Jacques, and Elsa de La Roche Saint-André. 2023. "Anatoli Prizenko, Commanditaire Présumé des Étoiles de David Taguées dans Paris, Prétend que l'Action Visait à «Soutenir» les Juifs." *Libération*, November 8, 2023. <https://shorturl.at/R2oNU>.
- "Pro-Kremlin Network Impersonates Legitimate Websites and Floods Social Media with Lies." 2022. ISD's Blog Digital Dispatches, September 29, 2022. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/pro-kremlin-network-impersonates-legitimate-websites-and-floods-social-media-with-lies/.
- Rid, Thomas. 2020. *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. New York: Farrar Strauss & Gieoux.
- Rid, Thomas, 2024 "Making Sense of the Doppelgänger Disinformation Operation, with Thomas Rid", *Lawfare Daily Podcast*, October 16. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/lawfare-daily--making-sense-of-the-doppelganger-disinformation-operation--with-thomas-rid>

- Ronzaud, Léa, Joseph A. Carter, and Tyler Williams. 2023. "Summit Old, Summit New: Russia-Linked Actors Leverage New and Old Tactics in Influence Operations Targeting Online Conversations About NATO Summit." Graphika Report, August 2023. https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_summit_old_summit_new.pdf.
- Rose, Hannah, Jakob Guhl, and Milo Comerford. 2024. "Rise in Antisemitism on Both Mainstream and Fringe Social Media Platforms Following Hamas' Terrorist Attack." ISD's Blog Digital Dispatches, February 2024. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/rise-in-antisemitism-on-both-mainstream-and-fringe-social-media-platforms-following-hamas-terrorist-attack/.
- Rid, Thomas. 2020. *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. New York: Farrar Strauss & Gieoux.
- Sasse, Sylvia. 2024. "#Doppelstandard." *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, June 23, 2024. <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/doppelstandard/>.
- Tabarovsky, Izabella. 2019. "Understanding the Real Origin of that New York Times Cartoon: How Antisemitic Soviet Propaganda Informs Contemporary Left Anti-Zionism." *Tablet*, June 6, 2019. <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/soviet-anti-semitic-cartoons>.
- Thomas, Elise. 2024. "Russian Influence Operation Doppelganger Linked to Fringe Advertising Company." ISD's Blog Digital Dispatches, June 13, 2024. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/russian-influence-operation-doppelganger-linked-to-fringe-advertising-company/.
- "Temporarily Overcast: The Effects of Three Months of War Between Israel and Hamas on Pro-Kremlin Discourse About the War in Ukraine." 2024. ISD's Blog Digital Dispatches, January 31, 2024. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/temporarily-overcast-the-effects-of-three-months-of-war-between-israel-and-hamas-on-pro-kremlin-discourse-about-the-war-in-ukraine/.
- "Who's to Blame for Gaza Hospital Bombing? Sputnik Explores Contrasting Theories." 2023. *Sputnik India*, October 18, 2023. <https://sputniknews.in/20231018/whos-to-blame-for-gaza-hospital-bombing-sputnik-explores-contrasting-theories-4926016.html>.
- Weinthal, Benjamin. 2024. "Operating in the 'Grayzone': The Pro-Hamas Outlet Being Funded by Iran and Russia." *i24NEWS*, June 6, 2024. <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/americas/artc-operating-in-the-grayzone-the-pro-hamas-outlet-being-funded-by-iran-and-russia>.

20. Russian Anti-soft Power and Its Application Since the Onset of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022 through the Lens of Narrative Manipulation

Liia Vihmand-Veebel*

Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to enhance the understanding of the Russian Federation, which is now overtly regarded as a Western adversary. The article introduces Russia's perspective on Western soft power and explores the concept of anti-soft power as Russia's response to Western influence, with a focus on narrative manipulation and the Russian deterrence narrative in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine since February 2022. Using a corpus of the Kremlin's official rhetoric, this study examines how its narratives shape public perception and frame the West as an aggressor and Ukraine as a pawn in a broader geopolitical struggle. The findings underscore anti-soft power's role in fostering national resilience, countering Western influence, and justifying Russia's geopolitical stance. The chapter also reveals how linguistic aspects influence Russian audiences' interpretation of deterrence.

Keywords: anti-soft power, narrative manipulation, deterrence, NATO, Russia, Ukraine

Introduction

Since the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin have sought to legitimise their actions, both to the Russian domestic audience and on the international stage. With Western nations actively supporting Ukraine, the war has polarised global perspectives, making the perceived legitimacy of Russia's actions increasingly crucial. As tensions with the West deepen, there has been a growing

* Liia Vihmand-Veebel is a doctoral student at the Institute of Foreign Languages and Cultures at the University of Tartu. She holds Master's degree in Translation Studies. Her research interests include NATO-Russian relations, strategic narratives, and political linguistics.

effort to discredit Western values in the eyes of the Russian population and its allies. These dynamics have significantly influenced Russia's communication and information strategies. Russia has increasingly militarised them, framing information as essential battlefield element. Domestically and internationally, Russia has leveraged state-controlled media and government messaging to reinforce its narrative.

One of the significant changes in Russia's information strategy post-2022 has been its increased reliance on the anti-soft power – the Russian “answer” to Western soft power and normative power. If the object of soft power is another state, the object of anti-soft power is the population of one's own country and allied states, who must be “protected” from the influence of the opponent. The purpose of the Russian anti-soft power strategy is to undermine the appeal of Western values and norms. This strategy seeks not just to bolster Russian influence but to erode the attractiveness of Western culture, media, and governance models, particularly among domestic and allied audiences. Russia's anti-soft power approach is a part of Russia's broader geopolitical strategy. It is framed through aggressive narrative manipulation that helps to counteract Western influence while reinforcing its own geopolitical stance, sustaining internal cohesion amid international isolation and legitimising Russia's actions.

The chapter examines Russia's perspective on soft power and anti-soft power and highlights examples of how Russia has applied the strategy of anti-soft power, particularly through narrative manipulation. It uses the case of Russia's deterrence narrative as a central study, showing how this approach has been utilised since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In the process, the main differences between the Western and Russian deterrence narratives are explored.

Russia's Perspective on Western Soft Power

Soft power, a concept popularised by Joseph Nye in the 1990s, refers to a country's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than through coercion or deterrence. Unlike hard power, which relies on military or economic force, soft power leverages cultural appeal, political values, and diplomacy to shape the preferences and attitudes of other nations. In modern international relations, soft power is seen as a key strategy,

focusing on voluntary participation and the appeal of a nation's culture and values to achieve political objectives.

In the Russian Federation, the concept of soft power is often seen as an attribute of the United States, having originated in a specifically American context (Izotov 2011; Alikin 2017; Fenenko 2020). Russian political scientist M. Lebedeva notes that in Russia, soft power is viewed rather negatively. In the most widespread and dominant understanding in Russia, soft power refers to non-military methods of influencing the other side. Moreover, in Russia, soft power is often equated with propaganda. Since the term "propaganda" has a negative connotation, soft power is also given a negative evaluation (Lebedeva 2017, 213).

Since the early 2010s, the term soft power in Russia has come to refer to a set of manipulative technologies designed to disrupt society (Fenenko 2020, 42). This interpretation began to solidify after the publication of then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's article "Russia and the Changing World" in 2012. In it, Vladimir Putin pointed out that soft power is often used to nurture and provoke extremism, separatism, nationalism, manipulation of public consciousness, and direct interference in the internal politics of sovereign states (Putin 2012).

The critical view of soft power laid the foundation for its characterisation in official Russian policy documents, such as the foreign policy concepts. The 2013 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation notes that soft power is becoming an integral part of modern international politics and is a complex toolkit for solving foreign policy problems by relying on civil society, information and communication technologies, humanitarian methods, and other alternatives to classical diplomacy. However, the document also highlights that increased global competition and the buildup of crisis potential lead to risks of the destructive and unlawful use of soft power for the purpose of exerting political pressure on sovereign states, interfering in their internal affairs, destabilising them, and manipulating public opinion and consciousness (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2013, 7). Despite these potential negative aspects of soft power, the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept calls for improving the system of using soft power in the Russian Federation (*ibid.*, 21).

In the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 2016, soft power is not characterised in any specific way, but it is mentioned as a set of tools used as an integral part of modern politics for solving foreign policy tasks. These tools include the capabilities of civil society, information and

communication technologies, humanitarian methods, and other approaches, in addition to traditional diplomatic methods (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2016, 25). Notably, in the most recent and current Foreign Policy Concept of 2023, the term “soft power” is not mentioned at all. This trend indicates a decline in the official use of the concept of soft power in Russian policy, or rather, a decline in the usage of the term, while the use of the related tools remains active.

Since the concept of soft power is seen in Russia as primarily a product of American political culture (Fenenko 2020, 43), it is logical that the Russian Federation, which increasingly positions itself in opposition to this Western power, seeks to distance itself from a concept attributed to the United States. A. Alikin notes that if Russia’s soft influence on the international stage becomes a significant factor in world politics, it will not be Russia’s “soft power,” but a specific, situational form of soft influence that can be attributed exclusively to Russia (Alikin 2017, 162). Based on this, Russia has increasingly emphasised the need to, first, resist the soft power of Western countries and, second, develop its own form of soft influence.

Russian soft influence outside Russia has been called sharp power. This form of influence can include attempts by a country to manipulate and manage information about itself in the media and educational systems of another country. Russian soft influence that is intended to resist Western influence and apply soft influence in Russia itself is called anti-soft power (even though there are authors who suggest it should be called “soft counter-power” instead, e.g., see Goliney 2023).

Russian Anti-soft Power as an Answer to Western Influence

The term anti-soft power (RUS: анти-мягкая сила/*anti-myagkaya sila*) was introduced into Russian political discourse by Professor A. Fenenko of the Faculty of World Politics at Moscow State University, who first formulated it in 2018 (Fenenko 2018). According to Fenenko, if soft power is the ability of an actor to attract by example, then anti-soft power is the ability of a state to make the opponent unattractive, unlikeable, and, in some cases, unacceptable in the eyes of this state’s society (Fenenko 2020, 45). Fenenko explains that if soft power is the theory of increasing the appeal of one’s political culture and weakening others, then anti-soft power is the theory of blocking the attractiveness of the opponent’s political cultures (ibid., 48).

Fenenko includes both soft and anti-soft power in the realm of cultural competition in the broad sense of the term. However, while soft power focuses on broadcasting a positive image of a country outwardly, anti-soft power is aimed at blocking this transmission and simultaneously increasing the appeal of one's own country to its domestic population. The object of soft power is another state, while the object of anti-soft power is the population of one's own country and allied states, who must be protected from the influence of the opponent (Fenenko 2020, 46).

Fenenko asserts that a state that succumbs to the application of soft power recognises its secondary, subordinate position. Acceptance of foreign norms solidifies a dependent or junior role in a hierarchy. In contrast, anti-soft power is based on the idea that a state is not willing to recognise the superiority of its opponent's rules. Such a state has serious political ambitions, does not acknowledge any external norms as superior, and refuses to accept a subordinate role (Fenenko 2020, 46). According to Fenenko, soft power relies on the stronger and more stable political culture prevailing over weaker and less stable ones. Anti-soft power, therefore, involves measures to enhance the resilience of one's own political culture, preventing the adoption of foreign values and norms. It is a set of countermeasures designed to block the opponent's soft power, backed by an alternative, attractive ideology. Such anti-soft power policies can be effective if they are part of a targeted state strategy that includes concrete measures to outmatch external influence (Fenenko 2020, 48). Fenenko's description of soft power eliminates the possibility that Russia would ever admit succumbing to the application of another country's soft power and admit Western influence as Russia would never accept superiority of Western rules and its own secondary, subordinate position and a junior role in the hierarchy of international relations or admit that it has weaker and less stable political culture.

As already mentioned, in Russia soft power is often equated with propaganda, but anti-soft power is not considered equivalent to counterpropaganda. The goal of counterpropaganda is to discredit enemy propaganda, while the aim of anti-soft power is to create a public and political discourse in which propaganda becomes nearly impossible. As Fenenko explains, counterpropaganda seeks to solve an immediate problem, while anti-soft power is intended to shape a long-term ideological discourse that makes society impervious to propaganda (Fenenko 2020, 47).

It is worth mentioning that even though the concept of anti-soft power is relatively new in the discourse of international relations, it has been pointed

out that it has already become established as part of Russia's response to Western soft power. According to S. Lalik, Russian anti-soft power opposes almost everything that the West stands for (Lalik 2017).

Based on the essence and the purpose of implementing anti-soft power, its toolkit includes methods and strategies aimed at weakening or neutralising the influence of another country's soft power. Key tools in this toolkit include narrative manipulation and control of information space, criticism of the adversary's cultural or political values and promotion of alternative values and ideologies, support of alternative alliances and international organisations, economic pressure and restrictions on foreign businesses to limit the influence of specific countries or blocs, educational and cultural programs to instil "correct" values and reduce the appeal of foreign cultural models. These instruments work to shield the state from cultural and political influence, helping it to maintain control over its audience and counteract external "threats." This chapter focuses on how Russia applies the strategy of anti-soft power using narrative manipulation as one of its key instruments.

Narrative Manipulation as a Tool of Russian Anti-soft Power

Narratives are accounts of a series of related events that shape the way people understand the world around them. Narratives are defined by a core theme (an event, a person, a strategy, etc.) around which a specific narrative – a story – unfolds. In political discourse, narratives can be described as subjective political storytelling. Political narratives serve as instruments of influence and persuasion, shaping the image of oneself and others in global politics. Narratives are part of political discourse, through which political actors attempt to influence the political landscape. For example, Russian media has consistently framed Western sanctions as an attack on the Russian way of life, while simultaneously painting Ukraine as a fascist state backed by a hostile NATO. This narrative has also extended to claims of "Nazification" in Ukraine, designed to evoke memories of World War II and rally Russian nationalist sentiment.

Narrative manipulation is prevalent in modern information spaces, utilising the narrative's inherent role in explaining and interpreting events to shape public opinion. The use of narrative manipulation has become more intense since the Russian invasion to Ukraine in 2022. Studying the political narratives of states or alliances (e.g., the Russian Federation or NATO

countries) allows us to understand their roles and goals within the international relations system and shed light on key trends in the development of international affairs.

Political narratives, crafted by leaders and influencers, go beyond reflecting reality. They actively construct public perception by selectively framing facts and events. This selective presentation appeals to audiences' emotions and shapes attitudes, helps to shift responsibility or (de)legitimise one's actions. That makes narratives especially effective for building support or opposition toward particular issues or events. Techniques used in narrative manipulation often include distortion of information and facts, legitimisation and delegitimisation, "us versus them" dichotomies, subjective judgments, and emotionally charged commentary. By embedding subjective elements within political discourse, narratives can shape mass consciousness and even reshape perceived realities.

Narrative manipulation plays a central role in Russia's anti-soft power strategy. This approach involves crafting narratives that either counter, contrast, or present opposing views to Western perspectives, positioning them less attractive or even unacceptable within Russian society. Disinformation and critical discourse about the West, its culture and political values are being strategically distributed, often through state-controlled media and cultural campaigns, to shape perceptions that frame West negatively, thereby undermining Western influence. Such narrative manipulation seeks to bolster national identity, foster cultural cohesion, and minimise the appeal of foreign political ideologies. The Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2022 has further intensified Russia's use of such narrative strategies and narratives that from Western point of view can be classified not only as contrasting or counternarratives, but as explicitly hostile.

Exploring the Contrast between Western and Russian Deterrence Narratives

One of the themes in political discourse often targeted for narrative manipulation is deterrence. The deterrence narratives hold a crucial role in shaping both Western and Russian political discourses, especially in the context of escalating tensions since the full-scale invasion of 2022. These narratives are central to both Western and Russian international relations and they revolve around how each side perceives and implements the concept of deterrence.

While both side's narratives aim to influence public perceptions, they diverge significantly in terms of national-cultural viewpoints, which shape their distinctive and often opposing characteristics.

The West's deterrence narrative generally casts Russia and its leadership, specifically President Vladimir Putin, as the primary aggressors. By contrast, the Russian deterrence narrative presents Western nations and NATO as the instigators of conflicts, positioning Russia as a defender against Western encroachment. This binary portrayal intensifies the adversarial stance between the narratives, with each side presenting the other as hostile and aggressive. This tension has been further amplified by the Russo-Ukrainian War, which features prominently in both Western and Russian deterrence narratives as each side seeks to set the other as responsible for the conflict's escalation.

Both in the West and in the Russian Federation, deterrence narratives carry a set of ideas and a specific worldview characteristic of either the Western countries or the Russian Federation. The current Russian deterrence narrative is influenced by the dominant metanarrative in the Russian Federation, which claims that Western countries are opposing Russia. It is also influenced by the narrative of the Russo-Ukrainian War and the historical narrative of World War II, with parallels now being actively drawn to support and even construct contemporary narratives, including the Russian deterrence narrative (e.g., see Putin 2020, Vihmand-Veebel 2024).

In the West and Russia alike, deterrence narratives act as tools for justifying and guiding political decisions, mobilising public support for policy measures, and framing future actions. For Russia, the deterrence narrative prepared its population for the possibility of military action well before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and continues to legitimise Russian aggression in Ukraine ever since. In the West, this narrative framework also aligns with a broader strategic effort to counteract Russian aggression through NATO and allied policies.

Ultimately, the deterrence narratives function as tools within a broader narrative confrontation, where both sides develop and deploy counter-narratives to challenge the opposing viewpoint. The result is a highly polarised discourse, one where political narratives not only reflect but actively shape international relations.

The divergence in narratives is further underscored by linguistic differences, particularly in how the concept of deterrence is understood and translated between Western and Russian contexts. In English-speaking

NATO countries, “deterrence” has a relatively standardised meaning, whereas, in Russian, there is no unambiguous and unambiguously understandable equivalent for the Western term “deterrence.” This term has several possible translations. Typically, the Russian translation for “deterrence” is “*sderzhivaniye*”, a term that implies containment, restraining, or holding back. Notably, “*sderzhivaniye*” carries a broader and less precise meaning compared to the Western understanding of deterrence, often encompassing elements that in English-speaking contexts would require separate terms (Vihmand-Veebel and Veebel 2023, 35-36).

The Russian noun “*sderzhivaniye*” and the related verb “*sderzhivat*” are used in a wider variety of contexts than “deterrence” and “deter” in English and can convey additional connotations beyond deterrence in the strict Western sense. This semantic variance shapes how Russian-speaking audiences interpret and internalise the Russian deterrence narrative presented within Russian discourse, affecting public perceptions of international relations and defence policies.

To sum it up, deterrence narratives shape Western and Russian discourses, each portraying the other as aggressor, especially in the context of the Russian actions in Ukraine. These narratives, rooted in cultural and historical perspectives, justify political actions and mobilise public support, intensifying adversarial tensions.

Narrative Manipulation and Anti-soft Power in Russia’s Deterrence Rhetoric after February 2022

The following section examines how narrative manipulation has functioned as a key instrument of Russian anti-soft power since February 2022, focusing specifically on Russia’s deterrence narrative as a case study. The data analysed is a part of a corpus of the Kremlin’s rhetoric referring to deterrence. This corpus is made up from the speeches, messages, press conferences, statements, articles, and the like that were published on the Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia website kremlin.ru from 21 February 2022 until 24 February 2024. This periodisation enables a focus on the last days leading up to the invasion of Ukraine and to cover the first two years of the full-scale war. The article highlights how the Russian political elite depicts the West, the Western deterrence efforts, Ukraine, and Russia itself within the framework of the Russian deterrence narrative following February 2022.

The analysed texts reveal various forms of narrative manipulation employed to shape perceptions of the conflict and interactions between Russia and the West. Multiple techniques are used to influence the feelings and emotions of the audience, thereby reinforcing certain narratives, and emphasising themes that intensify audience's emotional perception of the conflict. The following examples will demonstrate this further.

Kremlin narratives portray the West as destabilising and hypocritical. Western political and cultural norms are presented as undesirable or threatening. The United States is seen as striving to maintain global dominance, but its influence is perceived as waning due to the rise of new power centres, making US strategies ineffective in the long term. NATO is portrayed as actively fuelling and sustaining the conflict with Russia to serve its own goals. The Alliance is characterised as aggressive and provocative, aiming to deter Russia and other independent nations, with Ukraine being used as a tool to weaken Russia. Within the Kremlin narrative, NATO is not a defensive alliance but a geopolitical instrument of Western interests (e.g., see Kremlin 2022a; Kremlin 2022b; Kremlin 2023a).

The West's policy toward Russia is described as strategically aggressive to curb Russia's development. Kremlin texts delegitimise adversaries by portraying them through imagery of aggression and corruption, repeatedly positioning Western countries – particularly the United States and NATO – as primary instigators of conflicts driven by a desire to preserve dominance by controlling and suppressing sovereign states, including Russia (e.g., see Kremlin 2022c; Kremlin 2023b; Kremlin 2023c). This creates a negative perception of the West among the Russian audience, intensifying an emotional rejection of the actions of the United States and its allies, including the ones related to Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The Russian narrative often frames events in Ukraine not as a direct conflict between Ukraine and Russia but as a result of Western intervention, where Ukraine is used as an instrument in the geopolitical struggle against Russia (e.g., see Kremlin 2023a; Kremlin 2023d; Kremlin 2023e). This shifts the focus away from internal causes of the conflict toward external players. The Russo-Ukrainian War is interpreted not as a Russia-Ukraine conflict, but as a part of the West's broader strategy to weaken Russia. The narrative suggests that the conflict is a result of long-standing Western efforts to curb Russia's strategic capacity and economic growth (e.g., see Kremlin 2022d; Kremlin 2022e; Kremlin 2022f).

Within this framework, Ukraine is presented as a manipulated entity, sacrificed to the West's geopolitical aims, with Western nations allegedly prolonging the crisis through military and financial support to pursue their goal of global dominance. Ukraine is portrayed as the frontline in a broader battle for a multipolar world order, as a victim of Western policies, and a tool NATO and the United States use to increase tensions at Russia's borders and destabilise the country (e.g., see Kremlin 2023d; Kremlin 2023f). Depicting Ukraine as a victim of Western manipulation evokes anger and resentment toward Western nations, portrayed as exploiting Ukraine to advance their own agendas against Russia. In this way, narrative manipulation operates here by shifting responsibility to the West, demonising its actions, and extolling Russia's resilience, which collectively fosters a specific interpretation of the conflict and its underlying causes.

Further, Russia is framed as a victim of the West's long-term deterrence strategy. In Russian discourse, Western deterrence is framed in a negative light as hostile and ineffective. The Western deterrence strategy appears multifaceted and purposeful, intended to restrict the international standing and progression of emerging powers, especially Russia, China, and India. This long-term approach is seen as a systematic effort by the West, led by the United States, to sustain global leadership by suppressing the autonomy and growth of potential rivals through economic, technological, political, and, at times, military measures. In Kremlin narratives, the conflict between Russia and Western countries is framed as a global struggle for survival against oppressors. It is argued that Russia is not merely engaged in a conflict in Ukraine but is resisting global pressure and NATO expansion, casting this effort as a war for independence and sovereignty (e.g., see Kremlin 2022g; Kremlin 2022h; Kremlin 2022i; Kremlin 2022j; Kremlin 2022k; Kremlin 2023g; Kremlin 2023h). Such a narrative fosters patriotic feelings and a sense of pride among the audience, intensifying the emotional impact.

The Kremlin's perspective sees the United States as the main initiator and organiser of the deterrence policy against Russia and its allies, playing a dominant role in the conflict between Russia and the Western states. The Russian narrative claims that the West applies its deterrence strategy not only toward Russia but also toward all nations pursuing independent development. This narrative constructs an image of a global conflict between sovereign nations and the West that seeks to retain hegemony by stifling other countries' progress. The Kremlin's narrative notes that Western countries engage in an information and ideological warfare to justify their deterrence

policy, spreading anti-Russian, anti-Islamic, and other biases to discredit nations who challenge Western hegemony (e.g., see Kremlin 2022l; Kremlin 2022m; Kremlin 2023i).

The Russian Federation itself is portrayed as a central player in the global confrontation with the West, positioned as an independent state countering aggressive Western policies to protect its sovereignty and foster a multipolar world order. The narrative emphasises Russia's role in advocating for a fair world system, where multiple independent power centres, including allies like China and the BRICS organisation, can thrive free from Western dominance. This portrayal includes Russia's successful resilience against Western sanctions, highlighting the stability of its economy and technological sectors. Russia is depicted as advancing its defence industry and scientific development, showcasing new technological and economic initiatives that seek to reduce dependence on Western economies and fortify its global position (e.g., see Kremlin 2022n; Kremlin 2022o; Kremlin 2023j; Kremlin 2023k).

Sanctions are viewed as provocative actions that intensify rather than resolve conflict. They are described as instruments used to destabilise entire regions and create economic and political challenges for Russia and its allies. Implementing sanctions is sometimes compared even to declaring a war against Russia. According to the Russian narrative, the West leverages sanctions as an ineffective primary tool to weaken Russia, viewing economic pressure as an attempt to destabilise Russia internally and obstruct its global development, but that Russia has managed to adapt and continue its development despite the restrictions. The Kremlin's narrative delegitimises sanctions imposed by the West, being explicitly labelled as illegitimate. Western sanctions are portrayed as tools of deterrence and suppression against Russia, evoking a sense of injustice among the audience, who perceive such actions as aggression toward their country (e.g., see Kremlin 2022p; Kremlin 2022q; Kremlin 2023l).

In Kremlin narratives, Russia is portrayed as a nation that is constantly being deterred and besieged, yet one that maintains internal strength and unity. This framing creates a sense of external threat and legitimises Russia's efforts to resist international pressure. Russia is depicted as a victim under external duress, forced to defend itself against the aggressive actions of the West, particularly the United States and NATO (e.g., see Kremlin 2022r; Kremlin 2022s; Kremlin 2023b; Kremlin 2023d). This portrayal generates sympathy among the audience for Russia's stance and evokes a sense of injustice. It is emphasised that Russia is not the instigator of the conflict but

is instead compelled to respond to Western aggression. This portrayal creates the impression that Russia is defending itself against external pressure rather than initiating offensive actions. Such depiction supports Russia's narrative about their own deterrence strategy that is presented as a defensive strategy implemented to protect Russia and its allies from external aggression (e.g., see Kremlin 2022p; Kremlin 2023m; Kremlin 2023n).

In the Kremlin's narrative, there is a clear dichotomy of "us" (Russia and its allies) versus "them" (the Western countries). The conflict is presented in black and white, with Russia symbolising goodness, sovereignty, and truth, and the West symbolising evil, aggression, and the desire for world domination. This presentation intensifies the emotional perception of the conflict between Russia and the West, evoking a strong sense of allegiance to the "righteous" side of the struggle.

The Impact of Linguistic Complexity on the Perception of Deterrence

The analysis confirmed that the Russian terms "*sderzhivaniye*" and its variation "*sderzhivat*" encompass a broader and more variable meaning compared to the Western understanding of deterrence and are used in a wider variety of contexts than "deterrence" and "deter" in English. Besides original Russian language texts, the Kremlin's website has an English version that features translated texts. In these translations "*sderzhivaniye*" and "*sderzhivat*" are often translated other than "deterrence" and "to deter". Based on the context, they are also translated as "containment", "containing", "to contain", "to hold back", "to curb", "to hamper", "to restrict", "to restrain", "to hinder", "to rein", "to avert", "to constrain." In English, these alternatives are semantically more precise, conveying distinct nuances that the Russian terms "*sderzhivaniye*" and "*sderzhivat*" do not inherently specify. The broader application of a single term (and its forms) within diverse contexts in Russian language influences the interpretation of deterrence strategy (both Western and Russian), shaping audience percept and understand deterrence differently than in English.

Conclusion

The Kremlin's narrative manipulation effectively fulfils its objectives as a tool of Russian anti-soft power. Kremlin rhetoric portrays Ukraine as a Western pawn and the West as an aggressor, who aims to encroach on Russian sovereignty and suppress emerging global powers. Russian narratives undermine the appeal of Western values and norms. They portray Western countries and their political systems as immoral, hypocritical, and inherently corrupt. This strategy is used to make Russian opponents and their political cultures unattractive or even unacceptable to Russian domestic population.

The deterrence narratives, crafted for both domestic and allied audiences, aim to delegitimise Western motives, while reinforcing Russia's ideological stance and national solidarity. By framing Western influence as hostile, Russian state media and official channels foster patriotic and defensive sentiments, aiming to consolidate domestic support and shape ideological discourse to favour Kremlin policies and justify its actions. Findings indicate that Russia's anti-soft power strategy intends to increase the appeal of Russia to its domestic population, strengthen internal cohesion, and legitimise its geopolitical stance by emphasising sovereignty and national strength in opposition to the West.

Moreover, Kremlin's narrative manipulation significantly impacts the preconditions for Ukraine to restore its territorial integrity and sovereignty after the full-scale invasion in 2022. By promoting disinformation and framing the conflict as a defensive measure against Western aggression, Russia strives to undermine both domestic and international support for Ukraine and create divisions among its allies. This manipulation seeks to erode global consensus on Ukraine's sovereignty and create confusion and alternative interpretations of the conflict, which can delay or derail efforts to negotiate a resolution favouring Ukraine's sovereignty.

References

- Alikin, A. A. 2017. "Myagkaya sila i normativnaya sila Yevropy: genealogicheskiye istoki dvukh kontseptsiy myagkogo vliyaniya v mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniyakh" [Soft power and normative power of Europe: genealogical origins of two concepts of soft influence in international relations]. *Vestnik Permskogo universiteta*, 4: 152–164.
- Fenenko, A. 2018. "Vozmozhna li «anti-myagkaya sila?»" [*Is anti-soft power possible?*]. *Rossiyskiy sovet po mezhdunarodnym delam [Russian International Affairs Council]*, November 16, 2018. <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/vozmozhna-li-anti-myagkaya-sila/>.
- Fenenko, A. 2020. "Anti-myagkaya sila v politicheskoy teorii i praktike" [Anti-soft power in political theory and practice]. *Mezhdunarodnyye protsessy* 18, 1: 40–71.
- Goliney, V. A. 2023. "Kontseptual'noye pereosmysleniye «myagkoy sily»: otechestvennyy i latinoamerikanskiy vzglyad" [Conceptual rethinking of "soft power": domestic and Latin American views]. *Vek globalizatsii*, 2: 102–116.
- Izotov, V. S. 2011. "«Myagkaya moshch'»: obnovlennyy teoreticheskiy kontsept i rossiyskaya model' dlya sborki" ["Soft power": an updated theoretical concept and a Russian model for assembly]. *Vestnik Rossiyskogo universiteta druzhby narodov*, 4: 146–155.
- Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii [Concept of foreign policy of the Russian Federation]. 2013. President of Russia official website. <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d447a0ce9f5a96bdc3.pdf>.
- Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii [Concept of foreign policy of the Russian Federation]. 2016. President of Russia official website. <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/acts/files/0001201612010045.pdf>.
- Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii [Concept of foreign policy of the Russian Federation]. 2023. *Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation]*. https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/1860586/.
- Kremlin. 2022a. "Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii" [Address by the President of the Russian Federation]. President of Russia official website, February 21, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.
- Kremlin. 2022b. "Vstrecha s predstavitel'nitsami lotnogo sostava rossiyskikh aviakompaniy" [Meeting with female aircrew members of Russian airlines]. President of Russia official website, March 5, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67913>.
- Kremlin. 2022c. "Vstrecha s Prezidentom Belorussii Aleksandrom Lukashenko" [Meeting with President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko]. President of Russia official website, March 11, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67963>.
- Kremlin. 2022d. "Soveshchaniye o merakh sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoy podderzhki regionov" [Meeting on socioeconomic support for regions]. President of Russia official website, March 16, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67996>.

- Kremlin. 2022e. "Vstrecha s Sovetom zakonodateley" [Meeting with Council of Lawmakers]. President of Russia official website, April 27, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68297>.
- Kremlin. 2022f. "Vstrecha s rukovodstvom Gosdumy i glavami fraktsiy" [Meeting with State Duma leaders and party faction heads]. President of Russia official website, July 7, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68836>.
- Kremlin. 2022g. "Pervyy Yevraziyskiy ekonomicheskiy forum" [First Eurasian Economic Forum]. President of Russia official website, May 26, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68484>.
- Kremlin. 2022h. "Zasedaniye Soveta po strategicheskomu razvitiyu i natsional'nym proyektam" [Meeting of Council for Strategic Development and National Projects]. President of Russia official website, July 18, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69019>.
- Kremlin. 2022i. "Soveshchaniye po voprosam razvitiya metallurgicheskogo kompleksa" [Meeting on metallurgical complex development]. President of Russia official website, August 1, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69089>.
- Kremlin. 2022j. "Podpisaniye dogovorov o prinyatii DNR, LNR, Zaporozhskoy i Khersonskoy oblastey v sostav Rossii" [Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia]. President of Russia official website, September 30, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>.
- Kremlin. 2022k. "Zasedaniye Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba «Valday»" [Valdai International Discussion Club meeting]. President of Russia official website, October 27, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>.
- Kremlin. 2022l. "Obrashcheniye k uchastnikam i gostyam X Moskovskoy konferentsii po mezhdunarodnoy bezopasnosti" [Address to participants and guests of the 10th Moscow Conference on International Security]. President of Russia official website, August 16, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69166>.
- Kremlin. 2022m. "Videoobrashcheniye k uchastnikam vstrechi glav oboronnykh vedomstv gosudarstv – chlenov SHOS i SNG" [Video address to the participants of the joint meeting of SCO and CIS defence ministers]. President of Russia official website, December 9, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70057>.
- Kremlin. 2022n. "Plenarnoye zasedaniye Peterburgskogo mezhdunarodnogo ekonomicheskogo foruma" [St Petersburg International Economic Forum Plenary session]. President of Russia official website, June 17, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68669>.
- Kremlin. 2022o. "Vstrecha «BRIKS plyus»" [BRICS+ meeting]. President of Russia official website, June 24, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68700>.
- Kremlin. 2022p. "Vstrecha s Sergeyem Shoigu i Valeriyem Gerasimovym" [Meeting with Sergei Shoigu and Valery Gerasimov]. President of Russia official website, February 27, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68700>.

- Kremlin. 2022q. “Soveshchaniye po razvitiyu aviaperevozok i aviastroyeniya” [Meeting on development of air transport and aircraft manufacturing]. President of Russia official website, March 31, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68097>.
- Kremlin. 2022r. “Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [Address by the President of the Russian Federation]. President of Russia official website, February 24, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.
- Kremlin. 2022s. “Vladimir Putin pozdravil sotrudnikov i veteranov SVR so stoletiyem nelegal'noy razvedki” [Vladimir Putin congratulated current staff and veterans of the Foreign Intelligence Service on the centenary of illegal intelligence]. President of Russia official website, June 30, 2022. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68790>.
- Kremlin. 2023a. “Vstrecha s Prezidentom Eritrei Isayyasom Afevorki” [Meeting with President of Eritrea Isaias Afwerki]. President of Russia official website, July 28, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71830>.
- Kremlin. 2023b. “Vstrecha s Prezidentom Eritrei Isayyasom Afevorki” [Meeting with President of Eritrea Isaias Afwerki]. President of Russia official website, May 31, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71261>.
- Kremlin. 2023c. “Soveshchaniye s chlenami Soveta Bezopasnosti, Pravitel'stva i rukovodstvom silovykh vedomstv” [Meeting with members of the Security Council and Government, and heads of security agencies]. President of Russia official website, October 30, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72618>.
- Kremlin. 2023d. “Zasedaniye Soveta glav gosudarstv – chlenov SHOS” [SCO Heads of State Council meeting]. President of Russia official website, July 4, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71578>.
- Kremlin. 2023e. “Vstrecha s molodymi uchonymi-yadershchikami” [Meeting with young nuclear scientists]. President of Russia official website, September 8, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72220>.
- Kremlin. 2023f. “Rasshirennoye zasedaniye kollegii Minoborony” [Expanded meeting of Defence Ministry Board]. President of Russia official website, December 19, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73035>.
- Kremlin. 2023g. “Plenarnoye zasedaniye Peterburgskogo mezhdunarodnogo ekonomicheskogo foruma” [Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum]. President of Russia official website, June 16, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71445>.
- Kremlin. 2023h. “Plenarnoye zasedaniye vos'mogo Vostochnogo ekonomicheskogo foruma” [Plenary session of the 8th Eastern Economic Forum]. President of Russia official website, September 12, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72259>.
- Kremlin. 2023i. “Vstrecha s predstavatelyami religioznykh ob'yedineniy” [Meeting with representatives of religious associations]. President of Russia official website, October 25, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72593>.
- Kremlin. 2023j. “Zasedaniye v formate «BRICS plus/autrich»” [Meeting in the BRICS Plus/Outreach format]. President of Russia official website, August 24, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72096>.

- Kremlin. 2023k. "Investitsionnyy forum «Rossiya zovot!»" [Russia Calling! Investment Forum]. President of Russia official website, December 7, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72926>.
- Kremlin. 2023l. "Sammit Rossiya – Afrika" [Russia–Africa Summit]. President of Russia official website, July 28, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71826>.
- Kremlin. 2023m. "Vstrecha s vypusknikami voyennykh vuzov" [Meeting with top graduates of higher military schools]. President of Russia official website, June 21, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71472>.
- Kremlin. 2023n. "Soveshchaniye po razvitiyu ZATO i gorodov v Arkticheskoy zone" [Meeting on closed administrative territorial units and towns in the Arctic]. President of Russia official website, July 20, 2023. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71711>.
- Lalik, S. 2017. "Russian orthodox church as a source of soft power." *Institute of International Relations Prague*, September 19, 2017. <https://www.iir.cz/en/russian-orthodox-church-as-a-source-of-the-russian-sof>. Accessed November 27, 2023.
- Lebedeva, M. M. 2017. "«Myagkaya sila»: ponyatiye i podkhody" ["Soft power": concept and approaches]. *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta*, 3: 212–223.
- Putin, V. 2012. "Rossiya i menyayushchiysya mir" [Russia and the changing world]. *Moskovskiy novosti*, December 27, 2012. <https://www.mn.ru/politics/78738>.
- Putin 2020 = "Vladimir Putin: The Real lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II." 2020. *The National Interest*. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982>.
- Vihmand-Veebel L., Veebel V. 2023. "The Linguistic Factor in Deterrence Conversation between Russia and the West: If and How Russians Understand the Meaning of "Deterrence"?" *Canadian Journal of European and Russian Studies*, 16 (2): 30–47.
- Vihmand-Veebel, L. 2024. "Vihmand-Veebel L. Weaponised Historical Narratives: Russian World War II Narratives as Tools of Kremlin Propaganda." *The Conference on Russia Papers 2024: The Paradox of power: Ukraine's Struggle, Russia's Dilemmas, and Global Consequences*: 49–62. University of Tartu Press.

21. Repulsing Russian Armed Aggression: The Experience of the Ukrainian Defence Forces (February–May 2022)

Dr. Vasyl Servatyuk^{*}

LTC Andriy Mostovoy^{**}

COL Ludmila Servatyuk^{***}

Abstract

The large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marked a pivotal moment in modern European history as the first major war within a multipolar international system. This full-scale war drastically reshaped perceptions of national security threats for Ukraine, testing the country's defence capabilities, especially in how the Ukrainian Defence Forces confronted Russia's aggression. This article presents a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of the Ukrainian Defence Forces' experience during the initial phase of the Russo-Ukrainian War (February-May 2022). It focuses on the early clashes between the Armed Forces of Ukraine and Russia, exploring tactical approaches used by Ukraine's Defence Forces in modern high-tech warfare. In particular, the defence of Kyiv is highlighted, providing insight into strategic and operational decisions. The analysis identifies key elements of armed confrontation in this phase, focusing on how advanced combat methods and a diverse mix of forces were utilised effectively. Special emphasis is placed on the hybrid warfare techniques employed by the Russian Federation, especially in the initial stages. These included coordinated strikes on civilian infrastructure, energy facilities, and the use of missile, air, and artillery assaults. The article evaluates these tactics to provide a clearer understanding of potential future enemy behaviour and to aid in the development of effective defensive strategies by Ukrainian forces. Through the application of a rigorous methodology, this analysis draws on a variety of sources to critically assess the combat experience, offering valuable lessons for enhancing Ukraine's defence strategies both presently and in the long term.

^{*} Armed Forces of Ukraine, Professor of the Department of Operational Art at the National Defence University of Ukraine, Kyiv

^{**} Senior Lecturer at the Department of Border Control of the Bohdan Khmelnytskyi National Academy of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, Khmelnytsky

^{***} Candidate of Law, Associate Professor of the Department of General Legal Disciplines of the National Academy of the Security Service of Ukraine, Kyiv

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian war, Ukrainian Defence Forces, national security, tactical approaches

24 February 2022 presented Ukraine, its defence forces, and the Ukrainian people with extremely difficult tasks that had to be solved without the right to make a mistake, as the existence of Ukraine as a sovereign state was at stake. Throughout its history, Ukraine has been a powerful resource, military-industrial, and spiritual donor for Russia.

The restoration of Ukraine's state independence in 1991 was a challenge to the Russian imperial consciousness and a psychological trauma for Russian political leaders. Almost immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian state leadership started talking about Ukraine as a "temporarily lost territory" (Tsevelov and Viter 2024; Zaluzhnyi and Zabrodskyi n.d.; Korenev n.d.). An analysis of various sources of information shows that Russia had been planning an armed invasion of Ukraine in advance, and the victory of the Revolution of Dignity in 2014 was only a convenient pretext for this. The active phase of Russian aggression against Ukraine began on 20 February 2014, with the operation of the Russian armed forces to seize part of the territory of Ukraine – the Crimean Peninsula.

The next stage of Russian aggression was an attempt to destabilise the situation in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine with the aim of creating a quasi-state 'Novorossiya' on this territory. The active phase of Russia's armed aggression was then stopped, but part of Ukraine's territory (the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and part of Donbas) remained occupied. But Russia's imperial ambitions were not satisfied.

Over the past eight years, Russia has significantly increased its military capabilities and significantly increased the number of operational and combat training activities (Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022a; Tsevelov and Viter 2024; Korenev n.d.).

Study of the first stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war clearly demonstrates that it was under the guise of operational and combat training that Russia regrouped a significant number of troops towards the state border with Ukraine in 2021 and in 2022 completed the creation of five strike groups to invade Ukraine.

In the border areas of Belarus, under the guise of the joint Russian-Belarusian exercise "Allied Determination – 2022," a group of troops was deployed, including about 20 BTGr from the 5th, 29th, 35th, 36th A, coastal

troops of the Pacific Fleet of the Eastern Military District (MD), and airborne troops (AT). At the same time, a formation of airborne troops and marines consisting of up to 12 BTGs (from the 98th, 106th airborne, 76th infantry, 31st brigade and 155th infantry) was created specifically to storm the capital of Ukraine, Kyiv.

In the Bryansk region, the enemy deployed a group of troops – up to 16 BTGs from the 2nd, 41st A, and 90th Armoured Forces of the Central Military District.

Directly in the Kursk and Belgorod regions, the enemy deployed a group of troops, which included up to 25 BTGs from the 6th, 20th A, and 1st TA of the Western Military District, as well as the Northern Fleet.

In the Rostov region, the enemy deployed a group of troops – up to 17 BTGs from the 8th A of the Southern Military District. In the temporarily occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the 1st and 2nd AKs were operating.

In Crimea, Russia deployed a grouping of the Southern Military District and the Airborne Forces – up to 26 BTGs from formations, military units, and subdivisions of the 8th, 58th A, 22nd AK of the Southern Military District, the Black Sea Fleet coastal troops, the Caspian Flotilla, and the 7th Airborne Division.

In total, the ground grouping of troops (forces) along the state border of Ukraine and on the territory of the Crimean Peninsula included more than 100 BTGs and consisted of: personnel – up to 140 thousand servicemen; OTRK – 66, tanks – up to 2000; APCS – more than 5570, artillery systems – up to 1950, MLRS – up to 700 units.

Up to 480 tactical aircraft and up to 450 helicopters were concentrated in the 400-kilometre zone near the state border of Ukraine.

The Black Sea Fleet, reinforced by amphibious and artillery boats from the Caspian Flotilla and the Baltic and Northern Fleets, had more than 40 warships and 6 submarines (Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022a; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022b; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022c; Zbirnyk materialiv vyvchennia boiovooho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 2 materialiv vyvchennia boiovooho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 3 materialiv vyvchennia boiovooho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Tsevelov and Viter 2024; Zaluzhnyi and Zabrodskyy n.d.; Ofitsiynyi sait Heneralnoho shtabu ZS Ukrainy n.d.; Ofitsiynyi sait Ministerstva oborony Ukrainy n.d.; Ukrinform n.d.; Korenev n.d.)

In addition, a grouping of Russian troops consisting of the 1st (Donetsk) and 2nd (Luhansk) Army Corps was created on the temporarily occupied territory of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine.

The manpower of the 1st and 2nd AK was about 35 thousand soldiers. These army corps were armed with 481 battle tanks (T-64, T-72, T-80); 4,914 armoured combat vehicles (BMP-1, BTR-70, 80, BRDM, MTLB); 720 artillery systems (D-20, D-30, SAU “Gvozdika”, SAU “Acacia”, MT-12 “Rapier”); 280 mortars and 202 units of multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS BM-21; BM-30K9 “Uragan”).

On 24 February, the enemy launched a strategic offensive. According to the forecast made at that time, it was assumed that the enemy could conduct a strategic offensive operation lasting up to 30 days, during which it would most likely try to accomplish the following strategic tasks of taking over the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine with the creation of a land corridor to the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Transnistria; establishing control over the city of Kyiv and bringing a pro-Russian puppet government to power; and creating of a “buffer zone” along Ukraine’s border with European NATO countries on the western border (Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022a; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022b; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022c; Zbirnyk materialiv vyvchennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 2 materialiv vyvchennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 3 materialiv vyvchennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Tsevelov and Viter 2024; Ofitsiyni sait Heneralnogo shtabu ZS Ukrainy n.d.; Ofitsiyni sait Ministerstva oborony Ukrainy n.d.; Ukrinform n.d.; Korenev n.d.).

The analysis shows that the offensive was conducted by the enemy’s established groups of troops simultaneously from five directions on a front of around 2600 kilometres (from Vilcha to Skadovsk). In the first week, up to 60% of the tactical groups deployed around the state border were brought into the territory of Ukraine.

The plans of Russia’s military leadership included the capture of Kyiv in 2–3 days and the occupation of most of Ukraine within 7–10 days. The main strike was carried out by the Western Military District in the direction of Suja, Sumy, Konotop, and Kyiv, by the forces of the Southern Military District in the directions of Armiansk, Kherson, Dzhankoy, and Melitopol, and by the Eastern Military District and the VDP in the direction of Mozyr and Kyiv.

In order to surround and defeat the grouping of the Joint Forces, which was conducting a defensive operation in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the enemy tried to launch flanking attacks with the forces of the 2nd AK and part of the 20th A.

At the same time, the enemy launched an air operation to hit critical facilities throughout the country. During the six days of the operation, the enemy managed to penetrate the territory of Ukraine in different directions to a depth of 190 kilometres, including partially blocking Kyiv from the north and northwest, capturing Kherson, Nova Kakhovka, and Melitopol.

After capturing Kherson, the enemy tried to bypass Mykolaiv from the north and advance toward Odesa but was unsuccessful. In this regard, the enemy refused to conduct a naval amphibious operation in the area of Odesa (Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022a; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022b; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022c; Zbirnyk materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 2 materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 3 materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Tselov and Viter 2024; Ofitsiyni sait Heneralnoho shtabu ZS Ukrainy n.d.; Ofitsiyni sait Ministerstva oborony Ukrainy n.d.; Ukrinform n.d.; Korenev n.d.).

The analysis shows that during the initial phase of the first stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war (24 February-2 March 2022), Russian troops managed to achieve significant success and seized Ukrainian territory in the Kupiansk direction of Kharkiv region, in the Sumy direction, and in the south of Ukraine in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions. Almost 3 hours after the invasion, the city of Nova Kakhovka was captured, and 6–8 hours later, the cities of Melitopol and Kherson were captured as well.

During the second phase of the first stage of the war (3-17 March 2022), the main principle in the actions of the Russian army was to inflict maximum losses on the means of armed struggle of the Ukrainian Defence Forces, reduce their will to resist, and continue to seize new territories.

During the third phase of the first stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war (18–29 March 2022), the Russian army continued its attempts to seize new territories. At the same time, using high-precision weapons, they shifted their main efforts to targeting ammunition, fuel, and lubricants depots, military training centres, defence industry enterprises, and critical infrastructure facilities located in central and western Ukraine.

During the fourth phase of the first stage (30 March–20 April 2022), having suffered significant losses, the Russian army began withdrawing its forces from the northern direction and from under the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, suspending its offensive in the southern direction.

During the first month of the war, the enemy partially lost its offensive capabilities, was stopped in some areas and suffered significant losses, namely: up to 13% of personnel (about 16 thousand people), 30% of tanks (561), 33% of armoured combat vehicles (1625), 16% of guns (291), 11% of multiple launch rocket systems (90), 26% of aircraft (115), 25% of helicopters (125).

Having suffered significant losses in the first months of the war, being unable to hold the captured territory and surround the capital city of Kyiv with limited forces, the military and political leadership of the Russian Federation was forced to withdraw its troops from Sumy, Chernihiv, Kyiv, and Zhytomyr regions and move them to the south.

After that, the enemy announced the completion of the so-called “first stage” of the special military operation (Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022a; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022b; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022c; Zbirnyk materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 2 materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 3 materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Tsevelov and Viter 2024; Ofitsiyni sait Heneralnoho shtabu ZS Ukrainy n.d.; Ofitsiyni sait Ministerstva oborony Ukrainy n.d.; Ukrinform n.d.; Korenev n.d.) . Let us analyse and summarise some crucial details of the enemy’s actions.

In offensive operations, the enemy continued to implement the concept of tactical groups. The official publications of the Russian Federation define a tactical group as a temporary ground formation created for the period of a combat mission under a single command by providing the main combat unit with other combat (special) and support units to increase its autonomy while performing tasks independently or as part of formations (associations). In addition to BTGs, tactical groups may also be created in formations and military units of the military services and special forces to perform relevant tasks.

The idea of creating tactical groups is not new, and the Russians recognise this. But they have gone about implementing this concept somewhat differently. In the 1990s, the Russians created regimental tactical groups

because of ‘poverty.’ At that time, a Russian division could ‘squeeze out’ a maximum of one combat-ready regiment, which in the Chechen war was usually a “prefabricated” regiment, and which the Russians themselves called “rabble.”

The main Russian combat unit in the Caucasus at that time was a regiment or brigade. They were formed from various units from divisions and armies. In the second Chechen war, such regiments were more carefully equipped. Existing staffs were changed, additional forces and means of the division were introduced, thus completing a truly reinforced regiment to solve a specific combat task in the North Caucasus. This was a “regimental tactical group” in the modern sense.

The division could relatively quickly, at the request of an operating remote regiment, provide it with everything it needed to accomplish its current combat missions, and after completing them, return the forces and means that were no longer needed to the PFA.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Russian army was still on the margins of state funding and support. At that time, divisions and brigades began to form battalions of permanent combat readiness with the means to reinforce these brigades and regiments. This is how the expression “battalion tactical group” appeared in Russia, which was again picked up from the world by the thread, scraping together all the most valuable things that were in military units and forming combat-ready reinforced battalions.

The Russian BTGr of 2014–2015 were essentially battalions with relatively little reinforcement, manned by contract and conscript soldiers and sergeants. Since 2017, the BTGr has been manned only by contract soldiers.

In 2022, the Russians used BTGs, many of which had a combat potential approaching half of the brigade’s combat potential. At the same time, the commander of a BTGr could often be the commander or deputy commander of a brigade (regiment) (Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022a; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022b; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022c; Zbirnyk materialiv vyvchennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 2 materialiv vyvchennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 3 materialiv vyvchennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Dosvid ta uroky boiv oborony m. Kyiv 2022; Tsevelov and Viter 2024; Zaluzhnyi and Zabrodskyyi n.d.).

The analysis suggests that in the first stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the leaders of the Russian Armed Forces used different approaches to

the formation of tactical groups. They consider it ideal when one BTG is simultaneously allocated from a brigade or regiment to perform combat missions, and a second BTG is created from the rest of the brigade (regiment), which is in reserve. After a certain time, the second BTG replaces the first on a rotational basis. At the same time, the brigade (regiment) retains one mechanised or tank battalion and some support units that are not assigned to the BTG and can be used to restore the combat capability lost by the BTG during combat missions.

When two or three BTGs are allocated to a brigade (regiment) at the same time, the possibility of using them on a rotational basis disappears, which makes it difficult to perform relatively long tasks in the direction assigned to the tactical group.

According to the Russians, it is advisable to use BTGs in conducting rapid offensive operations in wide areas where the enemy has built a focal defence. The combination of several BTGs acting in a coordinated manner within the framework of a single task with the support of tactical groups of services and special forces from a divisional or army set of troops allows for a greater effect than the use of a single brigade tactical group in the same area. At the same time, an operational unit operating in tactical groups can regroup faster in rapidly changing conditions (Zaluzhnyi and Zabrodskiyi n.d.; Korenev n.d.).

The generalised experience of the enemy's warfare allows us to conclude that, at the same time, in the hostilities of 2022, the enemy's BTGs also showed their weaknesses, the main ones being the following:

- The BTG's limited own intelligence capabilities and the ineffective construction of the system for transmitting intelligence information from the higher headquarters slowed down the pace of the Russian troops' advance;
- the stretched formation of the BTG along the roads and open flanks forced the enemy to allocate significant forces from the BTG to protect and defend the units and their own communications, which proved ineffective in the face of active resistance from the local population and the actions of mobile fire groups of Ukrainian troops;
- the imperfection of the logistics system caused delays in the supply of material supplies, which mainly reduced the fire and manoeuvring capabilities of the BTG, especially during the first stage of the so-called "special military operation;"

- the low level of medical care due to the inability to provide fast, qualified assistance near the battlefield led to a significant increase in mortality among the wounded, which had a psychological effect on the units and reduced the effectiveness of their actions.

In addition, the Russian approach to commanding troops, which is the antithesis of the Western concept of “Mission Command,” did not allow unit commanders to be properly active and proactive, which is the key to success in modern warfare (Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022a; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022b; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022c; Zbirnyk materialiv vyvchennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 2 materialiv vyvchennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 3 materialiv vyvchennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zaluzhnyi and Zabrodskyy n.d.; Korenev n.d.).

Ukraine has been persistently preparing to repel Russia’s large-scale armed aggression, which is reflected in a number of public documents, including the Military Security Strategy of Ukraine.

The armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine has put on the agenda the issue of improving the model of organisation of the state’s defence, which has led to the need to revise the content of the national military art. The practice of military art has revealed the need to revise the organisation of troops, their command-and-control system, approaches to the creation of groups of troops (forces), and the procedure for preparing and conducting operations.

Modern national military art is developing under the influence of changes in the operational environment in accordance with the principles of Ukraine’s comprehensive defence and taking into account the implementation of the principles and standards of NATO member states in the defence forces.

The comprehensive defence of Ukraine, which is being conducted to repel the armed aggression of the Russian Federation, is based on the principles of deterrence, resilience, and cooperation. The term “comprehensive defence” itself is in line with the NATO term “comprehensive approach” used in the well-known NATO Operations Planning Directive (Tsevelov and Viter 2024; Zaluzhnyi and Zabrodskyy n.d.; Ofitsiyni sait Heneralnoho shtabu ZS Ukrainy n.d.; Ofitsiyni sait Ministerstva oborony Ukrainy n.d.).

Analysing and summarising some of the results of the first operations, it should be noted that the Ukrainian defence forces began repelling the enemy's offensive simultaneously in five directions of enemy attacks with groups of troops that had begun to be formed on the eve of the Russian invasion.

The defence was conducted mainly in wide swaths of responsibility and was based on a skilful combination of stability and activity.

The sustainability of the defence was based on the skilful use of terrain, pre-prepared defence lines, and the high moral and psychological state of the personnel. In the summer, the enemy, having a significant advantage in firepower, especially in artillery, practically burned everything in front of them, firing an average of 60–80 thousand artillery shells per day in the East and South of Ukraine. At the same time, the average rate of advance of the enemy in the areas of attacks in Donbas, even after such fire damage, did not reach one hundred meters per day, which demonstrates the stubbornness of the resistance of Ukrainian soldiers and their courage.

Defence activity was based on decisive counterattacks by reserves, sudden fire attacks, assault and raid operations, and resistance movement in the enemy's rear. The key to success was the skilful command of troops at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels (Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022a; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022b; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022c; Zbirnyk materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 2 materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 3 materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Dosvid ta uroky boiv oborony m. Kyiv 2022; Tsevelov and Viter 2024; Zaluzhnyi and Zabrodskyi n.d.).

The analysis and generalisation of the experience of hostilities in February-May 2022 allows us to conclude that the enemy suffered devastating losses as a result of hostilities. Today, we can say that the number of Russians killed is equal to the number of personnel in 5 motorised rifle divisions, the number of tanks destroyed is equal to the number of tanks in 24 tank regiments, the number of artillery systems destroyed is equal to the number of artillery divisions in 74 artillery divisions, the number of helicopters destroyed is equal to the number of helicopters in 5 aviation brigades, and the number of aircraft destroyed is equal to the number of aircraft in 11 aviation regiments.

It should be noted that Western partners have made and continue to make a significant contribution to Ukraine's defence by providing weapons and military equipment, ammunition, military and technical property, and humanitarian aid.

The results of the analysis of hostilities in the spring of 2022 show that after the loss of the seized territories in the northern and eastern regions of Ukraine by Russian troops, the frontline shrank by more than 1,000 kilometres. The enemy lost its combat potential and began to move to positional defence along a 1,500-kilometre section of the front.

The Ukrainian Defence Forces took measures to liberate the territory of the northern and northeastern regions, took measures to regain control of the state border (about 840 kilometres of the state border) and restore constitutional order in the liberated territories. Active work began on the preparation of powerful combat reserves, the formation of offensive groups to conduct a counteroffensive on the Kharkiv and Kherson directions in order to defeat Russian troops and reach their own state borders and the administrative border of the Kherson region with the temporarily occupied Crimea (Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022a; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022b; Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy 2022c; Zbirnyk materialiv vyvchennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 2 materialiv vyvchennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022; Zbirnyk № 3 materialiv vyvchennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku 2022); Tsevelov and Viter 2024; Ukrinform n.d.; Holovanov et al. 2024; Korenev n.d.).

The analysis and generalised experience of the first stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war allows us to state that as a result of defensive and offensive (counter-offensive) operations of the Ukrainian defence forces, the enemy's strategic plans were thwarted and the strategic initiative was intercepted (Tsevelov and Viter 2024; Holovanov et al. 2024).

References

- Dosvid ta uroky boiv oborony m. Kyiv. 2022. *Dosvid ta uroky boiv oborony m. Kyiv (24.02 – 28.03.2022)*. Kyiv: Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy. Vkh. № 257 dsk.
- Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy. 2022. *Voienno-istorychnyi opys rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny (liutyi – berezen 2022 roku)*. Kyiv: Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy [in Ukrainian].
- Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy. 2022. *Voienno-istorychnyi opys rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny (kviten 2022 roku)*. Kyiv: Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy [in Ukrainian].
- Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy. 2022. *Voienno-istorychnyi opys rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny (traven 2022 roku)*. Kyiv: Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy [in Ukrainian].
- Holovanov, A.V., Volosian, V.I., et al. 2024. *Obgruntuvannia sposobiv vedennia operatsii syl oborony iz vykorystanniam kontseptsii dyzainu operatsii, shyfr «Dyzain»: zvit pro OZ (ost.)*. Kyiv: Kafedra operatyvnoho mystetstva instytutu derzhavnoho viiskovoho upravlinnia Natsionalnoho universytetu oborony Ukrainy [in Ukrainian].
- Korenev, Ye. *Viiskova spetsoperatsiia v Ukraini: osoblyvosti rosiiskoi stratehii*. <https://eurasia.expert/spetsoperatsiia-na-ukraine-osobenosti-rossiyskoy-voennoy-strategii> [in Ukrainian].
- Ofitsiyni sait Heneralnoho shtabu ZS Ukrainy*. <https://www.zsu.gov.ua> [in Ukrainian].
- Ofitsiyni sait Ministerstva oborony Ukrainy*. <https://www.mil.gov.ua> [in Ukrainian].
- Ukrinform – aktualni novyny Ukrainy ta svitu*. <https://www.ukrinform.ua> [in Ukrainian].
- Zbirnyk materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku. 2022. *Zbirnyk materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku (berezen 2022)*. Kyiv: Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy. Inv. № 17910 dsk [in Ukrainian].
- Zbirnyk № 2 materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku. 2022. *Zbirnyk № 2 materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku (kviten 2022)*. Kyiv: Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy. Vkh. № 216 dsk [in Ukrainian].
- Zbirnyk № 3 materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku. 2022. *Zbirnyk № 3 materialiv vvychennia boiovoho dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2022 roku (traven 2022)*. Kyiv: Heneralnyi shtab Zbroinykh syl Ukrainy [in Ukrainian].
- Zaluzhnyi, V., and Zabrodskyi, M. *Perspektyvy zabezpechennia voiennoi kampanii 2023 roku: ukrainskyi pohliad*. <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3566162-ak-zabezpeciti-voennu-kampaniu-u-2023-roci-ukrainskij-poglad.html> [in Ukrainian].
- Tsevelov, O.Ie., and Viter, D.V. 2024. *Rosiisko-ukrainska viina: prychny, khid, vedennia ta naslidky (ohliad podii ta khid vedennia boiovykh dii 2022 – 2023 rokov)*. Kyiv: Talkom. ISBN 978 – 617 – 8352 – 22 – 6 [in Ukrainian].

22. Strategic Leader Development and Selection

Ukrainian Lessons Identified from 2014

Dr. (hab.) Colonel Yurii Punda*

Abstract

This article focuses on the lessons that can be learned from the problems of strategic leadership within Ukraine's Security and Defence Sector (SDS), which became fully evident during the initial phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the unlawful occupation of Crimea, and the deployment of Russian special operations forces into the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. The article is dedicated to analysing the root causes (identifying lessons) of the strategic leaders' unpreparedness to act effectively during a crisis and exploring methods to prevent such unpreparedness or mitigate its consequences should it arise again (learning lessons). The author proves that the primary drivers of strategic leadership issues are deficiencies in the development and selection processes of strategic leaders within Ukraine's SDS, compounded by deliberate interference by Russian intelligence agencies in these processes. The implementation of leadership development programs, adoption of rigorous ethical and counterintelligence screening, transparent evaluation techniques, political accountability mechanisms, rotation and continuous performance monitoring, as well as focus on values-based leadership, can make a massive contribution to improving the SDS Strategic Leadership effectiveness.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian war, strategic leadership, defence policy, leadership selection, crisis management

Introduction

On 24 June 2020, the State Bureau of Investigation of Ukraine announced charges of high treason against the former President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, along with former Ukrainian Defence Ministers Pavlo Lebedev and Dmytro Salamatin ("The SBI informed about the suspicion of the

* Military Institute of the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

ex-president of Ukraine and two former Ministers of Defense of Ukraine” 2020). Later, on 27 February 2021, Presidential Decree No. 81 imposed personal, special economic, and other restrictive measures (sanctions) against former high-ranking officials within Ukraine’s security and defence sector due to their activities undermining Ukraine’s national interests (“On the application of personal special economic and other restrictive measures (sanctions)” 2021). According to the decree, open-ended sanctions were imposed on the former Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, the former Head of the Security Service of Ukraine, the former Commander of the Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the former First Deputy Commander of the Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the former Chief of Staff of the Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the former Deputy Head of the State Protection Department of Ukraine, the former Military Prosecutor of the Crimean Region, the former First Deputy Chief of the Security Service of Ukraine, the former First Deputy Head of the Security Service of Ukraine, and the former Head of the Department for National Security Protection of the Security Service of Ukraine.

The majority of these individuals who once held strategic roles within Ukraine’s security and defence sector were convicted in absentia to various terms of imprisonment for high treason or remain wanted with ongoing investigations. These cases highlight profound challenges in strategic leadership within Ukraine’s Security and Defence Sector (SDS), which became fully evident during the initial crisis phase — marked by Russia’s unlawful occupation of Crimea and the deployment of Russian special operations forces into the Luhansk and Donetsk regions.

This article is dedicated to analysing the root causes (identifying lessons) of the strategic leaders’ unpreparedness to act effectively during a crisis and exploring methods to prevent such unpreparedness or mitigate its consequences should it arise (learning lessons). The main hypothesis of this article is that the primary drivers of this issue are the deficiencies in the development and selection processes of strategic leaders within Ukraine’s SDS, compounded by deliberate interference by Russian intelligence agencies in these processes.

Role of the SDS Strategic Leaders in Defence Capabilities

To begin, let us provide arguments in support of the hypothesis concerning Russia's continuous and targeted influence over the selection of strategic leaders in Ukraine before 2014.

The primary evidence of this is that all the individuals mentioned above are currently in Russia, either performing functions on behalf of the Russian state or publicly advocating for it. For example, Dmytro Salamatin, Ukraine's Defence Minister in 2012, also retained citizenship of the Russian Federation. Furthermore, his influence extended beyond his tenure in 2012. Between 2006 and 2007, he served as a member of the Ukrainian Parliament; in 2010, he was appointed Director of "Ukrspetsexport" (the state arms exporter), in 2011, he was Director of the "Ukroboronprom" holding, and from December 2012 to February 2014, he served as an advisor to the President of Ukraine at the same time remaining a Russian citizen.

Thus, Russian influence on the strategic leadership within Ukraine's SDS prior to 2014 is evident. However, identifying lessons requires examining not only the manifestations of this issue but also understanding the root causes and driving forces behind it. It is apparent that any confrontation, including hybrid warfare, aims to maximise the adversary's weakness, effectively minimizing their capabilities, including defensive ones. At the same time, we note that the role of strategic leaders in defence capabilities is crucial, and the negative impact on the SDS's strategic leaders multiply the degradation of defence capabilities.

Let us examine the state's defensive capabilities through the DOTMLPFI ("DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms" 2017; "Guidance for developing and implementing joint concepts" 2016) framework and analyse the role of strategic leaders in shaping national security and defence capabilities.

In brief, the DOTMLPFI framework is a concept used in military planning and management to assess and enhance an organisation's capabilities. It assists in systematically assessing all organisational aspects and identifying necessary adjustments to achieve optimal effectiveness and mission success. Each element of the DOTMLPFI concept provides a unique perspective on how strategic leaders shape a state's overall readiness and resilience.

Doctrine: For the SDS, the concept of Doctrine encompasses a set of high-level directives that define the principles and operational foundations of the SDS as an organisation. Strategic leaders play a crucial role in

approving and implementing these doctrinal frameworks, providing visions and conceptual approaches that form the basis of guiding documents that regulate the activity of all SDS elements. Although constrained by higher legal acts, strategic leaders can initiate amendments to these foundational guidelines.

Furthermore, doctrinal principles must evolve to remain relevant in a rapidly changing security environment. Strategic leaders are responsible for ensuring that doctrinal approaches are regularly assessed and updated, determining the precise threats to which the SDS must respond and the appropriate response mechanisms.

Organisation: Strategic leaders are decisive in designing organisational structures to enhance effectiveness and operational efficiency. This includes defining the responsibilities, roles, and functions of SDS components and their leaders, establishing clear command lines, and ensuring organisational flexibility to adapt to shifts in the security environment to optimise crisis response.

Moreover, strategic leaders are responsible for establishing effective coordination and collaboration across all SDS elements, particularly critical during crisis response operations.

Training: Strategic leaders lead and direct the development and implementation of training programs that prepare personnel for their assigned roles. They determine the required competencies and skills of sector professionals. In Ukraine's "Law on Education," competency is defined as a dynamic combination of knowledge, skills, thought processes, values, and other personal qualities that empower an individual to succeed socially and professionally (Law of Ukraine "On Education" 2017). Therefore, strategic leaders are tasked with shaping the values required within the SDS.

Material: Strategic leaders play a critical role in developing, procuring, and maintaining the material resources needed for the SDS, effectively determining the sectors' investment priorities in defence industries. Sound management decisions made today influence future preparedness in times of crisis. Conversely, the absence of crisis mitigation resources today often stems from poor investment decisions by previous strategic leaders.

These leaders are responsible for the timely modernisation and integration of new technologies and strategies in warfare and other conflict domains. Furthermore, they hold an essential duty to manage taxpayer funds ethically and transparently, establishing mechanisms to ensure resource

accountability and integrity. This duty involves material implications and fortifies trust between the public, the state, and the SDS.

Leadership: In the DOTMLPFI concept, “Leadership” refers to processes, structures, and qualities that enable leaders to exercise effective governance. This component focuses on several core aspects, such as: Ensuring leaders’ readiness to make complex decisions and take action in crises; Developing command structures that support efficient operations and enable leaders to manage SDS elements and employ resources during crises effectively; Adapting to new security challenges and evolving technologies, threats, and conflict methods, ensuring that the country remains prepared to address all threats, including unexpected ones.

Also, exemplary behaviour is a crucial aspect of leadership that ensures trust. Strategic leaders must serve as ethical and moral examples for subordinates, as this directly impacts the personnel’s confidence and internal motivation, especially in crises where mobilisation and effective action are paramount. In general, SDS leadership must be adaptable, strategically oriented, and aligned with modern security and technological trends.

Personnel: Strategic leaders organise and approve policies for personnel management, recruitment, and retention, focusing on attracting and retaining qualified individuals. Effective policies clearly describe each position, required competencies, and the criteria for selecting and retaining personnel who possess these qualifications. They also create a supportive environment that fosters resilience among personnel. For the SDS, this resilience means that the entire military and civilian personnel is prepared and internally motivated to act in crises, rapidly replace losses, and acquire necessary competencies tailored to the specific crisis context.

Facilities: Strategic leaders in the SDS are responsible for formulating policies that ensure the resilience of critical infrastructure. This includes establishing the rational allocation of facilities and equipment the sector relies on for crisis response. Ensuring long-term infrastructure base sustainability and implementing measures to maintain a robust infrastructure base for force readiness and crisis response are crucial for effective crisis management.

Interoperability: In the context of the SDS, both internal and external interoperability are of critical importance. Strategic leaders are responsible for achieving a synergistic effect of internal cooperation, where the capabilities of one sector element complement those of others during crises. This

involves establishing both permanent and temporary structures, procedures, and protocols for interaction.

The hybrid war against Ukraine and the Russian invasion have highlighted the vital importance of external interoperability. Strategic leaders build alliances and partnerships to counter common threats. The quality of these interactions largely depends on the leaders' values, beliefs, and ideologies. Effective cooperation with partner organisations is unlikely if the leadership values and convictions diverge significantly. Thus, the SDS's strategic leaders exert a decisive influence on each sector's capability element and its overall readiness.

Meanwhile, influencing the strategic-level decision-making of an adversary remains the most effective means of achieving the enemy's subjugation, a well-known concept outlined by Clausewitz (Clausewitz 1832): "War is an act of violence to compel the enemy to fulfil our will". This idea is reflected by Sun Tzu as the "victory without a battle" (Sun Tzu 2024). Renowned theorist John Warden incorporated this notion into his "Five Rings" concept, which identified "Leadership" as the most critical ring. In his work, "The Enemy as a System," Warden asserts that "The most critical ring is the command ring because it is the enemy command structure, be it a civilian at the seat of government or a military commander directing a fleet, which is the only element of the enemy that can make concessions, that can make the very complex decisions that are necessary to keep a country on a particular course". Warden suggests that influencing the adversary's strategic leadership can lead to strategic paralysis, whereby the enemy's forces remain unused and ineffective (Warden 1995).

Methods and Instruments for Influencing Strategic Leaders

While the necessity of influencing strategic leaders is evident, identifying lessons requires understanding the mechanisms through which such influence can be exerted. Modern technological advancements and the development of global society have introduced new, under-researched instruments for affecting the selection and actions of strategic leaders. Below, we explore various methods that may be employed, including the freedoms of speech and expression, capital flows, and social media as tools to influence the selection and decision-making of strategic leaders.

Material Incentives and Bribery: Modern technology has created countless schemes for bribing officials, including foreign officials. Numerous scandals have exposed instances of officials, politicians, or political parties in democratic nations receiving illicit financial benefits. In countries where transparency and accountability are not standard norms, such incidents might not be publicised, but this does not imply their absence. Material incentives ensure officials' loyalty and incline them to make decisions favouring the "donor." Ample evidence exists to suggest that Russia has employed significant material "stimulation" of Ukrainian politicians, officials, and public influencers and continues to do so both within Ukraine and across Western and Global South countries.

Compromising Material ("Kompromat"): Obtaining compromising information through illicit benefits or other reputation-damaging personal details allows for blackmailing strategic leaders. Such individuals may be held in a subordinate position, and their compliance is guaranteed. Those holding compromising material positions promote them to higher roles to extend their influence further.

Using Business Ties to Create Dependencies: Close business ties and economic interests in a potential adversary's country can establish dependencies that render strategic leaders vulnerable to external pressure. This form of influence may be less overt than direct bribery but is highly effective. The threat of loss of property or potential gain can and is used to influence decisions made by strategic leaders. For instance, even after Russia's overt aggression against Ukraine in 2014, many Ukrainian political figures maintained business interests tied to Russian entities, and certain Western corporations, despite anti-Western rhetoric from the Kremlin, continue to operate in Russia.

Funding Political Parties and Campaigns: Every European election attracts Russian interest. In most democratic countries, a political party exists that, to varying degrees, advocates for pro-Russian policies. Election examples from Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and other post-Soviet states show that each election becomes a choice between pro-European and pro-Russian orientations, with pro-Russian parties frequently utilizing opaque funding sources. Information on the indirect financing of election campaigns by Russia is frequently exposed and highlights Russia's intent to penetrate foreign political systems.

Information Operations: In addition to providing resources, images, and information support to pro-Russian forces, Russia actively conducts

information operations against individuals holding or aspiring to strategic roles who resist Russian influence. These operations involve spreading misinformation and distorted narratives to damage the reputation of these leaders, foster public distrust, and hinder the rise of anti-Russian candidates to strategic positions.

All these methods (as well as others), employed by Russia between 2000 and 2014, undermined Ukraine's strategic leadership stability and independence, rendering it vulnerable to Russian influence. These measures proved effective, creating a pro-Russian hierarchy within Ukraine's SDS, but were almost dismantled during the Euromaidan Revolution at a very high cost to Ukraine. This lesson holds relevance not only for Ukraine but also for all democratic nations, as the Russian regime is engaged in a broader conflict against democratic governance, leveraging democratic freedoms to weaken democracies themselves.

Approaches to Selecting Strategic Leaders

The selection of strategic leaders is a critical process that requires thorough development and adaptation to national security and defence needs. In times of crisis, the quality of strategic leader selection impacts the entire sector's resilience, as trust in leadership forms the foundation of internal motivation across the SDS. In combat, internal motivation helps military personnel remain resilient even under life-threatening conditions. Personnel driven by internal solid motivation are better "equipped" to handle stressful and traumatic situations, deriving strength from personal convictions and values. Conversely, external motivation tends to yield only short-term, unstable results, proving unreliable in crises, particularly in situations requiring independent action that may conflict with personal needs and interests. Thus, selecting strategic leaders must ensure that key SDS positions are filled by highly qualified leaders whose values and ethics positively impact the intrinsic motivation of the sector's personnel.

Various forms of selection and promotion exist for future leaders at the strategic level: patronage-based, nepotistic, hierarchical, populist, charismatic, loyalist, corrupt, meritocratic, portfolio-based, and combinations thereof. In essence, these selection methods can be classified into two opposing types based on their level of objectivity: patronage and impersonal (competency-value) approach.

'Patronage' refers to a practice whereby an influential person (patron) uses their position and authority to advance certain individuals or groups by providing employment, positions, or privileges. While patronage is often criticised for its potential to lead to nepotism and corruption, it still garners support as new leaders traditionally seek to "build a team" of trusted individuals. However, patronage usually results in favouritism and nepotism, undermining the sector's effectiveness, and the SDS is no exception.

Patronage can manifest negatively as nepotism, corruption, or political bias. The worst case is the formation of "influence networks" serving the adversary's interests. Consequently, strategic leaders and their teams must act solely in the state's interest, not under the sway of personal networks or external influences. In conclusion, while "positive patronage" may offer eventual advantages, selecting strategic leaders based on a competency-value approach is ultimately more effective.

The '*competency-value approach*' relies on an impartial, independent, and transparent assessment of candidates' competencies and values. Studies in personnel management indicate that this approach significantly enhances the quality of leadership selection (McNamee and Miller 2009; Northouse 2018; Hieker and Pringle 2020). Democratic nations' security institutions and leading corporations are increasingly adopting tools like strategic simulations, 360° feedback, reverse feedback, ethical interviews, etc. (Cannella, Finkelstein, and Hambrick 2008), which allow for comprehensive candidate evaluation, ultimately benefiting organisational growth and effectiveness.

Key Directions for Improving the Strategic Leader Selection Process

Leadership Program Development: The introduction of strategic leadership training programs will foster the necessary skills for effective crisis management. Such programs may include crisis management, international security, and strategic planning courses, along with specialised simulation exercises for crisis scenarios. These programs should be conducted regularly and focus on preparing leaders for the most likely crisis situations.

Ethical Screening and Selection: Ethical screening ensures that candidates meet the necessary moral and ethical standards. This process should include financial and asset assessments of potential strategic leaders and an evaluation of their working relationships. Such measures help reduce the

risk of individuals with questionable affiliations entering leadership roles, enhancing public trust in the sector's leadership.

360-Degree Feedback Evaluation: The 360-degree evaluation or feedback method is a comprehensive assessment technique that gathers insights from individuals at different levels, including supervisors, peers, subordinates, clients, and partners. This approach enables a holistic assessment of a candidate's ethical and leadership qualities, providing an objective view of their professional and leadership capabilities.

The above-mentioned directions are typical for the strategic leader selection process. However, given the unique challenges of selecting leaders within the SDS and Russia's persistent attempts to influence this process, it is advisable to add four additional areas of focus:

Counterintelligence Screening: Effective counterintelligence measures can help identify potential threats and suspicious affiliations among candidates for strategic positions. Incorporating counterintelligence screening as an integral part of the selection process would reduce the risks of foreign influence within national security and defence leadership.

Political Hearings: In accordance with democratic standards, strategic leaders within the SDS are accountable to political leaders. Therefore, it is reasonable to incorporate political hearings into the selection process for strategic leaders. During these hearings, candidates would have the opportunity to present their vision for the prospective role. The hearing holders should also have independent assessments of candidates' professional and ethical qualities. It would be prudent to involve independent (including civilian) experts at this stage to assess candidates' ethical standards and enhance procedural transparency.

Transparent and Continuous Performance Evaluation: Political hearings, contracts signed with strategic leaders entering a new position, or any other regulatory document should set clear performance indicators. Instead of a generic job description, these indicators define what a strategic leader should achieve. Success in meeting these performance goals should open new horizons for the leader or justify the continuation or suspension of their strategic leadership role based on their achievements.

Rotation: To maintain effective, strategic leadership within the SDS in peacetime, leaders should be rotated at fixed intervals based on their performance, as described above. Rotation provides several benefits for the SDS. First, it motivates strategic leaders to perform optimally in their current positions from a career advancement perspective. Second, it reduces the

likelihood of forming non-ethical, clan-based, or corrupt networks. Third, rotation serves as a straightforward and effective tool for selecting promising leaders and eliminating ineffective ones.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The lessons drawn from Ukraine's experience underscore the necessity for vigilance in protecting democratic institutions from external manipulation. Russia's consistent attempts to influence leadership selection processes, undermine trust in government, and exploit vulnerabilities in democratic systems have broader implications for all democratic nations. This underscores the importance of international collaboration and information sharing among democratic allies to develop unified strategies and defences against such tactics.

The SDS's Strategic Leaders selection and development processes must be thoroughly modernised and protected against adversarial influence, especially considering the unique threats posed by hybrid warfare and the ongoing geopolitical challenges faced by Ukraine and other democracies. Strengthening the resilience and objectivity of these processes is crucial for enhancing national security and ensuring that strategic leaders are both highly qualified and aligned with the ethical standards necessary to foster trust and motivation within the sector. In the author's opinion, implementation of leadership development programs, adoption of rigorous ethical and counterintelligence screening, transparent evaluation techniques, political accountability mechanisms, rotation and continuous performance monitoring, as well as focus on values-based leadership, can make a massive contribution to improving the SDS Strategic Leadership effectiveness.

By adopting a systematic, values-driven approach to leadership selection and development, the SDS can better withstand the pressures of hybrid warfare, ensure greater operational readiness, and uphold the ethical standards essential for effective national defence.

References

- Cannella, Bert, Sydney Finkelstein, and Donald C. Hambrick. *Strategic Leadership: Theory and Research on Executives, Top Management Teams, and Boards*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- CJCS Instruction. 2016. Guidance for developing and implementing joint concepts, 2016. <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Library/Instructions/CJCSI%203010.02E.pdf>
- Clausewitz, Carl von. 1984. *On War*. Translated by Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hieker, Carola, and John Pringle. *The Future of Leadership Development: Disruption and the Impact of Megatrends*. 1st ed. 2021. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- John A. Warden III. The Enemy as a System/ *Airpower Journal*. Spring 1995, Vol. IX, No. I, P 40-55
- Law of Ukraine “On education”, 2017 <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2145-19#Text>
- McNamee, Stephen J., and Robert K. Miller Jr. *The Meritocracy Myth*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009.
- Northouse, Peter G. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. 8th ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2018.
- President of Ukraine. Decree of the President of Ukraine no. 81/2021 “On the decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine dated February 26, 2021 “On the application of personal special economic and other restrictive measures (sanctions)” <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/812021-37057>
- Sun Tzu. 2024. *The Art of War*. Translated by Thomas Cleary. Shambhala.
- The State Bureau of Investigation of Ukraine. 2020. The SBI informed about the suspicion of the ex-president of Ukraine and two former Ministers of Defense of Ukraine (VIDEO), 2020. https://dbr.gov.ua/news/dbr_povodomilo_pro_pidozru_eksprezidentu_ukraini_ta_dvom_kolishnim_ministram_oboroni_ukraini_video
- US Department of Defence, 2017. DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms. <https://www.tradoc.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/AD1029823-DOD-Dictionary-of-Military-and-Associated-Terms-2017.pdf>

23. Technology Has Been a Driver in Ukraine's Quest to Restore Its Territorial Integrity and Sovereignty, but It's Not the End Game

Alexis Serfaty*

Abstract

This paper examines Ukraine's innovative use of technology, particularly drones and artificial intelligence, in its ongoing conflict with Russia. Despite significant disparities in manpower, resources, and military hardware, Ukraine's technological ingenuity has allowed it to counterbalance Russia's military superiority, contributing to the current stalemate. However, the chapter argues that while technology has played a crucial role, it will not be the decisive factor in winning the war. Instead, the future of Ukraine's struggle hinges on strategic political decisions. With the imminent return of Donald Trump to the US presidency, the author suggests that Ukraine needs to reassess its approach to the conflict, focusing on pragmatic solutions to preserve lives, territory, and sovereignty. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky appears to be preparing for a potential shift in policy, recognising that an end to the war is increasingly likely under the leadership of the incoming Trump administration.

Keywords: drones, artificial intelligence, NATO, China, Trump, leverage

Ukraine's ability to harness technological ingenuity and innovation on the battlefield has proven invaluable in its war against Russia. The Ukrainian military's use of drones and AI has largely blunted Russia's massive superiority in manpower, armaments, and funding. Indeed, this ingenuity has largely powered Ukraine to the war's current stalemate status—a truly remarkable outcome despite the insufferable loss of lives, not to mention infrastructure, homes, and villages.

But technology will not “win” Ukraine this war. A hail of drones (and, as of November 2024, ATACMS) deep inside Russian territory will spook

* Director of Geopolitics and Technology, Eurasia Group

Russians and annoy President Putin, but it will not usher in regime change ultimately.

So, what next, then? As President Trump prepares to reenter the White House in just a few weeks, no matter what the status of NATO and the transatlantic relationship, Russia's remit within the BRICS, and China's focus on foreign affairs – Ukraine, sooner rather than later, must come to terms with what's possible and what's logical to save lives, territory, and sovereignty. Indeed, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky is now coming to terms with – and even publicly intimating – an end to the war is much more likely under the policies of the incoming Trump administration.

Attack of the Drones: AI is Changing Wars and the Battlefield in Ukraine

A shortage of personnel and artillery has forced Ukraine to rely on drones and artificial intelligence (AI). Ukraine remains overwhelmingly outnumbered and outgunned by the Russian armed forces. And yet, nearly three years since Russia's invasion, Ukraine has managed to relative stalemate, and whatever gains Russia has made in the Donbas in recent months have come at overwhelming costs in both casualties and material.

As actors in every sector consider how best to use AI, militaries are no different: they, too, are adopting the technology for multiple uses. As a result, AI is already starting to change warfare. Technologically advanced countries such as Israel, Ukraine, and Russia are employing AI in ongoing conflicts, while others such as the US and China have begun introducing AI into specific enterprise and warfighting applications, with strategic implications.

Ukraine provides a case study of how AI is currently being used in conflict (Israel being the other notable example). AI is but one technology among many whose use Kyiv is pioneering in the war with Russia, but necessity is driving significant innovation. Like the US, Ukraine has used AI to improve enterprise and analysis tasks such as managing supply lines, identifying sanctions evaders, and parsing intelligence (International Center for Defense and Security 2024). In the field, Ukrainians employ AI for minor operational fixes, such as improving auto-aim functions (Reuters 2024). Ukrainians are also combing through reams of data with AI, especially open-source intelligence gathered by civilians and uploaded through a government app, Diia.

These innovations are helping Ukraine's military better understand the battlefield and make strategic and tactical decisions. They also equate to labor savings: making some functions more efficient allows units to run with fewer soldiers and to redeploy troops elsewhere. This has had strategic significance. AI-driven intelligence was a major reason Ukraine could pinpoint Russian units at the invasion's outset and turn back Russia's advance.

Neither Ukraine nor Israel has officially removed humans from the loop yet, but both are getting close. In the case of Ukraine, experts speculate that some individual operators may have allowed a drone or other weapon to go fully autonomous in a case in which a target was identified with relatively high certainty; if verified, this activity could be considered on the loop or even out of it (Reuters 2024).

In neither case, however, is the use of AI likely to be strategically decisive nor have an escalatory effect. In both instances, rather, AI is improving capabilities already in effect, enhancing different parts of the loop. Moreover, Russia is making strides with AI too, especially to improve its autonomous drone program. Moscow's aims to develop a fully autonomous drone within three to five years are bolstered by technical collaboration with China (Reuters 2024). Proponents of AI use argue that it can lead to better accuracy and precision, thus saving lives by avoiding collateral damage, but it works for both sides, thereby likely only exacerbating what, to this point, is a stalemate.

But in Russia, Ukraine Will Need to Make Some Hard Choices

On 17 October, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky arrived in Brussels to formally pitch NATO members on two overarching goals. The first was to secure a firm invitation for his nation to join the Atlantic alliance. The second was to receive approval to use weapons from allied countries deep inside Russia. President Zelensky's so-called victory plan had become a fledgling effort and was met by NATO members with open skepticism. After intense debate within the White House over many weeks, President Biden originally (before Trump's reelection and the introduction of North Korean troops) decided against permitting the use of American weapons for Ukraine to strike targets inside Russia. The Americans and core NATO allies remain convinced that the authority would ultimately have little impact on the battlefield.

Zelensky's pitch was made against the backdrop of a fledgling military campaign that, in recent weeks, has seen Russian armed forces advance in

the Donbas region. Russia has made steady gains toward the city of Pokrovsk in the Donetsk region at the same time as Ukraine's risky advance into Russian territory has stalled and is increasingly counterattacked. Pokrovsk is a key logistical hub for Ukraine's defenses in Donetsk, and reports have tied problems with troop numbers and weapons in Donetsk to the military's focus on Kursk. Separately, Russia has continued to strike Ukrainian power infrastructure, aiming to ensure power supply, heating, and general economic problems heading through the winter. To add to the uncertainty, North Korea is now providing significant troops to aid Russia's war in Ukraine.

In parallel, with a resounding win validating his worldview, Donald Trump's election means Washington is likely to intensify its criticism of NATO and push for rapid cease-fire talks in Ukraine despite hesitation from Kyiv and Western allies. In this regard, President Trump's focus will be almost entirely on ending the Ukraine conflict in the shortest timeframe possible, with limited regard to political backlash from Kyiv or European partners. Although Trump is not interested in abandoning Ukraine entirely – based in part on his selection of Michael Waltz as National Security Advisor and his initial post-election discussions with Zelensky – his initial approach will focus on pressuring President Zelensky to make concessions or accept a less-than-favorable deal.

Especially with NATO on Shakier Ground

President Trump's first four years in office were defined by threats and criticism of allies' spending levels but limited moves to reduce US participation. This is likely to shift during a second Trump administration, where the odds of substantial erosion, including devalued credibility of the Article 5 commitment, are increasing. In addition to threats of US pullback, Trump may use Ukraine aid as another lever to apply pressure on European allies. Rapid shifts in the US approach to Ukraine will create room for a major change in the US-NATO dynamic in short order as Trump could signal a directional shift before he takes office through his statements and appointments.

Putin, meanwhile, has thus far shown no flexibility in his claims on Ukrainian territory or his demand for a ban on NATO membership and neutrality. In June, he indicated that other terms, including sanctions relief, are necessary for the fighting to stop (Foreign Policy 2024).

But Where Does That Leave Ukraine?

Russia now claims to have annexed at least 20% of Ukraine's territory, including the regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, and the city of Sevastopol. The government has proved capable of managing national defense and maintaining its administration in areas under its authority. President Volodymyr Zelensky has been effective at leading and maintaining the public's confidence while also lobbying Western governments for their assistance. However, the government will face major challenges in maintaining the same levels of Western military and financial aid over the long term. It will also have to plan for stabilizing and rebuilding the economy, a process that will take years and require significant external support.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin has been campaigning to bring the war, at least indirectly, to NATO. This could take the form, for example, of asymmetrical escalations such as Russia providing advanced anti-ship missiles to the Houthis (allowing them to more effectively target oil tankers and push up energy prices, useful to Russia) or increased cyber operations (Reuters 2024).

But this doesn't change the correctness of Zelensky's fundamental analysis: President Putin needs to feel like he will pay a higher cost for the war going forward if he's ever prepared to enter ceasefire talks (never mind agree to a resolution). Meanwhile, the United States and its allies recognize that the high-water mark for economic (and, therefore, defense) support to Ukraine has already been passed. With Trump in office, it remains effectively impossible that anything close to another \$60 billion gets through a US budget in 2025. The Europeans are more committed despite some holdouts, but the total euro support will also be constrained while Ukrainian needs are only increasing. This has had the effect of greater urgency in discussing negotiations with the Ukrainians.

A Ceasefire Would Create an Opening for a Deal

In this case, the next step, given growing constraints on economic and military support, is to offer NATO membership to Ukraine in return for accepting a de facto loss of land (a ceasefire, even though the occupied territory wouldn't be recognized as Russian). This would not only create a more unified position between NATO and Ukraine but also potentially a coherent endpoint that would be deemed more acceptable by other countries,

including the Global South. India, for example, could shift from a neutral position to a NATO tilt; South Africa could move from actively pro-Russia toward neutral. This could increase pressure on China to lean on Russia to start negotiations, including though Chinese leverage over North Korea.

Despite Kyiv's innovative tactics through technology, Ukraine faces mounting difficulties as it tries to defend its territory and position in Russia's Kursk region. Ukraine continues to face problems with combat troop numbers on the frontline, and this is creating ripple effects that risk further significant Russian territorial advances. In parallel, President Zelensky never gained traction with his attempt to ramp up Western military assistance and economic pressure against Russia through his victory plan that emerged in anticipation of a Trump presidency.

A weaker-than-anticipated military position leaves Zelensky with a diminished ability to resist Trump's pressure to make concessions to Russia. Trump can also leverage military aid and intelligence support, even if Ukraine will still be getting weapons from European states and long-term US contracts and producing more domestically.

However, a cease-fire is far from a lock, given Russia's recent military gains and Putin's hardline position on his terms. A willingness to pause the fighting so Russia can regroup and rearm could lead Putin to agree to a cease-fire that includes pledges to negotiate his demands. Putin might agree to a pause as a favor to Trump. But Russian forces are making advances in eastern Ukraine's Donetsk region and have regained some territory in Kursk, which might prompt Putin to decide a further push would make Ukraine more likely to capitulate. Trump has less leverage with Putin to get him to the table for meaningful discussions if Putin decides this is not in his interests. Nevertheless, there remains an opening for concession from Putin who, notwithstanding recent gains, needs the war to stop before it gets worse on the battlefield and at home.

While praising Trump shortly after his election and saying he is willing to talk with him, Putin indicated Russia's terms are unchanged from this summer. They appear to include international recognition of all Russian-claimed Ukrainian territory, formal Ukrainian neutrality and a ban on NATO membership, and the lifting of economic sanctions. Sanctions relief would not likely be part of any opening US bid, given both the limited scope for unilateral sanctions unwinding on the part of the US and the lack of apparent negotiating space implied in Putin's current position. These terms have been nonstarters for Kyiv, but Zelensky might have to commit to at

least discussing them if a cease-fire becomes urgent. Putin would also probably expect that Trump would guarantee Ukrainian compliance with the terms of a cease-fire; it is not clear that Trump sees that as his role.

Given the incompatible Russian and Ukrainian terms, the existential nature of the war for Ukraine (Putin appears to perceive it that way, too), and the lack of mutual trust, achieving a durable peace will be extremely difficult to negotiate even if there is de-escalation along the frontline. A cease-fire would allow the sides to try to rebuild their military capacity, with each assuming the other would eventually attack. A ceasefire agreement will have to be brokered relatively early in Trump's first year, with reconstruction started expeditiously. A cease-fire brokered in the first year of the Trump administration that does not quickly lead to an enforceable political settlement would be in danger of breaking down into renewed intense fighting later in his term.

Brussels to the Rescue?

With technology no longer a deciding factor, therefore, and Washington increasingly eager to move on regardless of how favorable or not the terms are to Kiev, peace for Ukraine is likely to hinge on a European coalition of the willing. Though beware the lessons of Iraq and ensure the willing are also capable.

As prospects fade for a Ukrainian victory on the terms espoused by President Volodymyr Zelensky, questions about the post-war security order for the battered country are moving to center stage. Recent diplomacy among the US, Germany, the UK, and France has focused on a security package strong enough to inspire Zelensky's trust and allow him to consider a "land-for-peace" deal that could be sold to war-weary Ukrainians who oppose such concessions.

Two principal models are being discussed for future security guarantees. One is the so-called West German model, a proposal recently gaining traction in some Western capitals. Based on the arrangements made for the Federal Republic of Germany during the Cold War, this model would entail full NATO membership (including full Article 5 guarantees) for the free parts of Ukraine, non-recognition of Russia's annexation of the occupied Ukrainian territory, and a diplomatic and economic long game aimed at eventual Ukrainian reunification, possibly many decades later.

Ukrainians may not trust anything short of NATO membership – Zelensky has highlighted it as the only real security guarantee. However, many NATO countries are unwilling to offer Ukraine full membership in the alliance.

There have been some reports that the US, French, and UK governments are warming to the idea, though the US remains focused on bolstering and legally codifying security guarantees that fall short of NATO membership, potentially via the National Defense Authorization Act later this year. Many others, including Germany, Ukraine's most important European supporter, are also still reluctant to offer full membership; some, like Hungary, decidedly oppose such a move.

An additional problem is that Russia is unlikely to accept this option. President Vladimir Putin's demands for ending the war will almost certainly include Ukraine's neutrality or non-NATO status, in addition to recognition of the territory Russia claims (He has also demanded an undefined de-militarisation of the country).

Finally, critics point out that while this model might, in theory, keep the free parts of the country safe, Ukraine in 2024 cannot be compared to Germany during the Cold War, when the Soviet-dominated eastern parts of Germany were nominally a separate, independent German state, not an annexed territory of the Soviet Union. That model is unlikely to work in the occupied parts of eastern Ukraine.

Consequently, a second model, an in-between solution, is gaining popularity among European governments. With the path to NATO blocked but a pressing need to prevent Russia from triumphing in Ukraine, there is hope that a coalition of the willing could underwrite a credible future Ukraine defense posture outside of existing institutions while accounting for the prospect of a much smaller US role.

Senior French diplomats point to the "Compact Group" as the possible coalition of the willing. It comprises the 32 countries, including most NATO members, that signed the Ukraine Compact announced on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Washington on 11 July.

A solution based on a coalition of the willing would attempt to turn Ukraine into a so-called hedgehog, a heavily fortified country similar to Israel that does not have a formal alliance with the members of the coalition but would be able to withstand future Russian attacks.

As Ukraine would face a permanent threat of renewed Russian aggression, defense levels would have to be very high over an extended period. The

model could, but would not have to, include Western boots on the ground in Ukraine. It would require the supply of sophisticated armaments and military technology to Ukraine that would exceed the support granted since February 2022, a prospect raising doubts about its fiscal, industrial, and political sustainability should the US not participate.

Both models are hampered by the same structural problem: the Europeans' inability to sustain the required long-term military and fiscal support for Ukraine while beefing up their defense capabilities.

Most member states' fiscal firepower is already severely limited. France struggles to rein in its debt and deficit levels, and Italy and the UK are similarly challenged. Meanwhile, Germany suffers from a prolonged economic downturn and an at least partially self-imposed fiscal squeeze that keeps the country from using its comparatively healthy public finances to borrow and invest more (Fitch Ratings 2024).

Apart from these fiscal restraints, the politics of a coalition of the willing would also be highly uncertain given Trump's return to the White House and opt to cut off new aid to Kyiv completely. It appears unlikely that such a coalition could support Ukraine for any protracted period against Washington's explicit will.

An Uncomfortable Outlook

There is also a path to EU membership, to which Putin does not seem to object, and which would be a virtual equivalent to non-member NATO membership (see Austria). But ultimately, regardless of whether the model chosen for Ukraine is that of West Germany or the hedgehog, the safety of Ukraine and Europe more broadly may depend mostly on Europe itself. At a time of unfavorable demographics, dwindling competitiveness, and illiberal temptations, this is an increasingly uncomfortable reality.

References

- Balmforth, T. 2024. "Ukraine Sees Use of Uncrewed Ground Vehicles, AI-Targeting Drones Surging Next Year." Reuters, December 2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-sees-use-uncrewed-ground-vehicles-ai-targeting-drones-surging-next-year-2024-12-02/>.
- "German Coalition Collapse Underscores Economic and Fiscal Challenges." 2024. Fitchratings.com. <https://www.fitchratings.com/research/sovereigns/german-coalition-collapse-underscores-economic-fiscal-challenges-12-11-2024>.
- Goncharuk, Vitaliy. 2024. "Russia's War in Ukraine: Artificial Intelligence in Defence of Ukraine." ICDS, September 27. <https://icds.ee/en/russias-war-in-ukraine-artificial-intelligence-in-defence-of-ukraine/>.
- Hunder, M. 2024. "Ukraine Rushes to Create AI-Enabled War Drones." Reuters, July 18. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/ukraine-rushes-create-ai-enabled-war-drones-2024-07-18/>.
- Irish, J., Hafezi, P., and Landay, J. 2024. "Exclusive: Iran Brokering Talks to Send Advanced Russian Missiles to Yemen's Houthis, Sources Say." Reuters, September 24. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-brokering-talks-send-advanced-russian-missiles-yemens-houthis-sources-say-2024-09-24/>.
- Reuters. 2024. "Exclusive: Russia Has Secret War Drones Project in China, Intel Sources Say." Reuters, September 25. <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-has-secret-war-drones-project-china-intel-sources-say-2024-09-25/>.
- Sharp, A. 2024. "Russia's Putin Proposes Cease-Fire in Ukraine Ahead of Swiss Peace Conference." Foreign Policy, June 14. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/06/14/russia-putin-cease-fire-ukraine-peace-conference-switzerland/>.

24. DEFCON Electron

Dr. Thomas Withington*

Abstract

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has thrown the importance of the electromagnetic spectrum, especially the radio spectrum, to warfare into sharp relief. Militaries depend on the radio spectrum for communications, navigation, and target detection. Both Russia and Ukraine are seeking to control the radio spectrum while denying this to their adversary. This ongoing battle exemplifies the theoretical imperative for militaries to perform electromagnetic manoeuvre to achieve electromagnetic superiority and supremacy.

Keywords: electronic warfare, electromagnetic supremacy and superiority, e2s, electromagnetic manoeuvre, communications, radar, command and control, navigation, Russia, Ukraine, war in Ukraine, NATO, uninhabited aerial vehicles, UAVs

For Ukraine to defeat Russia, it is axiomatic that she must regain and retain control of her skies, seas, and land in their entirety. One precondition of this victory is that Ukraine must regain and sustain control of the radio spectrum in the theatre of operations. This chapter will explain the centrality of the radio spectrum to military operations. It will then define electromagnetic manoeuvre as mechanism to achieve this spectrum retention and control. A hypothetical example of tactical electromagnetic manoeuvre will be provided to this end. Electromagnetic manoeuvre works to achieve Electromagnetic Superiority as a prelude to Electromagnetic Supremacy. These two concepts are collectively known as (E2S). The article will define why achievement and retention of E2S is important. The conclusion will discuss the steps and capabilities Ukraine must develop and acquire to regain, retain and sustain control of the radio spectrum.

* Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute

The Radio Spectrum and Military Operations

The radio spectrum is a subcategory of the electromagnetic spectrum. The electromagnetic spectrum encompasses all sources of electromagnetic radiation. This radiation includes light, some of which is visible to humans, radio waves and ionising radiation like X-rays and gamma rays (National Aeronautics and Space Administration 2024). All electromagnetic radiation takes the form of a wave moving through a cycle. A cycle is the process by which a wave rotates from a peak to a trough and back to a peak again. Frequency is a measurement of how many times-per-second a wave performs this process. Electromagnetic radiation is measured in hertz with one hertz equating to one cycle. Radio waves have frequencies ranging from three hertz (Hz) to three terahertz (THz).¹

Militaries have increased their reliance on the radio spectrum since the discovery of electromagnetic waves in the late 19th century. The uptake of radio by the military to aid communications commenced soon after the perfection of wireless communications by the Italian engineer and physicist Guglielmo Marconi in that same period. Radio was used by Russian and Japanese forces during the war between those two countries between 1904 and 1905 (Global Defence Technology 2024). Radio's use increased in momentum with widespread adoption during the First World War (Johnson 2001, pp. 751-752). It was the German use of the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine during the Second World War which made radio indispensable at the tactical level. *Blitzkrieg* placed a keen emphasis on the use of radio for the Command and Control (C2) of land and air assets during manoeuvre (Holmes 2001, 135). Throughout the conflict, radio proved essential for the movement of voice and data (non-voice) traffic at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. The Second World War also proved radio's utility as a vector for communicating guidance commands to weapons like missiles (National Museum of the U.S. Air Force 2024).

Likewise, it was this conflict which saw the uptake of radar, itself an exploitation of radio technology, for the detection, identification, location, and tracking of targets, particularly in the air and maritime domains. Radar proved itself to be an invaluable capability during the Battle of Britain between July and October 1940. The technology aided the advanced detection of incoming *Luftwaffe* (German Air Force) aircraft for the Royal Air Force

¹ A frequency of three hertz equates to three cycles per second. A frequency of three terahertz equates to three thousand billion cycles per second.

(RAF). As a result, RAF fighters had vital early warning of these incoming planes and could be scrambled in good time. The *Luftwaffe* would similarly find radar indispensable for defending targets against aerial bombardment during the Allied Strategic Air Campaign against Germany. Equally important was the deployment of radar onboard aircraft and warships to hunt submarines and surface combatants (Buckley 2001, 750).

The next revolution in the military's use of radio technology occurred after the Second World War and the commencement of the Space Age beginning with the launch of the Sputnik-1 satellite on 4 October 1957. Sputnik-1 proved that radio waves could be transmitted to, and received from, space. The first dedicated communications satellite, Project SCORE (Signal Communications by Orbiting Relay Equipment), was launched by the United States Air Force on 18 December 1958. SCORE could relay communications between ground stations separated by thousands of miles (U.S. Space Force 2024). As revolutionary was the development of the US Global Positioning System (GPS) Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) constellation. GPS famously entered the public consciousness during Operation Desert Storm in 1991. The constellation provided the US military with Position, Navigation and Timing (PNT) signals. These signals were vital for helping US Army manoeuvre units navigate in the Arabian Desert as they fought to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi control (Pace et al. 1995, 245). GNSS constellations also provide a precise time signal via atomic clocks onboard the constituent spacecraft. A precise time signal provides a time source for complex digital systems like weapons guidance units and military radios. Coordinating complex, joint military operations is also dependent on accurate timing. In a nutshell, the radio spectrum is essential for militaries to share C2 information using conventional radio and Satellite Communications (SATCOM). Radar is vital for Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) while GNSS provides a useful source of navigation and timing information.

Electromagnetic Manoeuvre

Military reliance on the radio spectrum has triggered a corresponding effort to deny, degrade, and destroy that spectrum access via Electronic Warfare (EW). EW is almost as old as radio. The first acknowledged use of EW occurred during the Russo-Japanese War cited above. During that conflict,

Russian forces attacked Japanese naval communications to disrupt the flow of C2 information for naval fire control during the siege of Port Arthur (Von Spreckelsen 2018, 42). Port Arthur was then a Russian naval base on the northeast coast of the present-day People's Republic of China. Electronic Warfare comprises three subdisciplines: Electronic Attack (EA) constitutes "actions taken to prevent or reduce an enemy's effective use of the electromagnetic spectrum such as jamming and electromagnetic deception" (U.S. Department of Defense 2001, 153). Electronic Protection (EP) encompasses "actions taken to protect personnel, facilities, and equipment from any effects of friendly or enemy employment of electronic warfare" (ibid.). Finally, Electronic Support (ES) "provides information required for immediate decisions involving electronic warfare operations and other tactical actions such as threat avoidance, targeting and homing" (ibid.). Central to the latter discipline is the collection, interpretation and management of Signals Intelligence (SIGINT). SIGINT contains the two sub-disciplines of Communications Intelligence (COMINT) and Electronic Intelligence (ELINT). COMINT is the collection, analysis and distribution of intelligence relating to communications signals. ELINT is concerned with non-communications radio transmissions like radar transmissions and PNT signals. EW can be waged using the principles of Electromagnetic Manoeuvre (EM). Electromagnetic manoeuvre, like its kinetic manoeuvre warfare counterpart, works to exploit tactics such pre-emption, movement and tempo, dislocation, disruption, and deception (Withington 2023, 32-41). However, these tactics are applied in the radio spectrum as opposed to physical environments.

To understand how electromagnetic manoeuvre might work in practice, consider this example: Two company-sized army formations are fighting each other in a specific locale. The red force has deployed standard Very/Ultra High Frequency (V/UHF: 30 megahertz/MHz to 300MHz) tactical communications networks. These networks carry voice and data traffic between fireteam, squad, platoon, battalion, and company commanders. Communications/Transmission Security (COMSEC/TRANSEC) protocols of varying strengths protect these networks. Such protocols include frequency-hopping signals with low-probability of detection/interception characteristics. The red force is using these V/UHF networks to carry classified traffic. The red force company is also using deployed and local cell phone networks to move unclassified traffic. The logic of the red force is to ease congestion on the tactical V/UHF networks so that only secret traffic is moved across these links. At the company headquarters sits the company's digital Battle Management

System (BMS) sending and receiving traffic across both the dedicated V/UHF channels and the cell phone network.

Blue force CEMA (Cyber and Electromagnetic Activities) operatives have identified that unclassified traffic going to and from the company BMS is moving across local cellular networks. The CEMA cadres begin infecting the local cellular network with subtly false traffic. For example, correct red forces reports that a local bridge is intact are now labelled as 'incorrect' apparently by those same units. Blue force disinformation effort continue; Red forces have identified a group of local sympathisers located at a farm. The partisans are willing to help any upcoming red force advance into blue force territory. Bit by bit this false, but seemingly real, information populates the company BMS' own data and is treated as reliable. Blue forces then launch a blatant, but deliberately unsuccessful, jamming attack against the red force's classified and protected V/UHF networks. The jamming is detected. As a precaution, the red force immediately imposes emission control conditions. All units are ordered to stop using the networks until the jamming subsides.

Blue force units then transmit false traffic on the red force cellular network that says a Blue Force platoon is mounting an attack against a specific part of the red sector. Some red force units facing the blue fake axis of advance decide to move classified traffic over the cellular networks. They disclose their position, *materiel*, and personnel strength and plead for reinforcements to absorb the expected attack. In just a few short minutes, blue force CEMA cadres have discerned useful intelligence about red force strengths in a particular area. Red force troops eventually realise that information they thought about the bridge was true is in fact false. Distrust spreads like a virus through the red force company. The partisans at the farm never existed, but a red force squad went there anyway to meet them. Observed by an overhead First Person View (FPV) Uninhabited Aerial Vehicle (UAV), the squad was engaged and destroyed by blue fires when they arrived. The blue force has managed to sow chaos into red force C2 by combining CEMA effects, causing a tactical discombobulation it then takes advantage of.

Electromagnetic Superiority and Supremacy

Electromagnetic manoeuvre is not an end of itself. It works to establish E2S. The principle of E2S borrows from airpower theory regarding air

superiority and air supremacy definitions. Paraphrasing the US Department of Defence's definition of air superiority, electromagnetic superiority is the degree of dominance in the *electromagnetic* battle by one force that permits the conduct of its operations at a given time and place without prohibitive interference from *electromagnetic* threats (U.S. Department of Defense 2017, 14). Electromagnetic supremacy is the degree of *electromagnetic* superiority wherein the opposing force is incapable of effective interference within the operational area using *electromagnetic* threats (ibid.). E2S should be pursued not only to ensure that one side can dominate the spectrum at the expense of the other. This action should be done to contribute to tactical, operational, and strategic success.

How does the achievement and retention of E2S contribute to this achievement of tactical, operational and strategic success? As noted above, militaries depend on the radio spectrum to exercise C2, gather ISTAR information, and control weapons through radio signals. Russian forces, like their Ukrainian adversaries, are dependent on the radio spectrum in the Ukraine theatre of operations. Russian tactical and operational radio networks use High Frequency (HF: three megahertz/MHz to 30MHz) transmission for beyond line-of-sight communications. V/UHF is used for line-of-sight links. Russian troops also use local Ukrainian cell phone networks. In addition, they have been known to use private sector Satellite Communications (SATCOM) networks like the Space X Starlink system, which Ukrainian forces also rely upon (Watling 2024). Starlink uses Ku-band (10.9 gigahertz/GHz to 14GHz) and Ka-band (18GHz to 40GHz) frequencies. Russian forces make use of dedicated military communications satellites like the Raduga-1M constellation. Raduga-1M uses L-band (1.2GHz to 1.8GHz), C-band (3.7GHz to 6.425GHz), X-band (7.25GHz to 8.4GHz) and Ka-band frequencies (Russian Space Web 2024). The Russian military is known to rely on the Sfera-S/V constellation (Connell, Bendett, and Lennox 2023, 11-14). Details of the frequencies used by the Sfera-S/V does not appear in the public domain. Russian UAVs use a host of V/UHF frequencies for the control of uninhabited aircraft of all shapes and sizes inhabiting a waveband of 720MHz to 1.020GHz (Chornogor 2024). GNSS PNT signals from Russia's GLONASS system are relied upon by Russian forces in Ukraine as, ironically, are signals transmitted by the GPS constellation. GNSS PNT signals provide timing and navigation information for Russian personnel, platforms, weapons and sensors (Connell, Bendett, and Lennox 2023, 14-15).

Radars adorning Russian warplanes, ships, and weapons use frequencies from VHF up to Ka-band, as do the weapons locating ground-based air defence, coastal surveillance, and fire-control/ground-controlled interception radars deployed by these forces. Greatly reducing, or preventing outright, Russian access to the segments of the radio spectrum these systems rely on could have a profound effect on Russia's operational and tactical cohesion.

Capabilities

What are the capabilities that Ukraine must retain, develop, and acquire to regain and sustain control of the radio spectrum? Broadly speaking, the Ukrainian military needs electronic support measures (ESMs) to support SIGINT collection, interpretation, and management. It is imperative that Ukrainian SIGINT cadres can draft as rich and comprehensive electronic order-of-battle of Russian assets at the tactical and operational levels. Put simply, to know what to attack, you need to know what is emitting in the battlespace. Those Russian emitters from UAVs to ground-based air defence radars and tactical radio networks need to be engaged electronically (jamming) through cyber effects or kinetically. The latter requires Ukraine's allies to at the very least continue, but preferably vastly increase, supplies of artillery and air-to-ground ordnance into the country.

Cyberwarfare is already an acknowledged competence of Ukraine's defence industry, but Ukrainian forces always need more jammers (Conversation with senior Ukrainian defence intelligence official 2024). Relevant *materiel* needs not only to be supplied by Ukraine's allies, but assistance must be provided to increase the domestic production of such capabilities. The lethargy with which the US Congress dealt with a promised, large infusion of equipment into the Ukraine in early 2024 is a case in point. The best way of avoiding future bottlenecks is moving as much production into relatively safe areas in Ukraine as possible. Alternatively, production lines can be built in NATO members close to Ukraine's borders. Ukraine's allies must also widen and deepen the EW training they provide.

Ukraine has embraced the E2S and electromagnetic manoeuvre concepts. Over the last year, the country's military has formed additional tactical EW units. These units have concentrated on countering FPV UAVs and armed uninhabited aircraft. CEMA cadres have also been working hard to

target Russian tactical VHF communications. Allied to these steps is the fostering of a deeper coordinate and convergence of EW units with other combat arms at all echelons both within and beyond the land forces (Interview with senior Ukrainian military electronic warfare experts 2024).

NATO can take important lessons from the Ukrainian military in this regard. EW should not be seen solely as a combat support element on the battlefield. It should form a key part of the manoeuvre force. All troops, regardless of their specialty, should be 'spectrum minded'; understanding what EW can do while being cognisant of their own vulnerabilities to red force electrons. Likewise, the electronic protection measures taken by Ukraine's military is paying dividends. A concerted effort has been made to roll-out secure tactical communications with robust COMSEC/TRANSEC throughout the manoeuvre force (ibid.). This act alone helps blunt the severity of Russian tactical electronic attack. Equally important have been Ukraine's efforts to hunt down and destroy Russian jamming systems kinetically.

This is not to say that Ukraine's adversary is ignoring electromagnetic lessons from the conflict. Russian land forces have made concerted efforts to stop their troops using cell phones on the battlefield. Cell phone transmissions can be detected and located, inviting attacks by fires or UAVs. Systems have been deployed by Russian forces on the battlefield to monitor and manage their own use of the spectrum. These systems presumably detect spurious, unnecessary, and irresponsible spectrum use so that appropriate measures can be taken. Like the Ukrainians, Russian forces are using EW assets to target UAV use and tactical VHF networks. Another Russian tactic is to move frequencies across wide wavebands. Using a waveband of 700MHz to 1.020GHz gives Russian UAV operators a wide selection of frequencies to choose from. This forces Ukrainian counter-UAV operatives to continually monitor all these frequencies ready to jam them when necessary (ibid.). The fact that a UAV's control signal may change frequencies thousands of times per second across a wide waveband further complicates this task.

As Ukrainian EW experts have made clear, the electromagnetic situation on the battlefield is dynamic and subject to change. This makes a responsive domestic and allied industrial base vital. Lessons and data need to flow back rapidly from the battlefield to industry. New, or enhanced, EW capabilities need to expeditiously be developed, tested, and fielded. Those systems that do not make the grade must be discarded forthwith. Saturation of EW assets on the battlefield can create its own challenges. System must be able to work

in harmony with each other. Avantgarde capabilities like Artificial Intelligence (AI) are making their presence felt. AI algorithms can be trained to recognise hostile radio waveforms and then initiate an appropriate jamming response (ibid.).

Strategically, Ukraine's EW capabilities are being developed and fielded in alignment to NATO electromagnetic warfare doctrine and standards (Written statement supplied by senior Ukrainian Army electronic warfare expert 2024). The Ukrainian government has ambitions to join the alliance and ensuring that Ukrainian EW capabilities already dovetail with the alliance's requirements in this regard will ease Ukraine's integration within the alliance.

Dominating the spectrum at the expense of one's adversary is a prerequisite for success across all domains at all levels of war. This domination, achieved by winning and sustaining electromagnetic supremacy, can be secured through electromagnetic manoeuvre. The Ukrainian military is embracing this reality and successfully challenging Russia's use of the spectrum. At the time of writing (late November 2024), the war is entering a critical phase. Russian forces are making slow, but steady progress, as they advance in eastern Ukraine. The election of Donald Trump as the 47th president of the United States has thrown continued US support into doubt. Ukraine's allies must double down on efforts to supply the EW capabilities she needs. Domestic production, including licenced production of foreign-supplied systems, must expand. The ongoing war demonstrates that "[m]odern EW is no longer merely considered a type of support but as a form of combat, involving the use of electromagnetic energy to control the electromagnetic spectrum or to engage the adversary" (ibid.). Moreover, the war has shown that "electronic warfare has evolved into a refined form of combat, aiming to dominate the adversary within the electromagnetic spectrum and achieve comprehensive battlefield superiority" (ibid.). This observation is as relevant to NATO and her allies as it is to Ukraine as her military continues to challenge Russia's control of the spectrum and, by default, the latter's control of Ukraine's territory.

References

- Buckley, J. 2001. "Radar." In *Oxford Companion to Military History*, edited by R. Holmes, 750. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chornogor, Y. 2024. "Russian Unmanned Systems: Current State, Prospects of Production and Application." August 13, 2024. <https://prismua.org/en/russian-unmanned-systems-current-state-prospects-of-production-and-application/#:~:text=The%20overall%20frequency%20range%20for,drones%20is%20720%2D1020%20MHz.>
- Connell, M., S. Bendett, and B. Lennox. 2023. *The Role of Space in Russia's Operations in Ukraine*. Arlington, VA: Centre for Naval Analysis.
- Conversation with senior Ukrainian defence intelligence official, November 2024.
- Global Defence Technology. 2024. "The Evolution of Electronic Warfare - Global Defence Technology Special Issue 1." [https://defence.nridigital.com/global_defence_technology_special/the_evolution_of_electronic_warfare.](https://defence.nridigital.com/global_defence_technology_special/the_evolution_of_electronic_warfare)
- Holmes, R. 2001. "Blitzkrieg." In *Oxford Companion to Military History*, edited by R. Holmes, 135. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Interview with senior Ukrainian military electronic warfare experts, November 2024.
- Johnson, DM. 2001. "Radio." In *Oxford Companion to Military History*, edited by R. Holmes, 751-752. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration. 2024. "Electromagnetic Spectrum – Introduction." [https://imagine.gsfc.nasa.gov/science/toolbox/emspectrum1.html.](https://imagine.gsfc.nasa.gov/science/toolbox/emspectrum1.html)
- National Museum of the U.S. Air Force. 2024. "German 'Fritz X' Guided Bomb." [https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/196228/german-fritz-x-guided-bomb/#:~:text=by%20Ken%20LaRock\)-,German%20%22Fritz%20X%22%20Guided%20Bomb,armored%20ship%20or%20ground%20targets.](https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/196228/german-fritz-x-guided-bomb/#:~:text=by%20Ken%20LaRock)-,German%20%22Fritz%20X%22%20Guided%20Bomb,armored%20ship%20or%20ground%20targets.)
- Pace, S., G. Frost, I. Lachow, D. Frelinger, D. Fossum, D.K. Wassem, and M. Pinto. 1995. *The Global Positioning System: Assessing National Policies*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation Critical Technologies Institute.
- Russian Space Web. 2024. "Raduga-1M Communications Satellite." [https://www.russianspaceweb.com/raduga1m.html.](https://www.russianspaceweb.com/raduga1m.html)
- U.S. Space Force. 2024. "Satellite Systems – Communications Systems." [https://www.losangeles.spaceforce.mil/Portals/16/documents/AFD-150806-035.pdf.](https://www.losangeles.spaceforce.mil/Portals/16/documents/AFD-150806-035.pdf)
- U.S. Department of Defense. 2001. *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense.
- U.S. Department of Defense. 2017. *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense.
- Von Spreckelsen, M. 2018. "Electronic Warfare – The Forgotten Discipline: Why is the Refocus on this Traditional Warfare Area Key for Modern Conflict?" *The Journal of the Joint Air Power Competence Centre* 27: 42. Kalkar: Joint Air Power Competence Centre.

Watling, T. 2024. "Russia Illegally Using Musk's Starlink Satellites to Advance in Ukraine." October 14, 2024. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/elon-musk-russia-ukraine-war-starlink-b2629084.html>.

Withington, T. 2023. "Manoeuvre Warfare and the Electromagnetic Spectrum." *RUSI Journal* 168 (6): 32-41. London: Royal United Services Institute.

Written statement supplied by senior Ukrainian Army electronic warfare expert, October 2024.

25. Russian Military Reform and the War in Ukraine

Dr. Daivis Petraitis*

Abstract

Since Vladimir Putin's rise to power, Russian military elites have seized the opportunity to implement a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) through comprehensive military reform initiated in 2008 onward. This reform is viewed as essential for Russia's future military capabilities, positioning it as a key Centre of Gravity (CoG). However, the decision to deploy partially reformed and inadequately manned troops in the ongoing conflict raises questions about the prioritisation of political objectives over military readiness. Despite initial setbacks, Russian military leadership has demonstrated a capacity to address immediate challenges on the battlefield decisively. With significant financial backing and a robust ideological campaign, the military is poised to sustain an attritional war. Concurrently, the establishment of new military districts, the formation of additional units, and the refurbishment of the military-industrial complex suggest that the RMA remains on track, indicating a commitment to ongoing reform and adaptation in response to the evolving dynamics of warfare.

Keywords: Russia, military reform, Ukraine, Russo-Ukrainian war

Introduction

In 2008, Russia began its military reform. The ambitions and intentions were impressive – Russia announced plans to fundamentally change its military, eliminate Soviet military organisation, introduce new weaponry based on new technologies, and adopt new combat concepts. Anatoliy Serdyukov, a civilian minister with no previous military background and experience, was appointed as the new defence minister, leading to the gradual dismantling of the old Soviet military. Thousands of officers were retired, military formations and institutions were disbanded, and outdated tanks, infantry fighting

* Lecturer in War and Conflict Studies, Baltic Defence College

vehicles (IFVs), armoured personnel carriers (APCs), and other weapons were sent for scrapping. The reform was expected to be implemented in stages and completed around 2020. Upon completion, Russia aimed to have a military capable of engaging in modern warfare and competing with the world's most advanced armies.

In the years leading up to the invasion to Ukraine, the reform was still incomplete, but Western and Russian experts (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2020; CNA 2021) noted that the Russian military already looked impressive. Annual strategic exercises conducted in various military districts since 2008 demonstrated the increasing strength of the Armed Forces. The ranks were filled by professional soldiers, and new-generation weaponry began to emerge in testing grounds and parades. The new troops were involved in real combat operations. During the occupation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, new special operation forces (SOF) already participated. Those operations demonstrated the Russian military's ability to master and adapt to new fighting methods successfully. Finally, the military operation in Syria, where Russia deployed a significant military force to support the loyal regime of Bashar al-Assad almost convinced on-lookers (Sutygin 2015) that the military reform has been successful and that the Russian military deserved respect and fear.

Ukraine became a key indicator for the success of military reform in Russia. As negotiations with the West regarding new security arrangements in the Europe hit a wall, the security situation around and within Ukraine became especially tense. The Russian Armed Forces began massing thousands of soldiers and military equipment near the Ukrainian border and in Crimea. On 5 February 2022, two anonymous US officials reported that Russia had assembled 83 battalion tactical groups, estimated to be 70 percent of their combat capabilities, in preparation for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Steward and Pamuk, 2022).

The invasion started with Russian forces moving decisively, and, at first glance, seemingly unstoppable. Ukrainian air defences were attacked and severely damaged, and air assaults on Antonov Airport in Hostomel, Kyiv Oblast, and other targets were executed according to plans designed during previous training exercises. Numerous columns of Russian armed forces penetrated Ukrainian territory. It was expected to be a short 'blitzkrieg,' but despite premature forecasts of a rapid Russian success and victory, the war continues even today.

By December 2022, with the war deeply entrenched in Ukraine and Russian troops facing setbacks, military authorities were forced to initiate a partial mobilisation of reservists. Defence Minister Shoigu announced Russia's intention to continue the military reform. Was this announcement a sign of Russians retreating from its previous plans to modernise the military, or did it indicate a commitment to maintaining the reform despite the challenging situation? Let us take a closer look at these developments and analyse the current state of the Russian military right.

The Main Ideas of the Reform

For some, it may seem that this Russian reform is just one of many. Since breakup of the Soviet Union, the Russian military has announced several initiatives to modernise its armed forces, but all of them ended poorly. This reform is different. It began with a strong political and legal foundation. The military doctrine adopted in 2000 became the cornerstone for these changes.¹ As a next step, a document outlining the main tasks of the reform and the levels of ambitions (LoA) for the Russian military was presented. The report, titled, "Concrete Tasks to Develop the Military Forces of the Russian Federation," was announced by then-Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov and became known as the 'Ivanov Doctrine.'² This doctrine articulated the political-military elites' commitment to fundamentally transform the Russian military by focusing on three main areas: organisational structures, armaments and fighting concepts. In essence, the 'Ivanov Doctrine' expressed the desire to initiate a Russian Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) (Petraitis 2012)

The 'Ivanov Doctrine' also outlined Russia's LoAs. According to the document, after completing initial changes in all three military matters (structures, weapons, concepts), it was expected that at the end of first stage, Russia would have a standing military force capable of simultaneously engaging in two military conflicts and one peacekeeping operation without any mobilisation. Once the bulk of these forces became available, Russia planned to create a new mobilisation system and begin expanding its reformed forces. By the end of the second stage (and the reform itself), the Russian military was expected to be ready to withstand initial airspace

¹ The Doctrine was adopted on 21 April 2000 as Presidential Decree No. 706

² Presented in the Board of the MOD on 2 October 2003

attacks from opponents, mobilise using the new system, and fight and win any global conflict (Ivanov 2004; Petraitis 2012).

The reform (the RMA) received particular attention and importance. Political and military leadership acknowledged that it would take at least two to three decades to achieve what was stated in the ‘Ivanov Doctrine.’ They believed the effort was worth it, as success could position Russia as one of the strongest states in the world and enable it to realise its strategic ambitions. The success of the reform (the RMA) became one of the Centres of Gravity (CoG) for the military and even for the state in foreseeable future.

The Russian Military Reform before and during the Invasion

With the ‘Ivanov Doctrine’ announced and before its official initiation, preparatory steps were taken in October 2008. A new organisational system dividing the military into operational (combat) and institutional (support) parts was designed and tested in exercises like “Baikal 2006.” Subsequently, the General Staff prepared a secret reform plan, which was approved (Petraitis 2012). With the reform underway, the Russian military began to change. Serdyukov dismantled the Soviet organisational system and his successor, Shoigu, continued to build a new force structure. The Russian military began to take on a new shape and size, with a combat brigade (CB) consisting of three battalion tactical groups (BTGs) designated to be the main tactical unit (Petraitis 2015). A new division, similar to the US model, was likely intended to serve as a platform for these CBs. Several CBs and divisions had to form a corps or an army (Operational command, OC), which would, in turn, be subordinated to a specific military district (Joint Strategic Command, JSC).

Russia started forming numerous BTGs, and soon each new brigade had at least one BTG. They continued by adding a second and third BTG, transforming all brigades into full flesh combat units. At the eve of the invasion Russia possessed 168 BTGs (REGNUM 2021), with some brigades already hosting two BTGs (Mizokami 2022). Still, before the invasion to Ukraine in 2022, no announcements about at least one full-fledged (three BTGs) combat brigade were made

As we know, Russia invaded Ukraine with close to a hundred battalion combat groups (BTGs). Some reports suggest the number was even larger, reaching 120 BTGs (Mizokami 2022). Massive air assaults targeted Ukraine

air defences and supporting special forces and airborne troops conducted raids on specific targets, complementing the general BTG assault. Despite this, Russian success was short-lived, and the assaulting troops were soon badly damaged and forced to retreat. After the initial shock, Ukrainians mobilised and began destroying Russian tanks and fighting vehicles on the roads in large numbers. Except for the Kherson region, where Russian managed to make some progress – possible aided by the treason of some Ukrainians – the main Russian offensive was halted and quickly turned into a retreat. In contrast, in the Luhansk and Donetsk areas, where Ukrainian troops had combat experience, the Russian offensive met fierce resistance and, in some places, made little to no progress.

The initial Western fears of Russians finalising the campaign and defeating Ukraine in a few days dissipated, revealing the unpreparedness of Russian troops to wage local war (to meet the first stage LoA). Several experts noted that not all BTGs were fully manned, equipped, or logistically supported (Baez 2022). Problems with C2 also became evident. Communications between BTGs were poor or non-existent, forcing them to operate in unclear situations. In some cases, infantrymen were absent and only IFVs and APCs driven by a driver and commander alone formed invading columns. Getting lost, lacking upper leadership and situational awareness, they were consequently ambushed and destroyed while approaching Kyiv.

Russian failure can also be attributed to the fact that they encountered a nearly peer opponent. According to information provided by Ukraine,³ the country had more than 33 fully equipped brigades in 2021. Assuming each of brigade had three BTGs, this would lead to 99 Ukrainian BTGs facing a similar number of advancing Russian BTGs. According to military doctrine, this is not a favourable ratio of forces for an offensive. This suggest the Russian plan to initiate a real war with forces that were not finally reformed and massed was, if not punishable, at least poorly conceived.

The failure to achieve success in this blitzkrieg was not merely a defeat of the force; it threatened the entire completion of the RMA itself. The expectations of the Russian military brass to win quickly with partially reformed forces and then continue the reform proved to be misguided. Now, political-military leadership faced two options. The first was to concentrate on the war, introduce martial law, and implement full mobilisation, thereby

³ Annual information about Armed Forces is provided by all state signatories of OSCE Vienna Document. For details, see: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/4/86597.pdf>.

terminating the reform. After gathering forces, they could aim to win. This would mean a strategic defeat of everything announced more than two decades ago in the ‘Ivanov Doctrine.’ If this option were taken, new forces would not be created, and the RMA would be suspended, at least for the duration of the war, if not permanently. In summary, this option would jeopardise or even destroy their own strategic CoG. Two wasted decades of hard work and effort would easily qualify as the strategic defeat of Russia. It was clear that this option was unfeasible for both the military and ruling regime.

Therefore, another, more recent, option was chosen. This involved gathering reserves as quickly as possible and at any necessary cost. Despite the establishment of the new mobilisation system, a requirement for the second stage of reform initiated in 2013 (Petraitis 2015), not everything went according to plan, and when the aggression occurred, the system still was not in place. Under the famous guise of ‘partial mobilisation,’ Russian recruited around 300,000 reserves, likely using the old mobilisation system. They called and sent to units those who ‘failed to escape,’ with many going straight into battle. The remaining ‘lucky’ ones went to training centres for refresher training before joining the frontline units. Some of those ‘mobilised’ are still fighting. Other methods to increase troop numbers were also used. Private companies like “Wagner” recruited prisoners, while additional contracted and patriotically motivated “volunteers” (Lister and Pennington. 2022) and elements of experimental MOD reserve system BARS (*BAPC*) (Novaya Gazeta. 2022) contributed to the influx of thousands of new soldiers on the front.

In addition to the new personnel mobilisation system, no system of mobilising the state economy was created, so improvisation and regulatory mechanisms were used to accelerate the production of ammunition, weapons, and equipment (Petraitis 2024). All of this allowed Russia to keep the war machine rolling without introducing martial law and performing full mobilisation. Even the term ‘war’ was not used. The new term “Special Military Operation” allowed the country officially to remain at peace and, most importantly for the military, to continue the reform (the RMA). With the situation thus managed, in December 2022, the MOD (Shoigu) announced a decision to continue the reform (the RMA). The expansion of the reformed and slightly ‘corrected’ forces had to be continued. This enlargement included a gradual increase in the number of personnel (military and civilian)

in the military, the formation of new divisions, corps, armies, and even military districts (JSCs), all equipped with new weapons (Vedomosty 2023).

The number of military personnel was changed to grow from 2,039 758 (1,150,628 military) in summer 2022 to 2,209,130 (1,320,000 military) in 2023. An additional 169,372 new soldiers and officers were intended to fill losses in combat troops and to form more than 50 new formations, ranging from regiments and divisions to corps and armies (Komersant 2024). To attract soldiers and potential recruits for contract service, the age bracket for conscription was widened by three years; instead of the previous range of 18 to 27 years, all males from 18 to 30⁴ became potential conscripts. Salaries and bonuses for joining the contract service also increased significantly (Mironov 2024). According to official statements, this helped secure more than 230,000 new contracts signed by July 2023 (RIA 2023), allowing not only for the compensation of losses on the front but also for the formation of the announced two armies and 50 different units and formations as well (Andreeva 2023). The subsequent increase of 180,000 personnel the total number of Armed Forces to 2,389,130 (Komersant 2024). Continuing to raise of payments and bonuses (in some regions reaching millions of roubles) resulted in approximately 190,000 contracts signed by July 2024 (RBK 2024). If the rate of new recruits willing to sign and ‘become millionaires’ remains at least the same, this would enable the Russian military to continue the war and form additional new units, indicating that the reform is ongoing.

To acquire new arms, Russia managed to mobilise its military-industrial complex (MIC) to meet the basic needs of combat troops and to expand production (Petraitis 2024). In addition to the old weaponry from storage being modernised and sent to the front, new weapons were produced in increasing numbers. Some of these went directly to the front, while others, especially the newer models, were allocated to newly formed units. For example, in 2023 compared to 2022, the production of self-propelled artillery increased tenfold, mortars twentyfold, and MLRS doubled (Interfax 2024). While this was still insufficient to equip all new units and formations, the trend of increasing production was evident. The MIC continues to grow and strengthen. A new generation of weaponry, including self-propelled artillery guns like “Koalicya”, “Flack” or “Malka,” FPV drones like “Lancet,” flamethrowers like “Tosochka,” a remote mining system called “Zemledelya,” the

⁴ Federal Law from 25 July 2023. See: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202308040024>.

“Armata” tank, and other weapons have been observed undergoing combat testing in the Ukraine war (Leonova and Stepanov 2024; Chodorionok. 2023). This indicates that the second stage of reform is ongoing.

Today, with the war in Ukraine already lasting more than a thousand days, Russian military and political leadership appears satisfied with the situation. Despite some claims that Russia will soon run out of soldiers and ammunition, forcing a mobilisation, such a scenario has yet to materialise. To assist the MIC in fulfilling military orders, Russian political leadership has secured ‘good allies.’ Russia has signed a so-called bilateral cooperation treaty with North Korea, which “demonstrates a growing closeness between the two pariah states that is likely to make the rest of the world uneasy” (Terry and Sestanovich 2024). This agreement allows for the provision of Korean weapons, ammunition, and even soldiers if needed. The value of these resources is debatable, but according a Russian saying, “everything works in war.” Russian Defence Minister Belousov continues to maintain smooth in China (McCarthy 2024), helping to circumvent sanctions and acquire necessary technologies and goods. Additionally, Russian-Iranian agreements potentially lay the groundwork for decades of co-operation in political, defence, and other areas (Jansen 2024).

Conclusion

Since Putin came to power, Russian military elites have found a significant opportunity to pursue their own RMA through the military reform. This desire appears to have been well thought out and implemented since 2008. The military leadership views the reform as crucial for the future, assigning it great importance by this making it one of Russia’s most important CoGs.

Given this context, it is puzzling why Russian military leadership would send partially reformed and inadequately manned troops into war, thereby jeopardising the reform. Most likely, this decision was driven by political considerations related to other, perhaps more pressing issues, leading to military concerns being sidelined in favour of alternative arguments.

Ukrainian forces, heroically resisting the invaders, not only thwarted Russian columns but also tested the entire Russian reform. Ukrainians were the first to identify the weaknesses in the new Russian military structures and to recognise the strengths of the modernised Russian military. The experience they gained is invaluable, equipping them with the knowledge

necessary to continue fighting against an overwhelming opponent and inflicting significant losses even today.

Still, despite difficulties after receiving their defeat, Russian military leadership managed to address immediate problems on the front by acting roughly and decisively. With substantial financial resources and with a strong ideological campaign backing them, the military can continue an attritional war. At the same time, the formation of two new military districts, armies, corps, and divisions, along with the establishment of new military education institutions, refurbishment of the Soviet MIC, and the broad application of concepts and tactics associated with Russia's new generation (hybrid) warfare indicates that the RMA remains on schedule and the reform is being continued.

References

- Andreeva, Alisa. 2023. "Такого масштаба не было со времен ВОВ». Какие новые армии создаются в России." *Gazeta.Ru*, June 2, 2023. <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2023/06/02/17079776.shtml>.
- Báez, Gonzalo. 2022. "At First Sight: Russian Armor/Mechanized Battalion Tactical Groups in Ukraine War." 2022. <https://www.moore.army.mil/Armor/eARMOR/content/issues/2022/Summer/3Baez22.pdf>.
- CNA. 2021. *Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts*. Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, Dmitry Gorenburg, Mary Chesnut, Jeffrey Edmonds, and Julian Waller. CNA. 08/06/2021. DRM-2021-U-029755-Final.
- Chodorionok, Mikhail. 2023. "«Армата» вступает в бой в зоне спецоперации." *Gazeta.Ru*, April 25, 2023. <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2023/04/25/16612537.shtml>.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2020. *Russian Military Modernization*. September. ISBN 978-0-367-69811-9.
- Ivanov, S. 2004. "Вооруженные силы России и ее геополитические приоритеты." *Россия в глобальной политике* 1 (January-February 2004). http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_2471.
- Interfax. 2024. "Выпуск самоходной артиллерии в РФ за год вырос в 10 раз – 'Росrex'." *ИНТЕРФАКС*, July 30, 2024. <https://www.militarynews.ru/story.asp?rid=1&nid=623419&lang=RU>.
- Jansen, Michael. 2024. "Russia and Iran Sign Partnership Agreement." *The Irish Times*, September 23, 2024. <https://www.irishtimes.com/world/middle-east/2024/09/23/russia-and-iran-sign-partnership-agreement/>.
- Kommersant. 2024. "Путин увеличил численность Вооруженных сил до 2 млн 389 тыс. человек." *Коммерсант*, September 16, 2024. https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7158697?from=top_main_1.
- Lister, Tim, and Josh Pennington. 2022. "Russia Is Recruiting Thousands of Volunteers to Replenish Its Ranks in Ukraine. Prior Experience Isn't Always Required." *CNN*, August 19, 2022.
- Leonova, Yulia, and Bogdan Stepanov. 2024. "Технический прорыв: как СВО ускорила разработку новых образцов оружия." *Izvestiya*, January 3, 2024. <https://iz.ru/1627128/iuliia-leonova-bogdan-stepovoi/tekhnicheskii-proryv-kak-svo-uskorila-razrabotku-novykh-obraztcov-oruzhiia>.
- McCarthy, Simone. 2024. "Russia Defense Chief Touts 'Common Understanding' with China in Beijing Talks." *CNN*, October 16, 2024. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/16/china/china-russia-military-talks-intl-hnk/index.html>.
- Mironov, Mikhail. 2024. "В российском регионе вдвое увеличили выплату за отправку на СВО." *Gazeta.Ru*, October 17, 2024. <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2024/10/17/24170881.shtml>.
- Mizokami, Kyle. 2022. "How Russia's Battalion Tactical Groups Will Tackle War With Ukraine." *Popular Mechanics*, February 24, 2022. <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/weapons/a39193732/russian-battalion-tactical-groups-explained/>.

- Novaya Gazeta. 2022. "Пехота пуще неволи." *Новая газета. Европа*, September 24, 1973. October 5, 2022. <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/08/10/pekhota-pushche-nevoli>.
- Petraitis, Daivis. 2012. "Reorganisation of the Russian Armed Forces." *Finish National Defense University*, Department of Strategic and Defense Studies, Working Paper N. 43/2012. ISSN: 1236-4983.
- Petraitis, Daivis. 2015. "The New Face of Russia's Military." *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 2014-2015, Volume 13 (2015): 101-123.
- Petraitis, Daivis. 2024. "Russia's War Economy: An Assessment of Russia's Military Industrial Complex." *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, August 2024. <https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/29391852/Monitor+Russia%27s+War+Economy%2520Military+Industrial+Complex.pdf/fe728253-e977-3723-dc82-cc2bcacf168cb?version=1.1&t=1722425254656>.
- RIA Novosty. 2023. "Контракт с Минобороны подписали более 231 тысячи человек, заявил Медведев." August 3, 2023. <https://ria.ru/20230803/kontrakt-1888005763.html>.
- RBK. 2024. "Кремль объяснил рост выплат военным за подписание контракта." *RBK*, July 31, 2024. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/31/07/2024/66aa022d9a7947f63664ba32>.
- REGNUM. 2021. "Шойгу раскрыл число батальонно-тактических групп в составе Армии России." August 10, 2021. <https://regnum.ru/news/3341555>.
- Stewart, Phil, and Humeyra Pamuk. 2022. "Russian Forces at 70% of Level Needed for Full Ukraine Invasion, U.S. Officials Say." *Reuters*, February 6, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-forces-70-level-needed-full-ukraine-invasion-us-officials-2022-02-05/>.
- Sutyagin, Igor. 2015. "Detailing Russian Forces in Syria." *RUSI Defence Systems* 17 (November 13). <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-defence-systems/detailing-russian-forces-in-syria>.
- Terry, Sue Mi, and Stephen Sestanovich. 2024. "Russia Struck a Defense Pact With North Korea. What Does It Mean?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 19, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/russia-struck-defense-pact-north-korea-what-does-it-mean>.
- Vedomosti. 2023. "Шойгу анонсировал масштабные перемены в российской армии." *Ведомости*, January 17, 2023. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2023/01/17/959324-shoigu-anonsiroval-masshtabnie-izmeneniya>.



The Baltic Defence College (BALTDEFCOL) is the multinational professional military education institution of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania established in 1999.

The College provides education to the civilian and military leaders from the Baltic States, allies and partners at the operational and strategic level.

BALTDEFCOL promotes international cooperation and networking and contributes to research in security and defence policy.