

Hansen | Husieva | Frankenthal [Eds.]

# Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine

“Zeitenwende” for German Security Policy



**Nomos**



## ISPK-Studien zur Konfliktforschung

edited by

Institut für Sicherheitspolitik  
an der Universität Kiel gGmbH (ISPK)

Volume 5

Stefan Hansen | Olha Husieva  
Kira Frankenthal [Eds.]

# Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine

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The open access publication of this title was made possible by the umbrella initiative “Hochschule.digital Niedersachsen” of the German state of Lower Saxony.

**The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek** lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

ISBN 978-3-7560-1159-9 (Print)  
978-3-7489-1720-5 (ePDF)

#### **British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-3-7560-1159-9 (Print)  
978-3-7489-1720-5 (ePDF)

#### **Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

Hansen, Stefan | Husieva, Olha | Frankenthal, Kira  
Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine  
“Zeitenwende” for German Security Policy  
Stefan Hansen | Olha Husieva | Kira Frankenthal (Eds.)  
359 pp.  
Includes bibliographic references.

ISBN 978-3-7560-1159-9 (Print)  
978-3-7489-1720-5 (ePDF)

1st Edition 2023

© The Authors

Published by

Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG  
Waldseestraße 3–5 | 76530 Baden-Baden  
[www.nomos.de](http://www.nomos.de)

Production of the printed version:  
Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG  
Waldseestraße 3–5 | 76530 Baden-Baden

ISBN 978-3-7560-1159-9 (Print)  
ISBN 978-3-7489-1720-5 (ePDF)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748917205>



Online Version  
Nomos eLibrary



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## List of Abbreviations

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| BMI     | Federal Ministry of the Interior and Home Affairs (Germany)                       |
| BMVg    | Federal Ministry of Defense (Germany)   |
| BND     | Federal Intelligence Service (Germany)  |
| BSI     | Federal Office for Information Security (Germany)                                 |
| BTG     | Battalion Tactical Group  |
| CAESAR  | Camion Équipé D'un Système D'artillerie (Truck equipped with an artillery system) |
| CCP     | Communist Party of China  |
| CDU     | Christian Democratic Union of Germany   |
| CERT-UA | Computer Emergency Response Team of Ukraine                                       |
| CFE     | Conventional Armed Forces in Europe   |
| CPSU    | Communist Party of the Soviet Union   |
| CSCE    | Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe                                  |
| CSDP    | Common Security and Defense Policy  |
| CSTO    | Collective Security Treaty Organization   |
| CSU     | Christian Social Union in Bavaria e. V.   |
| DDoS    | Distributed Denial-of-Service   |
| DNR     | Donetsk People's Republic   |
| EC      | European Community  |
| ECHR    | European Court of Human Rights  |
| EDIRPA  | European Defense Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act            |
| EEAS    | European External Action Service  |
| EMEA    | Europe, the Middle East and Africa  |
| ENISA   | European Union Agency for Cyber Security  |
| EPF     | European Peace Facility   |
| EU      | European Union  |
| EUMAM   | EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine                              |
| EW      | Electronic Warfare  |

## *List of Abbreviations*

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| FDP    | Free Democratic Party of Germany   |
| GDR    | German Democratic Republic   |
| GRU    | Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie (Foreign Military Intelligence Agency of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation) |
| HIMARS | High Mobility Artillery Rocket System  |
| HR     | Human Rights   |
| ICC    | International Criminal Court   |
| ICCPR  | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights   |
| ICJ    | International Court of Justice   |
| IHL    | International Humanitarian Law   |
| ISAF   | International Security Assistance Force  |
| KGB    | Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (Committee for State Security of the Soviet Union)  |
| LNG    | Liquefied Natural Gas  |
| LNR    | Luhansk People's Republic  |
| MLRS   | Multiple Launch Rocket System  |
| NATO   | North Atlantic Treaty Organization   |
| NBC    | Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Weapons  |
| NSS    | National Security Strategy   |
| OSCE   | Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe  |
| PESCO  | Permanent Structured Cooperation   |
| PLA    | People's Liberation Army (China)   |
| PMR    | Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic  |
| RT     | Russia Today   |
| SCO    | Shanghai Cooperation Organization  |
| SPD    | Social Democratic Party of Germany   |
| SSR    | Security Sector Reform   |
| START  | Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty  |
| SWIFT  | Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication  |
| TCG    | Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine  |
| TDF    | Territorial Defense Forces (Ukraine)   |
| TRA    | Taiwan Relations Act   |
| UAV    | Unmanned Aerial Vehicle  |

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| UN    | United Nations  |
| USA   | United States of America  |
| USSR  | Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the Soviet Union)  |
| VGTRK | Vserossiyskaya gosudarstvennaya televizionnaya i radioveshchatelnaya kompaniya (All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company) |
| VJTF  | Very High Readiness Joint Task Force of NATO  |
| ZMSBw | Bundeswehr Center of Military History and Social Sciences   |



## Foreword

*Stefan Hansen, Olha Husieva, and Kira Frankenthal*

As early as April 2021, Ukraine's then-Ambassador to Germany Andriy Melnyk stressed that the Russian troop concentration on the Ukrainian border was much more than a mere "saber-rattling or war drums, as many in Germany believe".<sup>1</sup> He noted these were Russia's most massive troop movements since World War II<sup>2</sup> and a very real preparation for attack, which is why more than nice words were needed. However, in Germany, as in several other European countries, fear of infuriating Russia by supporting Ukraine and thus potentially provoking an escalation prevailed. Consequently, people closed their eyes to the increasingly obvious reality that Russia, for its part, had long been deliberately driving the escalation, and that European inaction had made this possible in the first place.

The morning of February 24, 2022, brought forth a new reality: a brutal, full-scale conventional war of aggression in the middle of Europe, the like of which had not been seen since World War II. The pseudo goal of "liberating" supposedly oppressed Russophone Ukrainians in self-proclaimed republics of Donbas through annexation, as pushed by Putin's propaganda, and the pretext of "denazifying" and "demilitarizing" Ukraine through a "special military operation" could not conceal the reality that Russia, driven

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1 Müller, Dirk: "Russlands Truppenverlegung. Ukrainischer Botschafter: 'Wir brauchen militärische Unterstützung'", Deutschlandfunk, 15 April 2021, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/russlands-truppenverlegung-ukrainischer-botschafter-wir-100.html>, 01.12.2022.

2 Importantly, this statement by Andriy Melnyk is, however, not factually correct. Firstly, it was not the Russian Federation but the Soviet Union together with other Warsaw Pact countries who invaded Czechoslovakia. Secondly, that invasion totaled 250,000–500,000 troops in 1968, meanwhile, as for the time of Melnyk's statement in April 2021, Russia concentrated between 100,000 and 120,000 troops on the Ukrainian border: McEnchroe, Thomas/Ayzpurvit, Kateřina/Pohanka, Vojtěch: "It still impacts Czech opinion on Russia: The 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia", Radio Prague International, 20 August 2022, <https://english.radio.cz/it-still-impacts-czech-opinion-russia-1968-invasion-czechoslovakia-8759138>, 01.07.2023; Bielieskov, Mykola: The Russian and Ukrainian Spring 2021 War Scare, Center For Strategic and International Studies, 21 September 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-and-ukrainian-spring-2021-war-scare>, 01.07.2023.

by revisionist great power aspirations, was inflicting a humanitarian catastrophe of large-scale destruction, atrocities and war crimes on Ukraine. While denying Ukraine any right to exist, the U.S., NATO states, and “the West” in general are being painted as enemies. For Europe, this means nothing less than the end of the security order that had emerged after World War II, and it marks the end of any “peace dividend” reaped since the end of the Cold War.

For the past few decades, Germany had assumed a leading role in rebuilding bridges between the former Cold War rivals, describing this as its “historic responsibility towards the Russian people”. Today, however, this perhaps well-intentioned, yet too far-reaching concession to an increasingly authoritarian leadership in Moscow is mostly seen as a naïve policy of “appeasement towards an aggressor”, which had apparently overlooked the fact that there is also a historical responsibility towards the Ukrainian people. In effect, this policy has massively endangered the security of Europe.

In order to correct previous mistakes in its Russia policy, the German government initiated a turnaround in security policy. On February 27, 2022, a realignment of Germany’s foreign and security policy was announced in a special session of the Bundestag. The announced permanent increase in the defense budget and a 100 billion euros special fund for the Bundeswehr were intended to usher in a turning point for German security policy – the so-called “*Zeitenwende*” (German for “end of an era”, “turning point”, “watershed moment”). In light of the 2014 Crimea annexation, however, many experts criticized these changes as belated and their implementation as too timid, especially since the Bundeswehr is in such a desolate state after more than two decades of disarmament that the 100 billion euros will largely be needed to fully equip the forces at the current target level. Any subsequent upgrade and training of the German armed forces to a higher level will take decades. In terms of security policy, this means that Germany is still lagging behind its allies rather than leading the way.

Compared to other EU and NATO member states, Germany has missed multiple opportunities to take a leading role in the resolution of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Nonetheless, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022 represents a historic turning point for German security policy, which will not only significantly change Germany’s course *vis-à-vis* Russia, but also redefine Germany’s role in the future security order of Europe. It is yet to be determined in what way. In this context, it is of crucial importance that the envisaged reorientation of Germany’s foreign

and security policy is implemented on a sustainable basis, and that previous mistakes, including ideologically driven ones, are clearly recognized and addressed. What is needed to initiate policy corrections and sound security policy decisions is a timely and critical review of the course taken so far, coupled with foreign and security policy recommendations of practical value.

This anthology therefore aims to shed light on the causes and developments of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and to systematically review Germany's policy towards Russia since 1990. Thus, new directions for German foreign and security policy will be identified. It will explain why timely corrections are imperative in order to be better prepared for future escalations and security challenges. It shall not only serve scholars as a basis for further research on the war and its impact on the new security policy course of Germany and Europe, but also aims to support the wider public in better understanding previous and current political situations and threats in order to facilitate societal support for a changed policy direction.

The anthology consists of three overarching sections that address *Background and Causes*, *War Events and Developments*, as well as the resulting "*Zeitenwende*" for German Security Policy.

In the *Background and Causes* section, motives for the Russian aggression against Ukraine are examined from a geopolitical and regional political perspectives. Furthermore, numerous determinants of Russian domestic and foreign policy as well as its active expansionist agenda are highlighted. The analysis of the narratives of Russian media – inside and outside the country – demonstrates the far-reaching nature of Russian propaganda and illustrates how the Kremlin used such narratives to justify its expansionism in the "near neighborhood"<sup>3</sup> for years. Considering the fact that Germany did not prepare an appropriate response to the ever-increasing Russian provocations – it even entered into closer inter-state cooperation and became ever more dependent on Russia, especially in the energy sector – Germany's *Ost-* and *Russlandpolitik* and the respective political mistakes are evaluated.

The section *War Events and Developments* provides an in-depth analysis of the Ukraine war. It is important to reconstruct Russian strategy and tactics, to illustrate the weaknesses of the Russian army and assess its

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3 Adomeit, Hannes: Russia and its Near Neighbourhood: Competition and Conflict with the EU, College of Europe, Natolin Research Papers, 04/2011, [https://www.coleurope.eu/sites/default/files/research-paper/adomeit\\_0.pdf](https://www.coleurope.eu/sites/default/files/research-paper/adomeit_0.pdf), 01.12.2022.

military potential. Furthermore, the Ukrainian defense system is analyzed to show how it is set up and where future assistance to Ukraine would be effective and necessary. Finally, it is emphasized that the Russian aggression in Ukraine poses an immediate threat to German and European security, which is why it is so imperative to initiate the “*Zeitenwende*” for German security policy and to efficiently remedy previous mistakes.

In the final section “*Zeitenwende*” for German Security Policy, perspectives for German foreign and security policy are outlined, especially with regard to the further development of the Bundeswehr and Germany’s role as a security actor in Europe. It is discussed how the war will change the strategies and security policies of NATO, the EU, and China, and what place Germany should take in the respective cooperation. Finally, the main pillars for an effective reorganization of German security policy are presented, and the most important recommendations for action are outlined.

This anthology was originally published in German in December 2022. It represented a first attempt at analyzing Russia’s 2022 war of aggression against Ukraine and therefore contains chapters written by leading experts in German and European security policy between August and November 2022. When preparing the English edition in the summer of 2023, the authors included only some minor updates to their original texts, so the readers have a unique opportunity not only to study the specifics of the first months of the war, as recorded *realis tempus*, but also to assess those preliminary analyses and estimates of future developments in retrospect.

Unfortunately, the war is still being waged at the time of this volume’s publication and will most likely continue to bring about further decisive changes, both on the battlefield and in European capitals. Nevertheless, the editors consider it important to present this first comprehensive, but at the same time only preliminary, scholarly analysis of what has happened so far and what needs to be done in the future.

In this sense, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to all authors of this anthology, as well as to the NOMOS publishing house for the excellent cooperation and remarkably quick realization of this project. In addition, the Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University (ISPK) would like to particularly thank *Das Niedersachsen-Konsortium* for sponsoring the open access publication of this volume, which we expect will greatly enhance the reach of this study and aid its reception within broader social and scientific circles.



## I. Background and Causes



# Chapter 1: The Ukraine War as a Result of Geopolitical Rivalry?

Joris Van Bladel<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict did not arise from a geostrategic vacuum. The geography and turbulent history of Europe have made the Central and Eastern European states complete components of the Old Continent. Therefore, since the revolutionary events of 1989–1991, the traditional Western powers and Russia have been close observers and central actors regarding the fate of Central and Eastern Europe. Putin's invasion of Ukraine can be seen as a kind of culmination, on the basis of which it materializes the Russian response to the emancipation of Central and Eastern European states. Without downplaying the Kremlin's devastating responsibility for the current situation, the question remains whether Western European states are currently confronted with the decisions they made (or failed to make) during that period and to what extent they are considering the consequences of their decisions.

## Keywords

end of the Cold War, disintegration of the Soviet Union, Central and Eastern European countries, NATO enlargement, Russian-Ukrainian war, geopolitics

*“It has not been possible in all these years to end the Cold War.”*

Angela Merkel, 7 June 2022

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<sup>1</sup> The original German version was completed in collaboration with Chantal Dupradeau-Schwenger.

## 1 Introduction

February 24, 2022, marks a rupture in European history. The dimensions, effects, and consequences of the Kremlin's decision to invade Ukraine are so significant that they point to a historical caesura. Hence, the epoch that commenced on November 9, 1989, in Berlin, signaling the definitive conclusion of the Cold War, has now drawn to a close. The decision of the Russian leadership to turn its military against Ukraine, to threaten Western states with nuclear war, and to use energy and food as a weapon against the world has heralded a new phase in modern European history.

With Russia's war against Ukraine, Gorbachev's vision of a "common European home" has turned out to be a distant dream, if not a mirage. Indeed, Russia's latest military venture has demonstrated that the period between November 9, 1989, and February 24, 2022, must be considered an *interregnum*. This observation implies that a tense, confrontational relationship between Moscow and Brussels or Washington is the normal state of affairs, and that the last three decades of "good neighborhood" were an exception.<sup>2</sup> One could easily dismiss this as a deterministic view of Russian immobilism, but, unfortunately, this assumption finds its confirmation in the Killing Fields of the Donbas and beyond.

This sobering view calls for an explanation: why could we not turn the wheel of history and make the era of Russian-Western cooperation the norm rather than the exception? This brings to mind one of Russia's central historical questions: *Kto vinovat?* [Who is to blame?] To answer these questions, this chapter focuses on the geopolitical dimension of the problem.

## 2 The Grinding Power of Geopolitics

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict did not develop out of a geostrategic vacuum. Europe's geography and troubled history have made Russia and Ukraine an integral part of the Old Continent. Therefore, since the revolutionary events of 1989–1991, the settlement of the Cold War and the

---

2 Since NATO enlargement plays an essential role in the argument of this chapter, the term "the West" is used here to refer to the Euro-Atlantic world. Given the Russian tradition of emphasizing great power competition and military power more than economic power, we believe this is a defensible choice. This does not mean, however, that the EC/EU did not play a role in the events we have highlighted in our account.

disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Western powers, as well as Russia, have acted as close observers, even authoritative actors, regarding the fate of Central and Eastern Europe in general and Ukraine in particular.

The process of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) eastward enlargement – beginning with the reunification of Germany in 1990 – is a clear example of this geopolitical configuration and can currently be seen, along with Russia's revanchist aspirations,<sup>3</sup> as one of the main underlying factors fueling the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Moscow considers Kyiv's westward orientation as an existential threat: a red line, if not a *casus belli*. The Kremlin's military gestures and negotiating proposals, up to and including ultimatums demanding legal guarantees against NATO influence in Ukraine, are unmistakable signs of Russia's uncompromising attitude toward Ukraine's sovereign security choices.

Nor do the West's responses suggest appeasement. NATO considers the strategic decisions of sovereign states and their territorial integrity sacrosanct, and Russia's attempts to interfere with NATO's open-door policy are considered unacceptable. NATO sees itself as a defensive alliance that poses no threat to Russia. As a result of the Russian invasion, NATO has revised its strategy to strengthen its eastern flank. At the same time, Sweden and Finland have applied to become members of NATO, which must be called nothing less than a development of historical significance, given the long-standing neutral status of both countries. Moreover, the European Union (EU) stands united behind Ukraine, imposing massive financial and economic sanctions to isolate Russia from the global community.

Accordingly, instead of living the magic dream of a common European home, aptly articulated by Mikhail Gorbachev only 33 years ago in Strasbourg,<sup>4</sup> Europe has slowly but decisively moved once again toward a dangerous impasse, with Ukraine at its center. Deep mistrust and the use of rediscovered Cold War prejudices, metaphors, and strategies characterize the current relationship between Russia and the West, as narratives from both sides contradict each other, perceptions conflict, and strategic interests collide.

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3 For Russian nationalists as well as for Putin, Russia lost the Cold War partly because of Gorbachev's "weak hand", and a certain revanchism germinated with Russia's economic stabilization at the beginning of the Putin era.

4 Gorbachev, Mikhail: Europe as a Common House, Speech to the Council of Europe, 6 July 1989.

### 3 NATO Enlargement: A Complicated and Controversial Process

The fall of the Berlin Wall – an unpredictable event in a larger context of social protests and political unrest – had enormous consequences.<sup>5</sup> One of them was Gorbachev’s agreement to reunify Germany within NATO in the summer of 1990. Given the fierce opposition within the Soviet establishment, Gorbachev’s sudden agreement remains puzzling.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the reasons for his decision, as it later turned out, he was taking a considerable political risk. And as some Russian reactions in connection with his death on August 30, 2022, showed, at the time, the Soviet leader’s “permissive attitude” toward the West greatly angered the Soviet elite.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of the anti-communist revolution, József Antall, Václav Havel, and Lech Wałęsa, the leaders of the dissident movements in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, recognized the fragility of their security situation, as a security vacuum was obviously developing in Central and Eastern Europe. Soon, these three states formed the so-called Visegrád Group, which sought security guarantees from the West. Only when it became clear that both the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – too weak – and the European Community (EC) – too slow – were unable or unwilling to provide the requested security guarantee, did the Visegrád countries knock on NATO’s door. Although not dismissive, NATO was initially very reluctant to answer this request.

During Bill Clinton’s tenure (1993–2001), the U.S. president evolved from a hesitant observer with no clear vision or strategy for NATO’s future to a staunch advocate of expanding and modernizing the transatlantic organization. He was convinced that there was an opportunity to shape a new Europe that would be “free, secure, and undivided”. He saw NATO – modernized and adapted to the new security environment – as the appropriate vehicle for implementing this policy. Nevertheless, for the Visegrád

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5 Sarotte, Mary Elsie: *The Collapse. The accidental opening of the Berlin Wall*. Basic Books: New York 2014.

6 Adomeit, Hannes: *Gorbachev’s Consent to Unified Germany’s Membership in NATO*. German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Working Paper, GF 5 2006/11, December 2006; Müller, Wolfgang: *The USSR and the Reunification of Germany, 1989–90*. In: Mueller, Wolfgang/Gehler, Michael/Suppan, Arnold (Eds.): *The revolutions of 1989: A Handbook*. ÖAW: Vienna, pp. 312–353.

7 For example, Vladimir Solovoyov, the Kremlin’s mouthpiece on Russian state television, commented on August 31, 2022: “In six years, he has destroyed our homeland and betrayed the entire socialist camp.”

countries – Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia – it would take until the 1999 Washington Summit to become official NATO members. The reason it took so long was that the debate over NATO enlargement and modernization “involved major, and at times dramatic, fights and negotiations with the Russians, our European allies, and within the U.S. where it produced a passionate debate over what the Alliance was for in the post-Cold War world.”<sup>8</sup>

The Russian view was hostile and ambivalent from the very beginning of this enlargement discussion. In fact, during the initial euphoria, the relationship between Russia and the West had good prospects. Despite adverse economic and social circumstances in Russia, Boris Yeltsin wrote a letter in December 1991 expressing his desire to see NATO transformed from an “aggressive military machine” into an alliance of peaceful nations based on common values, and that under these circumstances, he was ready to cooperate in the political and military fields. Informally, he did not even rule out Russia’s membership in NATO. Despite these promising beginnings, NATO’s image as an enemy still haunted hardliners in Moscow. For example, during a meeting with NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner on December 10, 1991, Yeltsin explained the Russian view that NATO membership of Eastern European countries was unacceptable to Moscow.<sup>9</sup>

During Clinton’s second term as president (1997–2001), NATO enlargement became one of his top goals. Passionate advocates of this policy, such as Madeline Albright and Richard Holbrook, supported him in his efforts. There are several reasons for this: during his first term as president, one of Clinton’s main goals was to strengthen Yeltsin and his democratic and economic reforms. However, as political developments in Russia made clear, including Yeltsin’s shelling of the Russian parliament in 1993 and the First Chechen War (1994–1996), Russia’s democratic, social, and economic downward spiral was unstoppable. Even more so, as Russia’s fate remained completely incalculable, it became clear that foreign interference only complicated the existing chaos and uncertainty.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Asmus, Ronald D.: *Opening NATO’s Door. How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era.* Columbia University Press: New York 2002, p. 19.

9 Menon, Rajan/Ruger, William: NATO enlargement and US Grand Strategy. A net assessment. In: *International Politics*, Vol. 57, 2020, pp. 371–400.

10 Kramer, Mark: *The Limits of U.S. Influence on Russian Economic Policy*, PONARS Policy Memo 173, Harvard University, November 2000.

This may have influenced Clinton's decision to prioritize NATO's enlargement while sticking to a "two-track" policy. As a result, he pushed ahead with his NATO enlargement policy while trying to appease Russia with several proposals to keep it close yet outside of the Western security architecture. Examples included the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, the adaptation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (originally signed November 19, 1990, and updated in 1999), and the NATO-Russia Founding Act (Paris, May 27, 1997). These are just a few examples of Clinton's attempts to convince Russia to agree to NATO's enlargement policy.<sup>11</sup>

The NATO-Russia Founding Act clearly expressed NATO's intention to support its open-door policy as described in Article 10 of the NATO Treaty. Thus, if there was any doubt about the West's commitments to Russia regarding the Alliance's eastward expansion, the NATO-Russia Founding Act is crystal clear. Despite Russia's commitment to the Founding Act, ambivalence toward NATO enlargement persisted among the Russian elite. At times, Boris Yeltsin, privately, appeared cooperative with Western negotiators while publicly adamantly opposing NATO enlargement. Yeltsin's ambiguity and inconsistency on this issue are typical of his presidency, leaving the Russian Federation in a social and economic debacle and the Russian military in an abysmal crisis.

In 1999, Vladimir Putin took the helm of Russian politics in a context of political intrigue and social upheaval. Against all odds, the new Kremlin man restored order to state affairs and a degree of predictability to the Russian people. Putin's popularity grew rapidly, leading to a solid base of public support. According to *Levada Center* figures, his approval rating has never fallen below 60 percent since 2000.<sup>12</sup>

On the issue of NATO membership, a conversation that took place in 2000 between Lord Robertson and Putin is worth noting because it reveals a key aspect of the Russian mentality, if not the main obstacle to building an inclusive European security architecture with Russia. During that conversation, Putin said, "When are you going to invite us to join NATO?" to which Robertson replied, "Well, we don't invite people to join NATO; they apply

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11 Allison, Roy/Light, Margot/White, Stephen: *Putin's Russia and the Enlarged Europe*, Chatham House Papers. Blackwell Publishing: Oxford 2006, pp. 1-13, 94-127; Ivanov, Igor: *Russia-NATO. On the History of the Current Crisis*, The Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), 3 February 2022.

12 Yuri Levada Analytical Center: *Putin's Approval Rating*. Indicators.



to join NATO.” Putin replied, “Well, we’re not standing in line with a lot of countries that don’t matter.”<sup>13</sup> It is precisely this big-power attitude and disdain for small countries that motivates the “small countries” of Central and Eastern Europe to apply for NATO membership.

Over time, irritation and distrust of Western security institutions grew in the Kremlin. Putin had high hopes for his outstretched hand against the West. But several events will certainly have fueled his exasperation:

- NATO’s bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War (1999);
- U.S. withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty on June 13, 2002;
- The U.S. plans to build a NATO missile defense system in Europe, which began in 2002;
- The admission of Bulgaria, the Baltic states, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia – the so-called Vilnius Group – as NATO members on March 29, 2004;
- The focus of U.S. Middle East policy on the “axis of evil”, which resulted in controversial decisions such as the invasion of Iraq (2003) and the rivalry with Iran;
- The West’s support for the so-called “color revolutions”. These are protest movements that use nonviolent civil disobedience to overthrow governments, as observed during the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003–2004), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005). Moscow, apparently unhappy with this phenomenon of civil protest, accused the West of instigating these protest movements and thus interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Indeed, since 2012, when Putin experienced the most threatening domestic protest against his regime during the Snow Revolution, Russia has viewed Western support for social and political protest as nothing less than “acts of war by non-military means”.<sup>14</sup> One must be aware of the implications of this view: Russia sees itself at war with the West.

Did Putin feel ignored, misunderstood, rejected, or threatened by the West? In any case, he steadily lost his confidence in the West, and as a result, on

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13 Rankin, Jennifer: “Ex-NATO head says Putin wanted to join alliance early on in his rule”, *The Guardian*, 4 November 2021.

14 Jonsson, Oscar: *The Russian Understanding of War. Blurring the Lines between War and Peace*. Georgetown University Press: Washington 2019.

February 10, 2007, he delivered his famous Munich speech, in which he refused to speak in “pleasant but empty diplomatic terms” on international security issues.<sup>15</sup> In the summer of 2008, another warning went out to the West when Russian troops invaded Georgia, a country with Western ambitions and an overzealous president.<sup>16</sup> Was this military action a reaction to the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, where future membership of Ukraine and Georgia was envisaged?

In this context, Putin’s policies became more assertive, if not markedly aggressive. For example, “active measures” were launched, cyber and political operations that targeted the West and sought to exploit the fault lines of Western societies by attacking our way of life as the primary target. Provocative naval and air military maneuvers were conducted to test, intimidate, and disrupt the West’s security and military forces. In short, Russia uses political, diplomatic, economic, and other nonmilitary measures in combination with military force to exploit the West’s weaknesses and pursue its political goals.

#### *4 Ukraine as an Integral Part of Europe’s Security Landscape*

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was not the beginning of a conflict between neighboring states; it was merely the next escalation stage in a latent conflict that began with Ukraine’s independence. In fact, since 1991, the Kremlin has instrumentalized and abused several issues tangential to Ukraine’s sovereignty, including the fate of the Black Sea Fleet, gas supplies, minority rights of ethnic Russians in the Donbas region or Crimea Peninsula, the Orange Revolution of 2004, and the Maidan Revolution of 2013–2014, to exert pressure on Kyiv. Since then, Russia has employed various strategies to limit Ukraine’s independence and sovereignty, using nonmilitary methods such as information and energy warfare, as well as political infiltration and intrigue. As pressure from Moscow increased, Kyiv’s Western orientation, expressed in its aspirations for membership in Western alliances, gradually became more apparent. As such, Europe, and by exten-

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15 Putin, Vladimir: Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, Kremlin, 10 February 2007.

16 Cornell, Svante E./Starr, S. Frederick: *The Guns of August 2008. Russia’s War in Georgia*. Routledge: London 2009; Asmus, Ronald: *A Little War That Shook the World. Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*. New York: St. Martin’s Press 2010.

sion, the Western world, has become embroiled in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Even a compromise proposal to defuse the conflict between Russia and the West and grant Ukraine neutral status could not change this reality.

In 2014, the next escalation stage in the war between Russia and Ukraine began when the Kremlin decided to annex Crimea and control parts of the Donbas by proxy. While Russia's military involvement was somewhat limited in the first eight years of the war, Russia's full-scale military invasion in 2022, aimed at regime change and annexation, represents the most extreme and thus risky step of Russia's interference in Ukraine. The scale of material destruction, the thousands of dead and wounded, and the millions of refugees are brutal testaments to Russia's illegitimate and criminal military campaign. As a result, the moral pressure on Europe and the Western world to intervene in this war has increased daily.

## *5 Conclusion*

In addition to being a humanitarian catastrophe, war is a highly emotional affair that leaves deep fissures in the public debate, as it demands far-reaching decisions from Western states and imposes strong positions. As a result of the war on Europe's eastern flank, two extreme camps formed, as expressed in the German and European press. On the one hand, there are those who claim that the war in Ukraine is not "our war" and that support for Ukraine's war effort should therefore be limited. On the other hand, there are those who claim that the Ukraine war is not just about Ukraine. It is about all of Europe because, if the Kremlin is not stopped in Kyiv, it will soon threaten other Eastern and Central European countries.

Euphoria is very rarely a sound strategic advisor, and the laws of geopolitics are relentless. Therefore, we fear that this discussion is obsolete. The debate originated in 1991, when euphoria reigned, and self-confidence abounded in the West. The security issue of Central and Eastern European states, and thus that of Ukraine, was already clearly presented with the end of the Cold War and their accompanying emancipation. The question remains whether Western European countries are now confronted with the decisions they made or did not make at that time. Have Western European countries taken responsibility for their decisions since then?

We need to think deeply about these questions. What is clear is that the current Ukraine war can be seen as the result of a geopolitical rivalry

between Russia and the West. But let there be no misunderstanding: the human misery caused by the Kremlin is to be blamed on Moscow, which cannot come to terms with its past and break away from the dream of great power or the essence of Russian state power [*derzhava*]. The Russian elite, still indulging in its own fantasies and nostalgic dreams, cannot stand the unvarnished face of reality. In this regard, the rights of individual citizens are not guaranteed, let alone the sovereignty of “small states”. And that has made the last thirty years an *interregnum*, not an age of fundamental change. Perhaps this is the bitter realization of the terrible war that some declared the first battle of World War III.<sup>17</sup>

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17 Felshtinsky, Yuri/Stanchev, Michael: Blowing Up Ukraine: The Return of Russian Terror and the Threat of World War III. London: Gibson Square 2022, pp. 13–18.

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## Chapter 2: The Ukraine War as a Regional Confrontation

*Jakob Wöllenstein*

### Abstract

To this day, some commentary, such as Elon Musk's "peace plan", suggests that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine can be viewed as a local phenomenon. But the assumption that it is simply a dispute between two ex-Soviet republics over manageable territory misses the character of this confrontation in origin and extent. Rather, the invasion is the culmination of a long-simmering regional confrontation with global implications. The search for adequate responses by politics and society must clearly note this dimension and acknowledge the system Russia has evolved into under Putin's leadership. The German *Zeitenwende* requires a broad rethinking, at the end of which there should be a resilient society as well as European economic, energy, and defense policies that define a long-term strategy for peace and security in (Eastern) Europe. In addition to the integration of Ukraine, this includes a vision for a democratic, peace-loving Russia.

### Keywords

Russian-Ukrainian war, imperialism, revanchism, Budapest Memorandum, multi-ethnic Soviet Union, European security order, NATO, Baltic states, East-Central Europe, "frozen conflict", non-proliferation, annexation, *Ros-Gosism*, Putinism, Rashism

### 1 Introduction

The fact that not only weapons and soldiers "clash" on the frontline in Ukraine, but also contrary world views and perceptions of reality, becomes clear to anyone who takes a look at one of Vladimir Putin's major speeches

of 2022. According to his portrayal – and presumably conviction<sup>1</sup> – Russia has (for centuries) been in a (defensive) struggle against an “aggressive West” and is at the head of the “free people of the world” who do not want to submit to the “Anglo-Saxon yoke”. The Central and Eastern Europeans, on the other hand, face a Russian imperialism that has repeatedly changed “shape and color” over the past 400 years, but remains the same at its core. Even if one does not have to go so far as to draw a line “from the Mongols to Putin”, Russia’s democratic new start as a peaceful neighboring country after 1991 has ultimately failed in nightmarish fashion. The German and European policy in dealing with Russia of “not letting the thread of conversation break” even in the face of serious breaches of international law and of wanting to build “bridges of dialogue” again and again is thus in burning ruins. For many, February 24 seemed inconceivable – and yet it did not come out of nowhere. Its roots and antecedents were manifold and, at the latest in retrospect, seem compelling. The picture that emerges is not so much a struggle for control of territory as the culmination of a long-simmering confrontation between systems, values, and principles of political order. Its regional<sup>2</sup> dimension began in the early 1990s and is coming to a head today in the acute threat perception of the eastern EU countries and states of the Eastern Partnership, but also in the (militarily decisive) exploitation of Belarusian territory and infrastructure by Russia.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the Russian-Ukrainian war has a global component – not only in view of the worldwide struggle for sovereignty. Since day one, it has also been a decisive test for the global non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore also in the vital self-interest of the West that Ukraine, which is under attack, decides it in its favor and that a stable peace in Europe follows. A precondition for this is to properly analyze the causes of the current confrontation.

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1 Since a precise differentiation where the line runs between what he actually believes and where targeted propaganda begins can hardly be made with certainty, it must be assumed that Putin himself generally believes in his narratives.

2 The term “regional” is not meant here as “localized” but refers to the broader region of Central and Eastern Europe.

3 It is also expressed in the NATO accession process for Sweden and Finland, as well as the EU candidate status of Ukraine and Moldova and the increased military presence of Allies from Estonia to Romania.

4 At the beginning of the war, Putin indirectly threatened all those who supported Ukraine with nuclear annihilation. In the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, Russia promised Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus territorial integrity in exchange for their nuclear weapons.



## 2 Continuities

The Eastern Bloc and the multi-ethnic Soviet Union (USSR), which had pursued linguistic *Russification* and the dissolution of national identities after the minority-friendly *Korenizatsiya* policy of the 1920s, collapsed not only because of insoluble economic problems but, above all, because of the people's aspiration for freedom and national independence. While this transition was virtually free of violence in most countries of East-Central Europe and Russia reformed itself as the Russian Federation – the proportion of ethnic Russians was now 80 percent instead of 50 percent compared to the Soviet Union – the country remained an empire in terms of its nature and mentality. In the two Chechen wars (1994–1996 and 1999–2000, officially ended in 2009), Moscow was determined to prevent any further disintegration.<sup>5</sup> In retrospect, it seems almost a paradigmatic signal that it was precisely the second Chechen war that brought the ex-KGB man, Putin, to power. From the Kremlin's point of view, however, the principle of territorial integrity did not apply to others from the beginning – when Transnistria seceded from Moldova in 1992, Russia provided weapons assistance and the first “frozen conflict” in the post-Soviet arena was born. While the simultaneously escalating dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has complex historical causes, Russia knew how to secure influence on both sides and the region through military and economic support.

Based on their historical experience and political orientation, almost all of the states that escaped Russian control aspired to join NATO. However, the fact that this process in Central Eastern Europe dragged on in several stages over about fifteen years and that geopolitically central states such as Ukraine and Georgia were denied accession demonstrates the absurdity of the thesis held in Russia today that the West used the momentum of Russian weakness to appropriate a maximum of “its” sphere of influence. On the other hand, experts complain that in most Western capitals, Eastern European policy is still seen through the Russian lens, that policy

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5 In 1991, the Caucasus republic under Dzhokhar Dudayev had declared its independence from Russia, and Moscow justified the military intervention with the need to preserve the state integrity of the Russian Federation. In this very brutal confrontation, both sides were guilty of serious war crimes, but the Russian side to a much greater extent. See Fradkin, Vladimir: “К чему привела вторая чеченская война” [What the Second Chechen War Led To], Deutsche Welle, 6 August 2002.

approaches such as the “Eastern Partnership” have always placed (too) much emphasis on Moscow’s sensitivities, and that hardly any strategies have been formulated, for example, for dealing with Ukraine in the long term. Nevertheless, in August 2008 – *after* NATO’s cancellation of the Bucharest summit – Moscow marched into Georgia not only to *de facto* annex the provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but also to send signals to the U.S. and NATO to “respect Russia’s interests”.<sup>6</sup>

However, Ukraine was of particular importance from Moscow’s point of view. As early as October 1991, the so-called “war of presidential decrees” broke out between Moscow and Kyiv over the affiliation of the USSR’s Black Sea Fleet. It was not until 1997 that Leonid Kuchma and Boris Yeltsin were able to agree on a division and the retention of the now Russian part of the fleet in Sevastopol in the Ukrainian Crimea for twenty years. That same year, the two also signed the grand treaty of friendship and cooperation, extended for another ten years in 2008. Even then, however, many in Moscow thought rather disparagingly of Ukraine as an independent state and formulated claims to at least Crimea if not the entire country.<sup>7</sup> The debate over the affiliation of Tuzla Island in the Kerch Strait already brought both countries to the brink of armed conflict in 2003, and for recognition of its affiliation with Ukraine, the Kremlin demanded its accession to a single economic area.<sup>8</sup> In order to gain political concessions from its neighbors, Russia was already happy to exploit its dependence in energy relations during these years. The so-called “gas wars” hit Kyiv’s pro-Western government under Viktor Yushchenko particularly hard in 2006 and 2009.<sup>9</sup> But even Belarus’ then president Alyksandr Lukashenka, who is loyal to Russia, felt

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6 Thus, the words of President Medvedev, see Regnum: “Медведев назвал принуждение Грузии к миру сигналом для США” [Medvedev calls Georgia’s peace enforcement a signal to the United States], 8 August 2022.

7 Yeltsin himself, according to the recollection of a Ukrainian diplomat, was convinced that Ukraine would rejoin Russia, and, if necessary, energy prices would be used as leverage, see Kyrylenko, Aleksandr: “В СССР был встроен ‘ген смерти’, он встроен и в путинскую РФ: интервью с Юрием Щербаком” [The ‘death gene’ was built into the USSR and is also built into Putin’s Russia: interview with Yuri Shcherbak], Ukraine Segodnya, 23 August 2018.

8 Kondratova, Valeriya: “‘До войны за Тузлу была пара сотен метров’. Кучма назвал самый сложный момент за каденцию” [‘It was a few hundred meters before the war over Tuzla’. Kuchma names toughest moment of his term], Liga Novyny, 24 August 2020.

9 Cohen, Ariel: “Russia’s gas war”, Washington Times, 13 January 2009; Vesper, Reinhard: “Russlands Gaswaffe”, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 7 January 2009.

the effects of this “instrument” in 2004, when he got into a dispute with Putin over the modalities of Gazprom’s takeover of the Belarusian transit gas pipeline “Beltransgaz”.<sup>10</sup>

Reestablishing its regional influence was not least a central motive for Moscow in building the various integration and cooperation projects in the post-Soviet area.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, the breakup of the USSR’s tightly integrated economic space had certainly intensified economic turmoil, and regional integration projects have great potential to bring benefits in terms of mobility and prosperity for citizens. But in this case, there was a significant imbalance between Russia and all the other, considerably smaller states. Not only did the latter regularly complain about perceived injustices and exploitation of Russia’s position of power. Russia also made little secret, even in official documents, of the fact that it saw the projects as instruments of influence.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the Kremlin exerted considerable pressure when Ukraine wanted to sign the EU Association Agreement at the end of 2013 – this would have made its integration into Russian-dominated structures much more difficult. For Ukrainians, however, the EU association was linked in a decisive way to the prospect of enforcing the rule of law and transparency in their corruption-plagued country, which seemed impossible to them in a relationship with Russia, given the rampant kleptocracy, nepotism, and cronyism there.

This was followed by the Maidan, the annexation of Crimea, and the “first hot phase” of the war in eastern Ukraine until 2015, which led to the secession and creeping *de facto* annexation of the “people’s republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk. Putin, whose approval ratings soared at home, had not only broken several international agreements, including the Budapest Memorandum crucial to nuclear non-proliferation, but at the same time perverted democratic procedures and core principles of the United Nations. Using the “right of self-determination of people”, expressed in a *gunpoint referendum*, he justified the land grab of Crimea, using either outright

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10 Rippert, Sébastien: Die energiepolitischen Beziehungen zwischen der Europäischen Union und Russland 2000–2007, Forum Junge Politikwissenschaft, Vol. 16. Bouvier: Bonn 2009.

11 The CIS, the Union State, the EaWU and the CSTO.

12 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Compass 2020. Україна у міжнародних відносинах. Цілі, інструменти, перспективи. Україна-Росія: сценарії розвитку відносин до 2020 року [Ukraine in International Relations. Goals, instruments, prospects. Ukraine-Russia: scenarios for the development of relations until 2020], p. 4.

lies or the “*nas tam njet*”<sup>13</sup> principle of plausible deniability. Practically accepting this farce was an arguably necessary diplomatic evil for Kyiv and the West in order to give Ukraine military and political breathing space via the Minsk agreements.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Putin obviously drew the lesson from this signal of weakness that he got away with these “methods”. At the same time, it became apparent on which course he had set his country.

### 3 *Russia’s Path to Ideology-Driven Authoritarianism*

Under the impression of Gorbachev’s policies, hopes were still high that Russia, too, would develop internally into a democratic constitutional state with a vibrant civil society. Criticism from the West therefore remained muted when President Yeltsin established the concept of a “controlled democracy” in the Constitution at the end of 1993, which granted the president a great deal of power. Under Putin, who set out to end the “chaos” of the 1990s, there was a further concentration of power in the hands of the state. But his “stability”, praised by many Russians to this day, was accompanied by political arrests, intimidation of the opposition, and an encroachment of civil liberties<sup>15</sup> to the point of murders of critical journalists.<sup>16</sup> Under the impression of the so-called “color revolutions” in Ukraine and Georgia, where citizens successfully revolted against corruption and electoral fraud, Putin’s political technologists further developed Yeltsin’s model into a “sovereign democracy” in 2005.<sup>17</sup> What was officially supposed to serve the goal of safeguarding state power by limiting democratic principles “in the interest of the Russian nation in all its diversity” favored,

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13 Literally “we are not there”. Cf. Zerkalo: “На смену ‘нас там нет’ пришло официальное ‘мы все-таки здесь’”. Зеленский вновь выступил с обращением к украинцам [“The ‘we are not there’ has been replaced by the official ‘we are there after all’”. Zelenskyy again appealed to Ukrainians], 22 February 2022.

14 While this gave Putin the satisfaction of negotiating war and peace in Europe on an equal footing, the Ukrainian army threatened to collapse under the offensive. However, the deficit-ridden agreement, which solidified the bloody “line of contact”, allowed Ukraine to address reforms and improve its military capabilities.

15 In 2004, Russia was deemed to be in the “Not Free Countries” category of the Freedom House Report for the first time.

16 Ifex: New report: Stifling free speech in Russia, 2012–2018, 10 October 2018.

17 Surkov, Vladislav: Суверенитет – это политический синоним конкурентоспособности [Sovereignty – is a political synonym for competitiveness], Yedinaya Rossiya – official party website, 22 June 2006.

in the words of ex-premier Mikhail Kasyanov, a “triumph of populism, the progressive destruction of public and state institutions, the abandonment of the rule of law, democracy and the market economy”.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Putin consolidated the influence of the old KGB elites, and new oligarchic structures emerged around him.<sup>19</sup> The power of the secret services and the wealth of the oligarchs grew to such an extent that critics refer to the Putin system as a “mafia state”.<sup>20</sup> Elections had changed from an instrument of power transfer to a ritual of confirming the established structure of rule. This was demonstrated, for example, by the “Bolotnaya Revolution” where protests against the rigged Duma elections in November 2011 and Putin’s return as president in March 2012 were suppressed by police forces. Later, Putin’s 2020 constitutional reform would secure him a power perspective until 2036 as well as immunity for life and further limit access to the presidency for potential opponents.

In terms of content, Putin still appeared as a pragmatist in his early years, and Dmitry Medvedev also appeared as a “liberal” president. But things like a self-critical reappraisal of the Soviet history of violence or a policy of reconciliation with neighboring states hardly happened in the Russian Federation. Such activities, which were mostly limited to civil society, have been increasingly repressed by the state since 2010. Instead, official policy and rhetoric have been progressively permeated by elements of a retaliatory ideology.

However, while communism was based on a firmly defined worldview, the ideology in Putin’s Russia is rather a mosaic of different building blocks, drawing from sometimes very contradictory sources and eras.<sup>21</sup> At its core, Putin appeals the “humiliation of the Russian nation” by the “decadent, vile, duplicitous” West and its “betrayal” by NATO’s eastward expansion. He stages himself as the great antagonist of the West and the guardian of Russian national and more broadly conservative values. This rhetoric as the people’s tribune of the oppressed and humiliated is aimed both at domestic and worldwide audiences and is remarkably at odds with

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18 Kasyanov, Mikhail: “Империя свободы” [Empire of Freedom], *Kommersant*, 29 August 2006.

19 Giles, Keir: *Moscow Rules. What Drives Russia to Confront the West*. Chatham House: London 2019.

20 Nevzlin, Leonid: *The Result of 20 Years of Putin: Russia as a Mafia State*, Institute of Modern Russia, 24 January 2020.

21 There are elements of tsarism, orthodoxy, Soviet nostalgia, but also anti-Sovietism and new symbols like the “Z”.

the realities in and around Russia. Some observers describe Putin's Russia as "fascist" because of the excessive glorification of strength, violence, and the cult of victory, growing personality worship of Putin, and the notion of a uniquely Russian "special way".<sup>22</sup> But historical fascism, at least in the realm of domestic politics, also exhibits significant differences.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, terms such as *Putinism* and *Rashism* circulate among experts, and the search for an appropriate label continues.<sup>24</sup> However, leaving aside "embellishing" (and often interchangeable) elements, at the core of this worldview is the unconditional rule of Russian state power over its own people and inhabitants of occupied territories as well as the claim of an exclusive sphere of influence<sup>25</sup> on neighboring states.<sup>26</sup> A suitable term, which has not yet been introduced into scientific discourse, would therefore seem to be "*RosGos-ism*", i.e. a combination of the initial syllables for "Russian state" (*Российское государство*) and the suffix "-ism", which emphasizes an absolute extent.

A striking contradiction emerges when, on the one hand, Russia reaches out to its neighbors in a neo-imperial manner and, despite Putin's homecoming rhetoric,<sup>27</sup> lays claim to rule over non-Russian territories, while at the same time an increasing narrowing of the historically multinational Russia to an (ethno-)national self-image can be observed.<sup>28</sup> Russia is thus

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22 A thesis that star historian Timothy Snyder, for example, supports (see Madan: "Timothy Snyder: 'Russian reincarnation of fascism'", 27 May 2022).

23 Today's Russia does not want to create a "new man", is obsessively oriented toward the past instead of the future, and renounces – even shuns – social mass mobilization. Nor does the war apply to Ukrainians as a "race", but as a cultural nation.

24 Laqueur, Walter: *Putinismus: Wohin treibt Russland?* Propyläen Verlag: Berlin 2015.

25 Putin marks this with his call for NATO to withdraw to 1997 levels.

26 This is reflected in the first line of the Russian anthem ("sacred state power"), the constant emphasis on "state sovereignty" by the political elite, and the attitude of many Russians to make the state absolute, partly because of an "existential anxiety".

27 This is particularly evident in statements about Peter the Great or the "programmatic" contribution about the "historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians", on which see Putin, Vladimir: *Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев* [On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians], Kremlin, 12 July 2021.

28 In the 2020 constitutional reform, Russians were, for the first time, recorded as the founding people of the state, and instead of promoting Russian as an international *lingua franca*, Russian speakers in neighboring countries are blankly assigned to Moscow's protective power. Even May 9, classically a unifying "Victory Day" in many post-Soviet countries, is increasingly defined by the Kremlin as a "Russian" event and Patriarch Kirill's clear support for Putin's imperialist policies means that the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia is also losing trust and members significantly and probably irreversibly for the foreseeable future.

foregoing potential *soft power* and is most likely to bind other countries to it by *hard power*, for example, through dependencies on raw materials, energy, arms supplies, or support for other regimes through military and mercenary troops. The propaganda in widely ramified networks from openly pro-Kremlin media to masses of ostensibly neutral but Russian-controlled websites, botnets, and social media accounts mostly disseminates a mixture of half-truths, fake news, and resentment that often claims less to paint Russia in a positive light than to portray the West as a Babylon in decay<sup>29</sup> and to undermine the credibility of Western institutions. How ideologically arbitrary and purely destructive this policy can be, however, is illustrated by the seemingly arbitrary promotion of either extreme left or extreme right anti-system parties in countries across the globe.<sup>30</sup>

How many people in Russia adhere to these ideas and to what degree they support the war in Ukraine in the form it is actually taking place (not the TV version) is difficult to determine. Under the impression of massive propaganda and a climate of fear, official poll figures of 80 percent should be taken with a grain of salt. But it can be assumed that a majority of Russians fundamentally approve of the chauvinist course – in any case, there can be no question of this being exclusively “Putin’s war”, and this mentality will not be changed overnight.

#### 4 Lessons for the West

A central mistake of German and European policy was not to have connected all these points – Russia’s increasingly aggressive behavior as well as the transformation of the state toward a dictatorship with a vengeful ideology – early enough and to have drawn appropriate conclusions.<sup>31</sup> Putin’s words and deeds were not taken seriously enough, from the disintegration of the USSR as the “greatest political catastrophe of the 20th century” (2005) to his historical treatise on the alleged non-existence of Ukraine in 2021.

The reactions to the war in Georgia, the occupation of Crimea and eastern Ukraine, the suppression of the protests of Belarus followed by

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29 This is sometimes even done in religious terms, for example, when Ramzan Kadyrov speaks of jihad or Patriarch Kirill sees the West as the embodiment of the Antichrist.

30 See, for instance, the comprehensive studies by iSANS (isans.org).

31 There were cautionary voices – for example, from Poland and the Baltic states, but also in Germany.

a “*creeping annexation*”, the bloody CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan, but also attacks on people and critical digital infrastructure in Western states up to regular violations of NATO airspace remained almost always only selective, half-hearted and the signals ambivalent. Western states did not even succeed in taking forceful action against oligarchs on the Côte d’Azur or the City of London.<sup>32</sup> The lack of consistency and determination had various reasons, be it that favorable energy costs mattered more than human rights, be it the ideological proximity of parties, the argument that the West had also made mistakes, or the conviction that Russia “could not be ignored” because of “historical responsibility” or its nuclear arsenal. Personal ambitions of individual politicians to master a “new start with Russia” may also have played a role.<sup>33</sup> All in all, the Kremlin ruler was able to gain the impression that he could basically do whatever he pleased. He would only have to wait for the West to get used to his actions and *de facto* accept them. Ultimately, they would return to him and asked for a reboot of relations. In any case, the cost-benefit calculation after the annexation of Crimea had worked out for him domestically in view of sensational poll ratings despite the Western sanctions. The most devastating signal in this direction was probably the launch of Nord Stream 2 *after* the annexation of Crimea.

The German model of *Wandel durch Handel* (“change through trade”) is now widely regarded as a failure. But drawing the conclusion that Russia should have been isolated from the outset is not very convincing either – after all, this is precisely what Putin now *falsely* accuses the West of having aimed for all along. The truth is the contrary. Attempting a peaceful rapprochement was generally the right thing to do, but in retrospect three crucial conceptual weaknesses are apparent. Firstly, Western countries, led by Germany, failed to develop sufficient alternative supply routes of their own in terms of energy infrastructure. The Baltic countries demonstrated the alternative in 2014: by procuring mobile LNG terminals, they opened the supply back door for themselves. The gas, which they nevertheless

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32 Belton, Catherine: *Putin’s People. How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York 2020.

33 This approach of believing that relations with Russia could be reordered “among men” who strike the right tone was mostly a mixture of good will and a fair amount of naïve arrogance, both toward other Western politicians and Putin himself – as if the latter were a little boy whose foreign policy depended fundamentally on emotions. This was the case with Obama after the war in Georgia, but also with the French presidents Sarkozy, Hollande, Macron, not to mention Orban.



continued to purchase from Russia, was from then on significantly cheaper, and in 2022 Lithuania became the first country in the EU to reduce imports to zero. The Baltic states also opted for diversification in electricity supply, creating the infrastructural prerequisites for synchronization with the continental European power grid via connections to Sweden (*NordBalt* submarine cable) and Poland (*LitPol Link*).<sup>34</sup> Other Central Eastern European countries, such as Romania, have also long understood the diversification of their energy sources as a matter of national security.

Secondly, economic cooperation on the Russian side was strongly dominated by large, state-owned enterprises, especially from the energy and raw materials sectors. A “*Wandel durch Handel*” could be expected in the case of high levels of cooperation in the area of small and medium-sized enterprises, where an exchange of entrepreneurial experience can actually take place. It is deemed to fail, however, in economic fields where the economic structure on one side of the partners is controlled by a small set of giants which tends to favor oligarchic structures. And thirdly, in view of the invoked interdependence, which indeed also meant a high dependence of the Russian economy on trade with the West, the latter underestimated Putin’s willingness to subordinate all this to the goal of subjugating Ukraine and to pass the costs on to the population.

It can be assumed that Putin had not reckoned with this high price but had assumed that his “special operation” would go smoothly with hardly any serious repercussions. After all, it was not only in Germany that there had been a decline in Eastern European expertise after 1990. The Russian side had also become increasingly entangled in its own narrative and marginalized experts with “Western contacts” at home. Thus, myths such as “Russia’s deception” with regard to an aggressive NATO expansion to the East are regarded as incontrovertible truths. That the opposite is true, can be seen by the fact that Ukraine was denied the desired accession in 2008 precisely out of consideration for Russia.<sup>35</sup> Today, Germany is reproached for this in retrospect by its allies. Although the arguments that Ukraine was neither technically nor domestically ready for accession at the time and that

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34 This is imminent, has not yet been done, nor are the Baltic countries synchronized with Russia in the so-called BRELL Ring.

35 Some commentators wanted to see an echo of this in the final declaration of the 2023 NATO summit. However, the continued lack of a clear time frame for Kyiv’s accession has multiple “fathers” (including the U.S.) and reasons and should not obscure the fact that membership in the alliance was promised in principle, along with substantial immediate military aid.

Russia would only have intervened militarily earlier because of its Crimean base must not be discarded too easily, it remains obvious that Europe, and again above all Germany, has done too little to maintain its own military strength and to empower Ukraine after 2014.<sup>36</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

In summary, the massive escalation of Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine since February 24, 2022, culminates in a confrontation that clearly goes beyond the realm of combat operations. After the failure of the hoped-for *Blitzkrieg*, the Kremlin and Russian state media increasingly speak of Russia's great struggle against the "decadent, hypocritical" West led by the U.S. and rhetorically place themselves at the forefront of the struggle for a new world order. This shows that it is not just armies that clash, but political systems, orders, values, and legal principles. The regional consequences in Eastern and Central Europe range from the NATO accession of Sweden and Finland to the military strengthening of NATO's eastern flank – including the promise to permanently dispatch 4,000 German servicemen to Lithuania – and the geopolitically spurred desire of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia to join the EU. At the same time, global repercussions are unmistakable, such as the threat of famine due to failing harvests and grain exports. A central mistake of German and European policy was not to take the signals and undesirable developments in Russia's aggressive foreign policy and internal transformation into a dictatorship with revanchist ideology seriously for many years and not to have drawn the appropriate political conclusions from them – in dealing with Russia and for their own resilience and security. Cautionary voices from Central Eastern Europe were too often ridiculed and their concerns dismissed with reference to historical "traumas".

Therefore, the *Zeitenwende* requires not only an improvement in energy infrastructure, diversification of economic partnerships and military rearmament, but must also be accompanied by a change in mentality. In view of the fact that the political weight in Europe is foreseeably shifting eastward,

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36 For instance, set out by former Chancellor Merkel, see BBC: "Меркель о Путине: 'Украина не была готова войти в НАТО, но мы смогли выиграть время'" [Merkel on Putin: 'Ukraine was not ready to join NATO, but we managed to buy time'], 8 June 2022.

Germany and the EU must further expand and network their expertise in Russia and Eastern Europe. In doing so, the valuable experience of the EU's eastern partners and *best-practice* examples there, for instance in dealing with fake news and cyber security, must be incorporated to a greater extent than in the past. Awareness must be raised in politics and among the population as to which kind of Russia we are dealing with today, which goals the Kremlin is pursuing and for what motives, and how deeply these are rooted in Russian society and the elites beyond Putin. On the one hand, this serves the goal of sharpening resilience in the population and central policy areas in the short term, of being able to withstand setbacks and one's own deprivations, and of being able to support Ukraine in its defensive struggle with all available means. On the other hand, this will be necessary to maintain the necessary focus in the long term and to act coherently *vis-à-vis* Russia. After all, if the war is to be followed by a stable peace in the region, not only will Ukraine have to be rebuilt and integrated into Europe's political structures, but Russia itself will also have to change profoundly. But even in the most optimistic scenario, if Russia is indeed ready for a new beginning, it will take an enormous effort over several generations to help the country and society reinvent itself as a peaceful, stable, and democratic country in the European neighborhood.<sup>37</sup> Both will require enormous determination, attention and resources.

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37 On approaches to helping build a democratic Russia, see Kubilius, Andrius/Milov, Vladimir/Freudenstein, Roland/Gurieva, Sergey: *The EU's Relations With a Future Democratic Russia. A Strategy*, Martens Centre, July 2022.

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## Chapter 3: Russia's Narratives and Disinformation in the War on Ukraine

*Susanne Spahn*

### Abstract

The Russian media are an important pillar in Russia's war against Ukraine. It paved the way for the "special military operation", as the Russian war of aggression is called there, and justifies the ongoing war daily. The narratives on Ukraine are meant to legitimize the fight against the supposedly "aggressive West" and to discredit Ukraine as a fascist or (neo-)Nazi<sup>1</sup> state. In doing so, state media at home and abroad pursue diverse goals and send different messages: in Russia, patriotism as well as the imperial consciousness of the people is nourished. Abroad, for example, in Germany, the foreign media stir up people's fears and resentment and mobilize them to protest. This article is based on the evaluation of the reporting of the foreign media *RT DE* and *Sputnik/SNA* as well as the domestic channels *Rossia 1*, *Rossia 24*, *Perviy Kanal* (First Channel), and *TV Center*.

### Keywords

Ukraine, Russia, Germany, media, disinformation, war, patriotism, protests, information policy

### 1 Introduction

Publications and broadcasts of the Russian media in the period from February to October 2022 serve as primary sources. The main thematic focal points concerning the war against Ukraine were examined. According to

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1 In modern Russia, these terms are used synonymously and to label political opponents. In the process, they have become detached from their original meaning.

the method of linguistic media discourse analysis by Ekkehard Felder,<sup>2</sup> the discourse topic “Russian Narratives” was divided into various sub-topics. Among others, the fight against fascism/(neo-)Nazism in Ukraine, considered from the Russian perspective as essential, was identified as one such topic. The aim of the analysis is to demonstrate how Russia tries to influence public opinion in Russia and Germany.

## 2 Russia’s State Media Circumvent EU Sanctions

In response to Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, the European Union (EU) banned the distribution of content from Russian foreign media *Sputnik* and *RT*, including its subsidiaries, in early March 2022. In Germany, the German-language TV channel *RT DE* and the news platform *SNA* (previously *Sputnik*) have been present since 2014. Both media are state-funded and controlled by the Russian presidential administration, as are the nationwide domestic broadcasters.<sup>3</sup> This was followed in June 2022 by the blocking of Russian-language channels *Rossia RTR/RTR Planeta*, *Rossia 24*, and *TV Center-International*. “Russia uses all these state-owned media outlets to disseminate targeted propaganda and conduct disinformation campaigns, including about its military aggression against Ukraine”, it says in justification.<sup>4</sup> *Rossia 24* and *Rossia RTR* belong to the state media holding company *VGTRK*.<sup>5</sup> *Rossia RTR/RTR Planeta* is a foreign channel broadcast via cable TV and satellite; its content is largely identical to the domestic channel *Rossia 1*.<sup>6</sup> The *Rossia 24* news channel broadcasts both

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2 Felder, Ekkehard: Pragma-semiotische Textarbeit und der hermeneutische Nutzen von Korpusanalysen für die linguistische Mediendiskursanalyse. In: Felder, Ekkehard/Müller, Marcus/Vogel, Friedemann (Eds.): Korpus-pragmatik. Thematische Korpora als Basis diskurslinguistischer Analysen, De Gruyter: Berlin-Boston 2012, pp. 115–174.

3 Spahn, Susanne: Russische Medien in Deutschland. Die Bundestagswahlen 2021 – Zwischen Einflussnahme und Disinformation. Friedrich Naumann Foundation: Potsdam 2022, pp. 4–6.

4 Prohibited are *all transmission and dissemination methods used in or directed to EU Member States*, including cable, satellite, IP-TV, platforms, websites, and applications. See Council of the European Union: EU Sanctions against Russia: An Overview, 16 August 2022.

5 VGTRK stands for All-Russian State Television and Radio Company, see: ВГТРК. ТЕЛЕВИДЕНИЕ, РАДИО, ИНТЕРНЕТ, <https://vtrk.ru/about>.

6 In Germany, *Rossia RTR* is, among others, part of *Vodafone Kabel Deutschland*’s paid TV services, which was discontinued in June 2022 due to the sanctions. See



in Russia and internationally. *VGTRK* says it is the “No. 1 industry-forming media holding in the country, reaching 99 percent of Russia’s population”.<sup>7</sup> The *TV Center* channel is financed by the Moscow administration and is thus also state-owned; the version intended for foreign countries runs under the *TVCI* (TV Center International) label.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the sanctions, this media is still accessible on the Internet. *RT DE* has created a whole series of websites under new domains, where the TV program can also be viewed in a live stream with a VPN. *RT* videos can be accessed on the *odysee.com* platform.<sup>9</sup> *SNA* has also moved to the *odysee.com* platform and is available there under two names simultaneously: *SNA* and *Satellit* (the German translation of Sputnik). The last one is also active on *Telegram* and *YouTube*.<sup>10</sup> The channels *RTR Planeta* and *Rossia 24*, which belong to *VGTRK*, were apparently not blocked on the Internet, because they are available on the in-house online platform “*smotrim.ru*”.<sup>11</sup>

However, the non-EU-listed state-affiliated channels *Perviy Kanal* (First Channel) and *NTV* can also be watched live on the Internet and programs can be accessed in the media library.<sup>12</sup> *Perviy Kanal*, *NTV*, and *Rossia 1* are the three channels that have a significant influence on the formation of opinion in Russia. The Russian government holds the controlling package of *Perviy Kanal* with 51 percent of the shares, the remaining shares are owned by shareholders close to the state.<sup>13</sup> *Perviy Kanal* also recently became known in Germany when its then-employee Marina Ovsyannikova

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Vodafone: Info: Discontinuation of the distribution of RTR Planeta at Vodafone, 3 June 2022.

7 Overview of *VGTRK* stations and web portals, <https://vgtrk.ru/about>, 29.10.2022.

8 About TV Center, see *Kommersant*: “Что такое канал ТВЦ” [What is the TVC channel], 22 December 2005.

9 See, for example, <https://pressefreiheit.rtde.live>, where the TV program also runs. Videos can be seen on the platform <https://odysee.com/@RTDE:e>.

10 *SNA* is usable at <https://odysee.com/@SNA:a> as well as under the label “*Satellit*” at Twitter [https://t.me/satellit\\_de](https://t.me/satellit_de), YouTube [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCT4S XUzme7FrqXfU1\\_9H8cw/featured](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCT4S XUzme7FrqXfU1_9H8cw/featured) and Odysee <https://odysee.com/@Satellite:1>.

11 On the platform *Smotrim.ru* you can see the live stream of *RTR Planeta* (<https://smotrim.ru/channel/1>) and *Rossia 24* (<https://smotrim.ru/channel/3>).

12 See about *Perviy Kanal*, <https://www.itv.ru> – *NTV*, <https://www.ntv.ru/air/>.

13 Kutscher, Tamina/Himmelspach, Anton: Die russische Medienlandschaft. Alles Propaganda? Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 8 March 2018.

displayed a protest poster “Stop the war. Do not believe the propaganda. You are being lied to here” to the camera in the live news program.<sup>14</sup>

The target audience is the general audience addressed by *RT DE* and *SNA* in German. The German *RT* offshoot had a total reach of 1.4 million subscribers on the most important social media platforms in September 2021. *SNA* had 327,000 subscribers.<sup>15</sup> Russian-language channels are popular among the Russian-speaking community of about three million people. According to the “Integration Barometer 2020” of the German Expert Council on Integration and Migration, around a quarter of late repatriates from the former Soviet Union – the largest group of Russian speakers in Germany – trust the media of their former homeland.<sup>16</sup>

### 3 Narrative 1: *The Fight against Fascists*

Sunday evening, the “News of the Week” is broadcast on the TV channel *Rossia 1*. The famous journalist Dmitry Kiselyov moderates the topic “Satanism as an ideology of the Ukrainian Nazis”.<sup>17</sup> Kiselyov is on the EU sanctions list as a “central figure in government propaganda for the deployment of Russian forces in Ukraine”, as the Council Regulation puts it.<sup>18</sup> The Russian (sic!) city of Mariupol has become a nest of Ukrainian Nazis, Kiselyov claims about the Ukrainian port city, with Azov fighters taking the population of the entire city hostage. An expert explains, “The official religion of the Azov Regiment is a mixture of pagan and mystical ideologies.

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14 RND: “Nach Protestaktion im TV: Russische Journalistin arbeitet künftig für ‘Welt’”, 12 April 2022.

15 The user figures of *Facebook*, *Youtube*, *Twitter*, *Telegram*, *Instagram* and direct access to the website (Easy Counter) were evaluated, see: Spahn, Susanne: *Russische Medien in Deutschland*, 2022, p. 9.

16 Friedrichs, Nils/Graf, Johannes: *Integration gelungen? Lebenswelten und gesellschaftliche Teilhabe von (Spät-)Aussiedlerinnen und (Spät-)Aussiedler*. In: *SWR-Studie 2022–1*, Berlin, p. 69.

17 *Rossia 1*: “Вести недели” [News of the Week], 24 July 2022, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2448950>, 05.09.2022.

18 Council of the European Union: Regulation (EU) No. 269/2014, 17 March 2014, p. 22.

For those who embrace this demonic doctrine, it is natural to torture and torment people”.<sup>19</sup>

Figure 1: A report on Ukrainian neo-Nazis in the “News of the Week”.  
Screenshot: *Rossia 1*.<sup>20</sup>



The fight with Ukrainian fascists is the focus of political broadcasts, like in the mentioned “News of the Week”. Bald-headed, bare-chested men are shown having Nazi symbols such as the “Wolfsangel” tattooed on their skin. Their alleged torture methods are then described in detail.<sup>21</sup>

The war in Ukraine – called a “special operation” in Russia – is the dominant topic in the news and talk shows. No broadcast is complete without a detailed report on the alleged atrocities committed by Ukrainian Nazis, who are often compared to the German Nazis and the SS. The narrative of nationalist or fascist Ukraine is one of the most frequently repeated misrepresentations. Ever since the Maidan and the annexation of Crimea in 2013/14, the state media has claimed that fascists or nationalists rule Ukraine. This is despite the fact that nationalists have not had a party in the Ukrainian parliament (Verkhovna Rada) since May 2014, nor are

19 Maksim Fomin: In “Вести недели”, 24 July 2022.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

they part of the government.<sup>22</sup> There are nationalist groups such as the Azov Regiment, but they are not a political force dominating the whole country,<sup>23</sup> as *RT DE*, for example, regularly broadcasts to the audience in Germany.<sup>24</sup> The strategy is to anchor the stereotype of Ukrainian Nazis into public perception through constant repetition.<sup>25</sup>

On the one hand, the narrative has the function of blaming the opponent for the military aggression; on the other hand, it serves as a legitimization for Russia's war and the discrediting of Ukraine – in Russia and abroad. *RT DE* and *SNA* spread the accusation of genocide by “the Kiev regime”, for which, however, there was no evidence.<sup>26</sup> Russia sees itself as a protective power of Russian speakers and Russians abroad. However, Russia has itself created those in alleged need of protection when it granted Russian citizenship to more than 800,000 residents in the separatist areas of the Donbas – a practice that continues in the newly conquered areas in eastern Ukraine.<sup>27</sup>

Addressed to the domestic audience in Russia, the Nazi narrative has the function of mobilizing the population in the spirit of patriotism and uniting them behind the “national leader” Vladimir Putin.<sup>28</sup> The parallel to World War II is often drawn. For example, during a report from the front, a *Rossia I* correspondent asks a historian who is now fighting as a soldier in Ukraine if he sees parallels with the Great Patriotic War. “Very clear parallels,” the

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22 Spahn, Susanne: *Das Ukraine-Bild in Deutschland: Die Rolle der russischen Medien. Wie Russland die deutsche Öffentlichkeit beeinflusst.* Verlag Dr. Kovač: Hamburg 2016, pp. 96–98.

23 The Azov Regiment currently comprises between 2,000 and 3,000 fighters and is integrated into the Ukrainian National Guard. According to Anna Colin Lebedev of the University of Paris-Nanterre and other experts, the extreme right plays only a marginal role in Ukraine's political landscape. Cf. *Deutschlandfunk*: “Asow-Regiment, Stepan Bandera & Co. Rechtsextremisten in der Ukraine und ihr Einfluss im Land”, 1 July 2022.

24 Exemplary: On the occasion of a demonstration by right-wing extremists in Kyiv, *RT DE* claimed that power was being seized by Nazis. See *RT DE*: “Nazis and Neo-Nazis Demonstrate in Kyiv: March in Honor of Ukrainian Waffen SS Division”, 30 April 2021.

25 Exemplary: *RT DE*: “‘Sie haben sich wie Faschisten verhalten’ – Ukrainische Truppen verwüsteten das Dorf Sinezki”, 22 August 2022.

26 *SNA*: “Russlands Außenministerium: EU unterstützt Völkermord durch Waffenlieferungen an die Ukraine”, 28 February 2022; *RT DE*: “Putin: Russland hat keine Pläne, die Ukraine zu besetzen”, 24 February 2022 (currently blocked, screenshot available).

27 *NTV*: “Russland verteilt Pässe an Ukrainer”, 11 June 2022.

28 On the leader cult around Vladimir Putin, see Ennker, Benno: *Analyse: Wladimir Putin – Führer, Diktator, Kriegsherr.* In: *Russland-Analyse* No. 421, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 20 June 2022.

latter replied. “The enemy is the same: fascism, only in this case Ukrainian fascism. [...] The truth is on our side. We are defending our country.”<sup>29</sup> The memory of the victory in World War II feeds the notion that “Russians are invincible,” as another soldier proudly said in the report from the front.<sup>30</sup>

*Figure 2: The Russian leadership reacts to German arms deliveries with incomprehension. Screenshot: RT DE.<sup>31</sup>*

## **Panzerhaubitzen am 22. Juni: Warum Medwedew die Deutschen an die Leningrader Blockade erinnert**

25 Juni 2022 15:09 Uhr

Es knirscht gewaltig zwischen Deutschen und Russen. Die Russen haben sich daran gewöhnt, russophobe Signale aus Warschau, London oder Washington zu empfangen und dementsprechend zu reagieren. Für Berlin galten in Moskau noch andere Maßstäbe – bis vor kurzem.



Furthermore, states and politicians who support Ukraine in the war against Russia are confronted with the accusation of fascism. This also applies to Germany. Criticism of Russia is taken as an opportunity to remind Germans of their National Socialist past. As an illustration, *RT DE* published a tweet by former President Dmitry Medvedev with the following content: “German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said that Russia ‘uses hunger as a weapon’. It is of course astonishing to hear such a thing from officials whose country sealed off Leningrad for 900 days in a blockade where nearly 700,000 people died of hunger.”<sup>32</sup>

29 Andrey Smirnov, historian, quoted on *Rossia 1*: “Вести недели”, 24 July 2022.

30 *Rossia 1*, “Вести недели”, 24 July 2022.

31 Sankin, Vladislav: “Panzerhaubitzen am 22. Juni: Warum Medwedew die Deutschen an die Leningrader Blockade erinnert”, *RT DE*, 25 June 2022.

32 *Ibid.*

Figure 3: *The memory of the victory over the German fascists in World War II is omnipresent on Russian television. Screenshot: Perviy Kanal.*<sup>33</sup>



The memory of World War II is meant to mobilize for renewed battle, but it also serves to present Russia as a renewed victim of fascism. On the talk show “*Vremya Vspomnit*” (Time to Remember) on *Perviy Kanal*, Russia’s largest TV channel, the host Aleksandr Gordon showed a video of the 1945 victory celebration in defeated Berlin. “It seemed that they will never forget it,” he says, but then presents Latvia’s reactions to the war in Ukraine, such as classifying Russia as a “state that supports terror”.<sup>34</sup> Latvia’s restrictions on the entry of Russian citizens and the use of the Russian language are also discussed. Gordon sees Russians as victims of a new fascism when he asks: “In the 21st century Russians have taken over the role of Jews, is it so or not?” In the course of the program, Gordon himself answers: “What has

33 Gordon, Aleksandr: “Время вспомнить” [Time to Remember], *Perviy Kanal*, 17 August 2022. The Foreign Affairs Committee of the Latvian Parliament (Saeima) classified the violence against Ukraine emanating from Russia as state terrorism, see: LSM.lv, “Saeima committee names Russia terrorist state”, 2 August 2022.

34 Ibid.

changed in the consciousness of the Latvians who are now performing a *de facto* form of genocide according to ethnic criteria?"<sup>35</sup>

These examples illustrate that Ukraine and the states supporting it are discredited as fascists or face accusations of Nazi methods, while Russia considers itself a victim of this fascism. According to this logic, Russia is waging war because it needs to defend itself against enemies in Ukraine and other states.

#### 4 Narrative 2: Ukraine is Not a Separate Nation with Its Own History

Figure 4: RT DE reports claim that Russians and Ukrainians are one people. Screenshot: RT DE.<sup>36</sup>

### Staatswissenschaftlerin zur Vorgeschichte des Ukraine-Krieges: "Russen und Ukrainer sind ein Volk!"

7 Sep. 2022 20:51 Uhr

Während von ukrainischer Seite die Abgrenzungsbemühungen vom allem Russischen seit 2014 immer heftiger wurden, versucht Moskau bis heute, die ethnische Ebene aus dem Konflikt herauszuhalten. Eine neue Publikation widmet sich nun dem vermeintlichen Gegensatz zwischen Ukrainern und Russen.



35 Gordon, "Время вспомнить", 17 August 2022.

36 Exemplary: RT DE: "Staatswissenschaftlerin zur Vorgeschichte des Ukraine-Krieges: 'Russen und Ukrainer sind ein Volk!'", 7 September 2022.

In the portrayal of the Russian media, Ukraine is not a separate nation with its own history and, consequently, it has no right to state independence. This is accompanied by the view that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people”.<sup>37</sup> However, this interpretation is contrasted with Ukrainian historiography and the process of decolonization from the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union.<sup>38</sup>

The Russian narrative goes back to the dominant idea in the Russian Empire that the Russians and Ukrainians, then called Little Russians, formed a larger, all-Russian nation with Belarusians.<sup>39</sup> Ukraine’s state independence touches Russia’s national identity: the Ukrainians received their first permanent independent state in 1991, while Russians lost their empire. Independence ended centuries of shared history in “Kievan Rus”, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The view of Russians as the state-bearing ethnic group of a multinational empire was shattered. Even more, the independence of Ukraine ended the role of Russians as a kind of leading nation among the Eastern Slavs, as it had found expression in the all-Russian identity.<sup>40</sup> This explains why Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine has been much more vehement and extensive than in other Western-oriented post-Soviet states such as Georgia and Moldova. “Denazification” therefore means the “liberation” of Ukraine not from fascism, as claimed, but from its own history and state, independent of Russia – in other words, the *de facto* destruction of its independence. The return to the Russian-dominated sphere of rule is enforced by the war.

### 5 Narrative 3: Ukrainians Must Be Liberated from Nazis

The studied media show in detail the successes in the struggle with fascism, the so-called “denazification”, which takes place not only on a military level

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37 RT DE: “Staatswissenschaftlerin zur Vorgeschichte des Ukraine-Krieges: ‘Russen und Ukrainer sind ein Volk!’”, 7 September 2022.

38 Simon, Gerhard: War die Ukraine eine Kolonie? In: Beck, Marieluise (Ed.): Ukraine verstehen. Auf den Spuren von Terror und Gewalt, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2020, pp. 114–116.

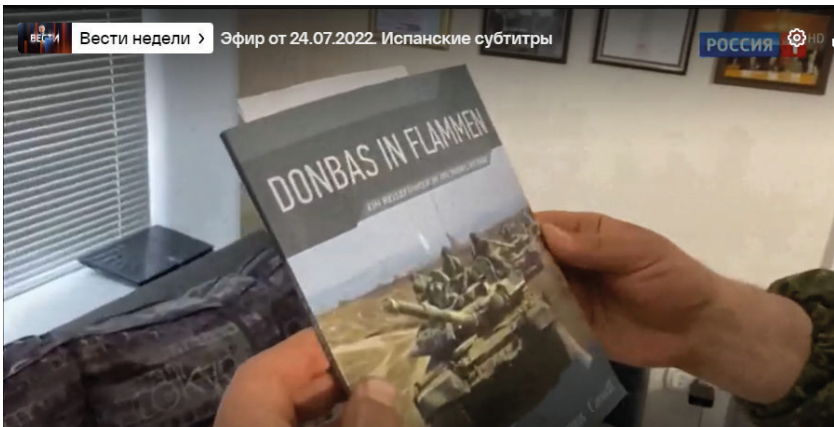
39 In the Soviet Union this idea survived in the form of the three socialist brother nations, see: Spahn, Susanne: Staatliche Unabhängigkeit – das Ende der ostslawischen Gemeinschaft? Die Außenpolitik Russlands gegenüber der Ukraine und Belarus seit 1991. Verlag Dr. Kovač: Hamburg 2011, pp. 21–29.

40 Ibid.



but also on a cultural and linguistic ones. For example, in the “News of the Week” a soldier shows books that he says were used in schools: “Look, a book in English” (sic), while showing the German-language title “Donbas in Flammen”,<sup>41</sup>

Figure 5: Russian state TV shows soldiers destroying literature on Ukraine during the “denazification”. Screenshot: *Rossia 1*.<sup>42</sup>



Then the soldier picks up another book: “Ukraine – History of a Great State, History of the Civilization of Ukraine”, he says with a sneer and reads a sentence in Ukrainian. Then he says in Russian: “We are now busy with denazification and will destroy this literature everywhere and nowhere on Ukrainian soil will people read such crap anymore.”<sup>43</sup>

Another soldier says threateningly: “You have betrayed your own roots, you have erased your own history. The history of your great Ukraine is already gone, *уже вмерла* (it is already dead),” he says in Ukrainian.<sup>44</sup> In that way, he twists the national anthem of Ukraine, in which the first line reads: “The glory and freedom of Ukraine has not yet perished.”<sup>45</sup>

41 *Rossia 1*, “Вести недели”, 24 July 2022.

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*

45 The first line of the poem written by Pavlo Chubynskyi in 1862 reads “Ще не вмерла України і слава, і воля”, for the lyrics of the anthem of Ukraine see <https://www.pisn i.org.ua/songs/24717.html>, 29.11.2022.

In their reporting, Ukrainians are compatriots confused by the West. Russia, in this logic, must defend itself from Western expansion. Moderator Dmitry Kiselyov stylizes this as a “clash of civilizations”:<sup>46</sup> “Russia is defending itself, defending its thousand-year-old multinational culture on this earth”, the moderator says emphatically. Russia’s Muslims are showing their support, he elaborates, quoting Chechnya’s ruler Ramzan Kadyrov: “Today, there is no one in the world who is taking action against this hellish abomination that the West is spreading, except Russia. I am [...] very grateful that we can participate in this holy war against Satanism.”<sup>47</sup>

#### 6 Narrative 4: *The West Wages War against Russia*

In the broadcasts, Ukraine appears merely as a puppet of the USA. In reality, it is the U.S. and NATO that are waging a war against Russia, with Ukraine simply being the instrument, according to the portrayal. In this thinking, Ukraine is not an independent actor on the international stage, but merely a geopolitical object of the great powers. The Americans and British (the collective term “the Anglo-Saxons”) forced Ukraine to wage this senseless war against Russia, host Dmitry Kulikov argues in the episode titled “The Fall of American Hegemony”. His program “Formula Smysla” is aired on television on the channel *Solovyov live*.<sup>48</sup>

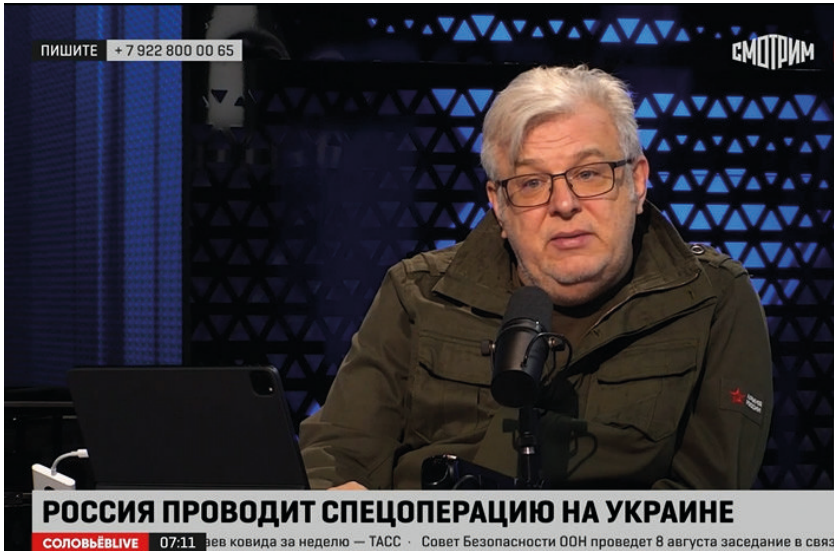
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46 Kiselyov, Dmitry: In “Вести недели”, 24 July 2022.

47 Kadyrov, Ramzan: In “Вести недели”, 24 July 2022.

48 Kulikov, Dmitry: “Падение американской гегемонии” [The fall of American hegemony], Formula Smysla, 8 August 2022.

Figure 6: *Russia sees itself in a war against the West. Screenshot: Solovyov live.*<sup>49</sup>



The presenter Dmitry Kulikov is sitting in the studio in an olive green military uniform with the patch “Army of Russia”. President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy wants to conduct negotiations from the position of strength, this is not real, the presenter says. “Mr. Zelenskyy, now there is a reassessment of the situation on the battlefield, where you sent your transatlantic masters.” He thinks Ukraine will not succeed and will be forced to negotiate on Russian terms. “The conditions for Ukraine are getting worse, worse, [...] and Ukraine will be helped [...] not by Borrell, not by Stoltenberg, this whole gang that is waging war against Russia with the bodies and lives of Ukrainians.” Ukrainians would have to “pay for the American provocation against Russia.”<sup>50</sup>

49 Kulikov, “Падение американской гегемонии”, 8 August 2022.

50 Ibid.

7 Narrative 5: *The West is Decadent and Weak*

In Germany, *RT DE* traditionally portrays Western democracy as dysfunctional, creating a supposed opposition between the people and the “system”. The government is portrayed as helpless and unable to cope with crises. Society appears decadent and morally decayed. Russia’s authoritarian system, on the other hand, is portrayed as effective, with President Putin staged as a successful crisis manager. In Germany, this is aimed at weakening people’s trust in their government and democracy and, conversely, strengthening Russia’s influence. The reporting is characterized by bipolarity: supposed enemies like the German government and especially parties with a Russia-critical stance such as the Greens (“*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*”) are portrayed negatively. Advocates of the Russian leadership, such as politicians from Alternative for Germany (“*Alternative für Deutschland*”) and the Left (“*Die Linke*”) and other actors with a pro-Russian agenda, are described positively and are given a stage in interviews.<sup>51</sup>

This description corresponds to the strategy that *RT* editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan described in an interview: the foreign channel *RT* is an “information weapon”. The goal, according to Simonyan, is to create an alternative counter-public sphere to the mainstream abroad and thus to gain users, these being leftists and other “fighters against the system”. Russia could then use them as a resource “in the next information war”.<sup>52</sup>

In Russia, the West is also portrayed as decadent, morally depraved and shaken by crises, offering an unrealistic image through selective choice of facts and exaggeration. Russia, by contrast, appears as a fortress of stability and order, with the Putin leadership staging itself as the preserver of traditional values and religion. Putin appears as a caring father of the country who selflessly serves the interests of the homeland.<sup>53</sup> In this way, the media fall back on the communication strategy that had already proven itself in the Soviet Union, namely to nourish the citizens’ pride in living in what is

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51 Kulikov, “Падение американской гегемонии”, 8 August 2022.

52 Spahn, *Russische Medien in Deutschland*, 2022, p. 5.

53 This can be seen, for example, in the structure of the news. Example: Perviy Kanal, 19 August 2022, 12:00 Moscow time, <https://www.itv.com/live>: Russia’s successes in the fight against fascism in Ukraine with honoring the heroes. Putin’s speech on the interests of the homeland. Report from a weapons exhibition. Disasters in Europe: storm and flooding. Young artists for Donbas: fundraising campaign.

supposedly the best country in the world. This is linked to the claim to be a world power again, as the USSR once was.<sup>54</sup>

### 8 Narrative 6: Russia Is an Empire in Eurasia

Distancing from the West, however, is also historically justified. The Eurasian movement emerged in the 1920s, founded by Russian intellectuals in European exile. They promoted the idea of Russia as a Eurasian “great power” by referring to its common history with the steppe peoples of Asia, especially the Mongols. They also founded “Eurasianism” as a political theory, seeing Russia as a separate continent of Eurasia, defined in opposition to the West.<sup>55</sup>

Eurasianism strongly shapes today's political debates in Russia and is taken up by political scientists who speak on talk shows and other venues. A prominent example is Sergey Karaganov, Honorary Chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy. In his view, China is wrestling with the U.S. for global dominance, and he sees Russia alongside China as the future winner of this struggle. “There is a *de facto* strategic alliance between Russia and China. It is good that we are together, this weakens their forces [...], America will undoubtedly suffer a great defeat in such a war on two fronts (meaning Russia and China, author's note),” Karaganov said on TV *Center's* talk show “*Pravo Znat*”.<sup>56</sup> Europe is no longer of interest to Russia, says Karaganov: “Europe has lost its role as a source of modernization, which it played for almost 300 years. [...] Intellectually and economically, we should get away from Eurocentrism.” Karaganov sees Russia's future in the East: “We are Eurasians [...] we are returning home.”<sup>57</sup>

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54 Simon, Gerhard: Russlands Griff nach der Weltmacht. In: Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik, Vol. 15, 2022, pp. 139–149.

55 In the late Soviet Union and Russia of the 1990s, historian Lev Gumilyov revived *Eurasianism* with his popular writings such as “Древняя Русь и Великая степь” [Ancient Rus' and the Great Steppe], Moscow 1993. An overview of the content and development of *Eurasianism* is given in the volume “Пути Евразии” [Paths of Eurasia], Moscow 1992.

56 Karaganov, Sergey: “Право знать” [Right to Know], TVC, 25 June 2022.

57 Ibid.

Figure 7: Foreign policy expert Karaganov sees China and Russia as winners in the global power struggle. Screenshot: TV Center.<sup>58</sup>



The geopolitical mastermind nurtures imperial self-confidence: “We are a unique empire. That’s what we can offer humanity: true multiculturalism and openness. We are the civilization of civilizations.”<sup>59</sup> Karaganov interprets the Ukraine war as “the last desperate counterattack of the West”, which refuses to give up its global hegemony. Russia’s goal is to break the West’s resistance. This is to be expected in ten to fifteen years, and for that Russia must win the war, the foreign policy expert said.<sup>60</sup>

### 9 Narrative 7: Supporting Ukraine Leads the West to Its Downfall

In Germany, too, the aim is to break the resistance of the German government, to agitate against sanctions and arms deliveries, and to question solidarity with Ukraine. This is clearly shown by the reporting: *RT DE* deliberately picks up on people’s fears of economic problems or a military confrontation with Russia in order to instrumentalize them politically. *RT DE* warned several times that the German government was risking a nucle-

58 Karaganov, “Право знать”, 25 June 2022.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

ar war with Russia with its policy.<sup>61</sup> Economic collapse is also predicted: the German government wants the “complete destruction of the German economy”, it was claimed.<sup>62</sup>

However, it is not Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine that is seen as the cause of the crisis, but the sanctions against Russia. The sanctions are blamed across the board for the rise in energy prices, even though gas is not one of the sanctioned goods.<sup>63</sup> *RT DE*-author Gert Ewen Ungar, for example, wrote: “Due to the Western sanctions regime against Russia, energy prices are rising. The sanctions have failed. They hurt the German economy and citizens in Germany far more than Russia.”<sup>64</sup>

In this context, misrepresentations are used, for example when it says: “These (the sanctions, author's note) are backfiring like a boomerang: there is a threat of an energy crisis due to a gas shortage.”<sup>65</sup> However, the gas shortage is not a consequence of the sanctions, but was deliberately created by the Russian energy company Gazprom with the backing of the Putin leadership. There is no mention of Gazprom's role, which cut gas supplies until the end of August 2022 and then stopped them completely.<sup>66</sup> Numerous articles now describe “energy poverty in Germany” and fuel people's discontent.<sup>67</sup>

In autumn 2022, *RT DE* reported favorably on the demonstrations against the sanctions and government in numerous cities in Germany. The reports were aimed at directing people's anger at the sanctions and attacking the political system. Russia's role as the perpetrator of the war and the aggressor was once again omitted. “A system based on fear is doomed to fail”, *RT DE*

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61 Exemplary: *RT DE*: “‘Ball absurd’ für die Ukraine – Der Tanz am Abgrund”, 2 May 2022.

62 *RT DE*: Interview with the economist Eike Hamer, 6 September 2022.

63 “The EU sanctions contain explicit exemption rules to prevent the EU's gas supply from being affected. (...) If Russia wanted to supply more, it could do so at any time and in many ways. Gazprom could pump more gas through Ukraine, for example. Here, the company has booked capacities that it even pays for but does not use. So the tense situation on the European gas market is something Russia is deliberately causing.” See: Die Bundesregierung: Interview mit Janis Kluge. Russland wird technologisch rückständiger werden, 17 August 2022.

64 Ungar, Gert Ewen: “Deutschland rutscht in die Rezession – Wie lange, hängt von der Politik ab, die sie verursacht hat”, *RT DE*, 7 September 2022.

65 *RT DE*: “Energiekrise”.

66 Austel, Nadja/Lothar, Sophia: “Nord Stream 1 ‘komplett’ gestoppt – Unabhängigkeit von russischem Gas in Arbeit”, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 2 September 2022.

67 Exemplary: *RT DE*: “Energiearmut in Deutschland nimmt weiter zu”, 22 October 2022.

headlined, referring to the social and political fabric. Social cohesion and this very system would “continue to gradually evaporate into thin air”. Author Tom Wellbrock elaborated: “Something is emerging in eastern Germany that has the potential for great, widespread resistance”. He saw the “end of an affluent society” coming. The reason for this was “fatal political decisions”, by which he meant above all “supposed solidarity with Ukraine”.<sup>68</sup>

Figure 8: Well-known presenter Vladimir Solovyov mocks energy-saving measures in Germany. Screenshot: *Rossia 1*.<sup>69</sup>



In the domestic media, propagandists are also convinced that the Germans are harming themselves the most with the sanctions. In the talk show “Evening with Vladimir Solovyov” on *Rossia 1*, the well-known presenter Solovyov expressed open joy that Germans were only allowed to heat public buildings up to 19 degrees in winter. “So what, just walk around inside in your coat. Germans will be easily recognized. Let them walk around the apartment in their coats all the time, back and forth [...]”<sup>70</sup>

Then he laughed and clapped his hands. “There will be no gas.” (Then partly German, partly Russian): “*keine Gas, ne budet gasen.*” (sic) “But that’s not bad, you’ll get used to it”, he says to Germany’s address.<sup>71</sup> After-

68 Wellbrock, Tom: “Ein System, das auf Angst basiert, ist zum Scheitern verurteilt”, RT DE, 23 October 2022.

69 *Rossia 1*: “Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым” [Evening with Vladimir Solovyov], 4 August 2022, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2455304>, 14.09.2022.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.



wards, an expert claimed that Russia allegedly benefits from economic isolation.<sup>72</sup> This account is controversial. Statistics show that the Russian economy shrank by 6.5 percent from February to June 2022, while Germany was still on a growth path in the summer of 2022.<sup>73</sup>

## 10 Conclusion

The campaign against Ukraine started already in late 2013/early 2014 with the Maidan and the annexation of Crimea, and since the 2022 attack it has been the dominant topic in Russian state and state-related media. *RT, Rossia 1* and *Co.* create an alternative reality in which the attacker becomes the victim and the victim the perpetrator. For this purpose, the national memory of the fight against fascism in World War II is skillfully instrumentalized and projected onto alleged fascists in Ukraine and abroad. Likewise, the recourse to propaganda stereotypes from the Soviet era can be seen: the staged culture war and isolation from the West, as well as imperial ambitions, are reminiscent of a new edition of Stalin's "socialism in one country" – now in the guise of the Russian-Eurasian empire. In the short term, the propagandists seem to be achieving their goals, i.e. legitimizing the war in particular. In Russia, a majority of 76 percent of respondents support the war against Ukraine, according to an August 2022 poll by the Levada Center.<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, the Putin system with its state media is threatened, despite the eternal mantra of stability in Russia. A policy of isolation cannot work in the age of the Internet. Public support is unstable, as the mass exodus after the partial mobilization clearly demonstrated. There is a difference between supporting the "special operation" and taking up arms oneself and dying for the fatherland in Ukraine. In terms of foreign policy, the Russian Federation has the problem that it cannot offer its post-Soviet neighbors an attractive integration model. Russia prevents Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova from being bound to the West through war and occupation. It is questionable whether such policy of oppression has a future.

The Russian state media seethes hatred and glorifies violence against Ukrainians and other "fascists", by which all political opponents are meant. The broadcasts are often extremely repulsive because of their brutality. A

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72 Shaende, Jonas: In "Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым", 4 August 2022.

73 Die Bundesregierung, Interview mit Janis Kluge, 17 August 2022.

74 Levada Center: Survey on the conflict with Ukraine of July 2022, 1 August 2022.

broadcast by the Russian-language edition of *RT* made its way into the German media. There, the presenter called for children to be either drowned in a river or set on fire in a hut if they believed that Ukraine had been occupied by Russia.<sup>75</sup> This is just the tip of the iceberg. The war and the media that glorifies it poison Ukraine's relations with Russia for a long time. Putin achieves the opposite of what he intends: the separation of the East Slavic "brother state" from Russia is irreversible.

In Germany, the notion of the Russian media is to use crises to attack and destabilize democracy. This is clearly demonstrated by the energy crisis triggered by the war. The foreign broadcaster *RT DE* specifically targets dissatisfied people and mobilizes them to protest. The "rage winter" organized by right-wing extremists and the "Querdenker" movement is fueled by *RT DE* in the media. In Germany, the political agenda of *RT* is particularly well demonstrated: while the Russian leadership is creating problems – be it by cutting off gas supplies, the war, or the waves of refugees that come with it – *RT DE* is fueling the mood of catastrophe and turning the population against its government. Putin's weapons in the information war serve only one goal: the preservation of his own power.

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75 NTV: "RT-Moderator ruft zum Kindermord auf", 26 October 2022.

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## Chapter 4: Russia's Foreign Policy Determinants: Expansionist Policy and "Imperialism" since 1991

*Olha Husieva*

### Abstract

Russian expansionism and imperialism are not new phenomena. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian rulers in the Kremlin have been flirting with the idea of rebuilding the lost empire and revising the world order. This chapter reviews the main determinants of Russian foreign policy since the 1990s, identifies the basic ideas behind Russia's imperialist policies, and analyzes Moscow's main set of tools for its expansionist activities. The repeated presence of certain ideologies, narratives, and methods in various campaigns, whether conventional or hybrid, confirm the existence of a pattern in Russian foreign policy since the 1990s on which Russian expansionism is based. While this has not infrequently been overlooked in the Western world, some scholars have warned of it for many years. Among them was our colleague and renowned Russia expert *Dr. Hannes Adomeit (1942–2022)*, who saw right through the ideologies and goals of the Russian political elite and fully predicted Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. This chapter is dedicated to Dr. Hannes Adomeit and is based on his central theses.

### Keywords

velikaya derzhava, Pravoslavie, Pobeda, the Great Patriotic War, revanchism, Transnistria, Chechen wars, war in Georgia, "frozen conflicts", Donbas crisis, Primakov doctrine

## 1 Introduction

*It can be said that we (Russia)  
are an exception  
among nations. We [...] exist only to  
teach the world a great lesson.*

Pyotr Chaadayev, “Философские письма”<sup>1</sup>, 1836

After the brutal Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, one could observe a sudden appearance of long-forgotten quotes by Pyotr Chaadayev in Russian-speaking social media. One of the harshest critics of the Russian Empire in the country’s philosophical movement of the 19th century, Chaadayev was labeled “insane” by the emperor Nicholas I, and his texts were immediately banned. Suddenly, when the war crimes of the Russian army in Bucha, Irpin, and Izyum were revealed in March-April 2022, intellectuals resorted to his scandalous texts about Russia’s alienation from the “universal cultivation of the human race”<sup>2</sup> to find an explanation for these tragic events. The world was chilled to the bone by the development of Vladimir Putin’s “special military operation”, at the same time finding itself at the entry gate of epochal changes in security policy.

Though for many Western experts on Russia or those familiar with the Kremlin’s image of the “Russian world” (with the Baltic states, Eastern and Central Europe), Putin’s expansionist course in 2022 is hardly an unexpected novelty. Imperialist policies, expansionism in the immediate neighborhood, and the use of similar methods of warfare (disinformation campaigns, deportations, “re-education”, attacks on civilians, etc.) are a long-standing habit of Moscow that, as we see today in the example of Ukraine, have been overlooked in the West either because of a systematic misreading of Russia, a misunderstanding of the Kremlin’s signals, or a deliberate policy of “closed eyes”. Only a rational view of Russia and an early assessment of its foreign policy actions can be a guarantee that neither the overestimation nor the underestimation of the Russian goals and capabilities will be repeated again – a mistake of strategic blindness that turned into a catastrophe for millions.

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1 Chaadayev, Pyotr: Философские письма [Philosophical Letters], 1836.

2 Ibid.



## 2 The Old “New” Russia: The Ideological Implications of Modern Russian Imperialism

Legally, the modern Russian Federation is a “legitimate successor” to the Soviet Union (USSR).<sup>3</sup> According to Putin, this is “self-evident”, which is why an amendment to this validity was included in the Constitution of the Russian Federation in 2020 on his initiative.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the UN General Assembly Resolution 55/153 “Nationality of natural persons in relation to the succession of States”, according to which all fourteen other Soviet republics are equal successors of the former state, was ignored. On practice, this Russian continuity<sup>5</sup> is presented economically (Russia paid a larger part of the Soviet foreign debt),<sup>6</sup> diplomatically (e.g. Russia taking over USSR’s seat in the UN Security Council) and, above all, ideologically.

Since 1991, the Russian ideological space began to develop, adopting selective features not only from the Soviet Union but also from Tsarist Russia. If not economically, then ideologically, almost every Russian citizen found his or her place in the new Russia in the 1990s. Among numerous other features, the complicated “ideological cocktail” of contemporary Russia consists of the following four, occasionally contradictory, “ingredients”. It is important to note that they all can be recognized as fundamental aspects of “Putin’s imperialism”.

### 2.1 “*Velikaya Derzhava*”: Great(er) Russia

It is a re-emerging phenomenon in Russian history that was devised in Tsarist Russia in the second half of the 17th century, namely *Velikaya Rossiya* (a geographical construct that literally means “Great(er) Russia”).<sup>7</sup> Used primarily as a domestically oriented policy of self-colonization, as in

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3 UN General Assembly: Nationality of Natural Persons in relation to the Succession of States, Resolution 55/153, 12 December 2000.

4 TASS: “Путин предложил закрепить в Конституции правопреемство России в отношении СССР” [Putin proposed to enshrine Russia’s succession to the USSR in the Constitution], 2 March 2020.

5 For more on the phenomenon of Russian continuity, see Jakob Wöllenstein’s chapter “The Ukraine War as a Regional Confrontation” of this anthology.

6 Seager, Ashley: “Russia pays off its Soviet era debts to the west”, *The Guardian*, 22 August 2006.

7 Adomeit, Hannes: “Putin’s ‘Greater Russia’: misunderstanding or mission?” *Raum op Rusland*, 27 February 2018.

Alexander Etkind, the concept eventually transitioned to foreign policy<sup>8</sup> – paralleling the establishment of Russia as an empire and, accordingly, as a great power. There are many similarities between the “*velikoderzhavnyi*” concept and *Realpolitik*, including the idea of undeniable natural right of the larger (stronger) state over the smaller (weaker) one. The paradox of this ideological aspect is the non-fulfillment of Russia’s “great power” claim, or as Anatoly Reshetnikov states, “Russia has often talked about being a great power and has always had problems being recognized as such.”<sup>9</sup> Putin was vocal about experiencing the similar dilemma, adding to his public speeches faintly irritated comments about Russia’s “humiliating defeat” in the Cold War and the destruction of the Soviet Union by the “weak hand of Gorbachev”.<sup>10</sup> In Putin’s view, Russia is being unjustly oppressed by the West/NATO, and he has no choice but to oppose this modern world order, in which *Velikaya Rossiya* is placed on a par with smaller sovereign states or is marginalized altogether.

Diplomacy is a good framework to illustrate Russia’s desire to be perceived as a great power. For example, Putin expressed this, among other things, by having all the world’s heads of government waiting for him in official meetings.<sup>11</sup> Russia also expected to be invited by the allies to join NATO and not to have to apply to join the alliance like the “smaller” countries.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, this “geopolitical insecurity” turned into the conviction that the Russian system was superior to the Western one, and thus the Kremlin believed in its “preeminence” – not without the encouragement of the anti-Western (mostly anti-American) regimes. Over the past decade, Moscow nurtured a plan to unite and lead a coalition of anti-Western actors

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8 See Etkind, Alexander: *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience*. Polity Press: Cambridge 2011.

9 Reshetnikov, Anatoly: *Uses of Greatness in Russian International Politics: A Conceptual History of Velikaya Derzhava*, Department of International Relations, Central European University: Budapest, 2018, p. 4.

10 Ponomaryova, Alya: “Последний генеральный секретарь” [The Last Secretary General], Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2 March 2016 .

11 According to Statista, the record was set during a meeting with former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had to wait 4 hours and 15 minutes for the Kremlin leader. Cf. McCarthy, Niall: *Putin Likes To Keep Other World Leaders Waiting*, Statista, 16 July 2018.

12 For more, see the chapter by Joris Van Bladel “The Ukraine War as a Result of Geopolitical Rivalry?” of this anthology.

– something that modern experts refer to as the development of the rivalry between “dictatorships *versus* democracies”.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding the competition between China and Russia for the leading role in the above unit, Hannes Adomeit emphasizes:

“Putin’s Russia has more of a problem providing positive proof that its system is superior to that of the West. Lavrov has argued that ‘a big debate is underway about which [system] is more effective. The coronavirus infection has taken the debate up a notch’. The question had arisen, therefore, ‘To what extent the Western democracies have shown themselves capable of opposing this absolute evil and to what extent countries with centralized, strong, and “authoritarian” government have been successful. History will be the judge.’ ... The more than preliminary verdict, however, is that China has been much more successful than Russia, both in terms of controlling the virus and in economic performance.”<sup>14</sup>

Bastian Giegerich and Maximilian Terhalle also confirm that at this stage of history Russia is not able to impose a new world order: “Russia suffers from a myriad of economic and political weaknesses and, unlike China, does not have the potential ability to shape a new world order, it is still strong enough to act as a ‘spoiler’ state within the existing order [...]”<sup>15</sup> The current war in Ukraine is a good example of how Russia is not able to defend the title of superpower, yet still manages to poison the existing world order – not only conventionally in Ukraine, but also asymmetrically worldwide.

## 2.2 “*Pravoslavie*”: Russian Orthodoxy

The Orthodox Church occupies an important place in modern Russian ideology. *Pravoslavie* (from the rus. *Pravo* – “right”, i.e. a correct Christianity in contrast to the Roman Catholic branch) is one of the main mechanisms

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13 See Szulecki, Kacper/Wig, Tore: The War In Ukraine Is All About Democracy Vs Dictatorship, CEU Democracy Institute, 9 April 2022.

14 Adomeit, Hannes: Russia’s Strategic Outlook and Policies: What Role for China? In: Kirchberger, Sarah/Sinjen, Svenja/Wörmer, Nils (Eds.): Russia-China Relations. Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals? Springer: Cham 2022, pp. 32–33.

15 Giegerich, Bastian/Terhalle, Maximilian: The Responsibility to Defend: Re-thinking Germany’s Strategic Culture. Routledge: London 2021, p. 98.

that constitute the Russian sense of exceptionalism in its foreign relations with the West since the Tsarist period. Originally, Kievan Rus' adopted Christianity from the Byzantine Empire. During the formation of the Muscovite state (15th century) and after the fall of Constantinople (1453), the name of “the capital of Orthodoxy” was unceremoniously endorsed by Moscow. Already in the 16th and 17th centuries a crucial political concept in the Kremlin was born: “Moscow is the third Rome [...]”,<sup>16</sup> which gave the growing empire a justification for its exceptional position in the region and a unique historical vocation. The Russian role as the successor to the Byzantine Orthodox Empire, though self-named, gave Moscow an ideological basis for uniting all Orthodox “brotherhood” nations into one *Pravoslavny Mir* (the Orthodox World). With its strictly hierarchical and controlling nature, the Church was supportive in justifying Moscow's absolute monarchy in the Tsarist epoch, and one may well note how nowadays Putin uses it in the same way both internally (by justifying his authoritarianism), and externally (by establishing “a natural claim” to neighboring Orthodox nations such as Ukraine and Belarus):

“[...] Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are the heirs of ancient Russia, which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes in the vast space – from Ladoga, Novgorod, Pskov to Kiev and Chernigov - were united by one language [...]. And after the baptism of Russia – an Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice of St. Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, still largely determines our kinship.”<sup>17</sup>

### 2.3 “Us” versus “the West”

On the path laid by the Orthodox Church, another feature of the Russian sense of exceptionalism in history and world politics emerged. The collective concept of “the West” became entrenched in the Russian vocabulary, among others, through the work of the chauvinist writer Fyodor Tyutchev

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16 Klimenko, A. N.: Концепция “Москва – Третий Рим” в геополитической практике И.В. Сталина [The concept “Moscow – Third Rome” in geopolitical practice of I. V. Stalin]. In: Vestnik Moskovskogo gosudarstvennogo lingvisticheskogo universiteta, Vol. 24 (684), 2013, pp. 124–132.

17 Putin, Vladimir: Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев [On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians], Kremlin, 12 July 2021.

in the mid-19th century. In his treatise “Russia and the West”, the author outlines the absolute and insurmountable distinctions between Russia and the West (in this case, the European countries). According to his vindication, European countries are more materialistic and practical, while Russia is spiritual – it is chosen, guided, and protected by God. Tyutchev criticizes Catholicism, Protestantism, and revolutions; he states that there are “us” and “them”.<sup>18</sup>

This hypothesis was broadly preached and incorporated to the political thinking during the Soviet times, and, expectedly, it found a comfortable place in the mottled ideology of the new Russian Federation. In the early 2000s, the so-called “imperial romantics” gained popularity in Russia, according to whom the need to create a strong state and acquire territories is essential. Traditional values from Tsarist times such as autocracy, Orthodoxy, and the Slavic chauvinism were adopted by modern Russian ideology, not neglecting to establish a belief of fundamental distinction between “us” and “them”. The only difference is that Tyutchev’s definition of “the West” as an anti-European concept has been enhanced by an anti-American one.<sup>19</sup>

#### 2.4 Post-Soviet Nostalgia

Putin is certainly not alone in his grief for the lost Soviet empire, but one of many more Russians who lost their economic stability and could not adapt to the rapidly changing market economy of the 1990s. For these people, it was logical to blame the West – the winner of the Cold War – since it was “the Western projects” (democracy and market economy) that replaced the socialist world. This sense of defeat was particularly bitter for the post-Soviet society, since it was precisely they who were the “nation of victors” of World War II (in Russia – the Great Patriotic War). Those who had liberated Europe from the Nazi regime now had to sit on the penalty bench of history. Today the Kremlin masterfully exploits this nostalgia and the sense of injustice in society, promising its people a historic revenge on the West. For thirty years, the narrative of the Great Patriotic

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18 Tarasov, Boris: Россия и Запад в историософии Ф. И. Тютчева [Russia and The West in the Historiography of Fyodor Tyutchev]. In: Literary Journal, Vol. 19, 2005, pp. 41–53.

19 Letov, Oleg: Россия и Запад: проблемы русской идентичности [Russia and the West: the Problems of Russian Identity]. In: Human Being: Image and Essence. Humanitarian Aspects, Vol. 3–4, Issue 30–31, 2017, p. 67 ff.

War was heavily politicized, often leaving out “uncomfortable” episodes of military cooperation with the Hitler’s Germany, dramatic defeats in the Soviet-Finnish Winter War, or occupation of Baltic, Eastern and Central European states. *Pobeda* (victory), theatrically celebrated on May 9 parades, became a sacred (and solely Russian) achievement and an opportunity to demonstrate the country’s military might.

Hannes Adomeit aptly describes how in modern times the history of Russian expansion is presented in purely “heroic” and “glorious” terms:

“... there are dark sides, but in comparison with other states, especially the USA, they are of little significance. In its history Russia has always had ‘brilliant’ military victories over the invaders from the West [...]. The Great Patriotic (war, author’s note) [...] is a proof of patriotism and sacrifice of the population and the need to be always militarily equipped. [...] the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is by no means to be devalued as morally reprehensible, but was objectively necessary – a historically justified act of reason of state. The horrors of the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States, Poland, and other territorial allocations from the Hitler-Stalin Pact in the period from September 1939 to June 1941 are ignored. The establishment of Soviet rule in these territories after 1944 is presented as liberation.”<sup>20</sup>

The new Russia has never really left behind the core ideas of old Russia (be it Soviet or Tsarist) but has gradually introduced them as determining factors for its modern domestic and foreign policy. All attempts to bring about a completely new rapprochement with the West failed, long before NATO “threatened” Russia’s national security with its eastward expansion. According to Adomeit, this happened as early as 1993, when *derzhavniki*<sup>21</sup> dismantled the new transatlantic approach of then-Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev by accusing him of making Russia a “lackey” of the United States.<sup>22</sup> The *derzhavniki* were able to unite under their ideological umbrella Russian nationalists, chauvinists, “Eurasianists”, “neo-Slavophiles”, and

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20 Adomeit, Hannes: Innenpolitische Determinanten der Putinschen Außenpolitik. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 1, Issue 1, February 2017, p. 49.

21 Could also be met in the literature as *gosudarstvenniki*: representatives of state power; those in politics who advocate a powerful state that can maintain order. For more on this, see Sergunin, Alexander: Explaining Russian Foreign Policy Behavior: Theory and Practice. Ibidem Press: Stuttgart 2016.

22 Adomeit, Russia’s Strategic Outlook and Policies, 2022, p. 18.

even communists.<sup>23</sup> The merger of the latter meant defeat for Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party, in the 1996 presidential elections. To the new imperialists, the Kremlin very soon proposed a (diplomatic) project to rebuild the lost empire – with the help of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, founded in 1991) and eventually the Eurasian Economic Union (2015). As such, Russia offered the platforms for cooperation to the former Soviet republics, which were presented as alternatives to the European Union (EU). This could be seen as one of the Kremlin's *soft power* instruments on the path to rebuilding the lost empire. However, Russian *hard power* instruments were never consigned to the bookshelves of history.

### 3 Russian Appeals to Historical Hegemony: Transnistria and Chechnya

Primarily, it is important to grasp the Russian understanding of its historical hegemony. Like every other empire in human history, both Tsarist and Soviet Russia never had a stable borderline – regions came and left, sometimes peacefully, but mostly as a result of military confrontations. So, which map of Russia is post-Soviet Moscow referring to when it speaks of its “natural right” to influence as a *hegemon*? In the early 1990s, the goal of the communists and revanchists was clear: to build a new Russia within the borders of the old USSR. It is often assumed that this imperialism can only be attributed to Putin, but in reality the foundation for it was already developing during the tenure of Boris Yeltsin (1991–1999).

According to what was eventually christened the Yeltsin Doctrine,<sup>24</sup> *blizhnee zarubezhè* (Near Neighborhood) – as a consideration of the post-Soviet space – is an “exclusive” Russian sphere of influence in which Moscow demanded to be recognized by the United Nations as a “guarantor of peace and stability in the region”.<sup>25</sup> Then-Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev specified this area: it was “the countries of the CIS and the Baltic republics”. According to him, a withdrawal of Russian troops would mean a power vacuum and a security threat to the Russian-speaking population.

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23 Adomeit, Hannes: Müssen wir Russland besser verstehen lernen? Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit den Argumenten für eine neue Russlandpolitik. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 3, Issue 3, September 2019, p. 227.

24 Could also be called the “Kozyrev Doctrine”.

25 Adomeit, Putin's 'Greater Russia', 2018.

A member of the Presidential Council at the time, Andranik Migranyan, on the other hand, noted that the post-Soviet states were a temporary phenomenon and that soon they would be united in a new state.<sup>26</sup> Shortly after, the new Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov formulated the main basic political doctrine that would determine Russia's foreign and military policy for the next twenty years. According to it, Russia will not accept a unipolar U.S. world; it will seek the restoration of its superpower status and, together with China and India, resist the U.S. dominance.<sup>27</sup>

The first use of military power by modern Russia took place in the Transnistrian War (1990–1992). The conflict, inherited by Yeltsin from the Soviet era, was actually the first military confrontation, the causes (or preconditions) of which underlie in the collapse of the USSR empire. It is believed that Russia initially had no geopolitical<sup>28</sup> or economic interest in the confrontation between the unrecognized Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) and Moldova.<sup>29</sup> However, over the past thirty years, the Kremlin has poured billions of Russian rubles into the PMR's economy (accounting for over 70 percent of its budget)<sup>30</sup> and into the local "peacekeeping operation". Was this potential political and military springboard, relatively small and not densely populated, actually worth such investments? In particular, the case of Transnistria has been presented – before the eyes of the West and the UN – as a practical example of Kozyrev's warnings about the danger of a "power vacuum" in the post-Soviet space. If Russia pulls out, similar crises will emerge elsewhere. Moreover, in a sense, Transnistria became a precedent, a first appeal for the restoration of the lost empire. Finally, this experience provided a case study for the Kremlin's future engagement in its *blizhnee zarubezh'e*. Based on the Transnistrian experience, Russian expansionism would adapt and refine instruments such as the following:

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26 Litera, Bohuslav: The Kozyrev Doctrine – a Russian Variation on the Monroe Doctrine. In: Perspectives, Vol. 4, 1994/95, p. 45.

27 Kainikara, Sanu: "Russia's Return To The World Stage: The Primakov Doctrine – Analysis", Eurasia Review, 5 November 2019.

28 Until the war in Ukraine, when Transnistria is now available as an additional strategic base for the Russian military if needed.

29 Adomeit, Hannes: Russia and its Near Neighborhood: Competition and Conflict with the EU, College of Europe, Natolin Research Papers, 04/2011, p. 54.

30 Puiu, Victoria: "Can Russia Afford Transnistria?", Eurasianet, 18 February 2015.



- “Peacekeeping operation”: Russian troops are the peacemaking units, similar to the UN Blue Helmets. Russian politicians actively participate in the drafting of peace agreements (e.g. the Kozak Memorandum of 2003).<sup>31</sup> Russia does not rely on pre-existing international agreements (since they are “pro-Western”), but creates its own international order and legal space;
- “Protection” of the Russian-speaking population: the use of the *lingua franca* as an argument for belonging to the *russkiy mir* (Russian world);
- Patron-client relationships with separatists:<sup>32</sup> a *proxy* method that allows both sides to benefit;
- “Freezing” the conflict:<sup>33</sup> this would allow Russia to exhaust the area economically and prevent building capacity for a counterattack, as well as to delay the confrontation as long as possible to erase the causes of the conflict from public memory and prevent its active resolution from the outside.

Besides *blizhnee zarubezh'e*, one could discover such terms as *russkiy mir* (Russian world) and *bratskiye narody* (brotherly nations) in the Russian media, in official documents, or in speeches of politicians. They refer to a kind of natural, if not explicit, allegiance of neighbor nations to Moscow's authority. Though these concepts are as fluid as the potential borders of such authority. Russian hegemony is not simply the unity of Russian-speaking nations or only of Orthodox believers. As with any other empire, there is no unifying feature that marries the territories unless it is (unenforced) economic advantage,<sup>34</sup> (enforced) central power, or military efforts that yoke them. While in the case of Ukraine and Belarus the Kremlin ideologists were able to comfortably use the aforementioned factors such as Orthodoxy or *lingua franca* as unifying factors, there are no such *soft power*

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31 For more on the Kozak Memorandum 2003, see: Russian Draft Memorandum on the basic principles of the state structure of a united state in Moldova (Kozak Memorandum), 17 November 2003, <http://stefanwolff.com/files/Kozak-Memorandum.pdf>, 12.11.2022.

32 For more on the concept, see Kosienkowski, Marcin: The patron-client relationship between Russia and Transnistria. In: Hoch, Tomáš/Kopeček, Vincenc (Eds.): *De Facto States in Eurasia*. Routledge: Abingdon 2019, pp. 183–207.

33 See Rácz, András: Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine. Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist, FIIA Report 43, 2015.

34 In the case of Russia and its own economic challenges, this instrument would be less effective. See Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Jarosław: Limits to Russian Soft Power in the Post-Soviet Area, DGAP Analysis No. 8, July 2012.

mechanisms for the predominantly Muslim, ethnically non-Slavic Caucasus region.<sup>35</sup>

The First (1994–1996) and Second (1999–2009) Chechen Wars fuel a notion about the *stroptiviy Kavkaz* (stubborn Caucasus), which refers to the protracted, complex, and bloody wars of expansion waged by Tsarist Russia in the Caucasus in the early 18th to early 19th centuries.<sup>36</sup> The *vol'nye gortsy* (free peoples of the mountains)<sup>37</sup> which had been rebelling against Russian imperialism for centuries, wanted to seize the opportunity of the USSR collapse in 1991 and break away from Moscow's rule along with the other Soviet republics. The Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, however, was denied this by the Russian rulers. Yeltsin, fearing that the Chechen rebellious conduct would become a precedent for the secession of other federal districts,<sup>38</sup> responded with military might.<sup>39</sup> In doing so, the Kremlin also demonstrated to the West that it was prepared to defend Russia's "natural hegemony" militarily. The fragile peace that Yeltsin had concluded after the first Chechen war was more of an operational pause for both sides than a realistic regulation of the confrontation. When Putin took political power, he began to earn a reputation of a "ruler with a strong hand"<sup>40</sup> who eliminates "unrest" and creates "order". Moreover, from the Kremlin's perspective, it was the West that set Putin a strong example of "decisive and efficient military action" in 1999. NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia provided both "strong public support for the Kremlin's new war" and "a lifting of the

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35 See further Hansen, Stefan: Die Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik der Republik Armenien. Komplementäre Entscheidungen in systemischer Konkurrenz zwischen Ost und West. Nomos: Baden-Baden 2021.

36 For more on the history of Russian imperialism in the Caucasus, see Jahn, Hubertus (ed.): Identities and Representations in Georgia from the 19th Century to the Present. De Gruyter/Oldenbourg: Berlin/Bonn 2021.

37 *Vol'nye gortsy* (from Rus.: free peoples of the mountains) is a term referring to the name of a Soviet newspaper in the South Caucasus and akin to the cliché that all Caucasians admire above all their freedom.

38 In March 1992, the newly formed Russian Federation was busy drafting the legal agreement between its federated states (kraj). Chechnya and Tatarstan were the only two republics that refused to sign the agreement. Tatarstan eventually signed the document on more favorable terms.

39 See Kipp, Jacob W.: Russia's Wars in Chechnya. In: The Brown Journal of World Affairs, Vol. 8, Issue 1 (Winter/Spring), 2001, p. 47.

40 Zemtsov A.O.: "Сильная Рука": Авторитарность В Политической Культуре Современных Россиян ["Strong Hand": Authoritarianism In the Political Culture Of Modern Russians]. In: Politija: Analiz. Hronika. Prognoz, Vol. 4, Issue 95, 2019.

taboo against the use of military force as an instrument for resolving ethnic problems".<sup>41</sup>

The "special military operation" in Chechnya had little in common with the frozen conflict in Transnistria, but it enriched the Russian toolbox with a new methodology and experience that will eventually be heavily used in the war against Ukraine. Among many other features, the following should be stressed here:

- Disinformation to its own population: Moscow is believed to have provided false information about the number of casualties among its soldiers;<sup>42</sup>
- Morale factor: although Russian forces outnumbered Chechen guerrillas, they experienced difficulties eliminating them because of the strong morale of the resistance;<sup>43</sup>
- *Carpet bombing* and *urban fighting*:<sup>44</sup> use of airstrikes and bombing to eliminate resistance, target civilian infrastructure, and use of terror.<sup>45</sup>

Even though the West showed some reaction and criticized the methods of Russian forces in Chechnya, this war was still predominantly seen as an internal Russian affair, which consciously or unconsciously allowed the Kremlin to act in its "natural hegemony" according to its ambitions. The Russian military experiences of the 1990s not only created a specific toolbox that was later used in other expansionist operations. They also led to the creation of a new national security concept and military doctrine (January–April 2000). Consequently, military spending was increased, nuclear deterrence and nuclear "first use" became the main pillars of Russian security, and "the routine use of armed forces to deal with local, including intra-state, conflicts"<sup>46</sup> was introduced. In this context, it became clear that "local conflicts" were defined by the Kremlin's own perception of its "natural hegemony" – *blizhnee zarubezh'e* was the major case.

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41 Arbatov, A. G.: The Transformation of Russian Military Doctrine: Lessons Learned from Kosovo and Chechnya, The Marshall Center Papers, No. 2, 2000, pp. 2–3.

42 Wines, Michael: "Propaganda's Return. Popular War, Russian Style", The New York Times, 27 February 2000.

43 Kramer, Mark: The Perils of Counterinsurgency: Russia's War in Chechnya. In: International Security, Vol. 29, Issue 3, 2004/2005, p. 5.

44 Myre, Greg: "Russia's wars in Chechnya offer a grim warning of what could be in Ukraine", NPR, 12 March 2022.

45 Hughes, James: Russia's Wars: Ukraine and Chechnya Compared, ZOiS Spotlight 15/2022, 20 April 2022.

46 Arbatov, The Transformation of Russian Military Doctrine, 2000, p. 26.

#### 4 A Decade of Certainty: Putin's Ambition to Transform Russia into a Superpower

Western scholars often assume that Putin's imperialist path began in 2007 with his infamous speech at the Munich Security Conference.<sup>47</sup> Even though it was indeed a first public international announcement of disagreement with the post-Cold War order, preparations for the restoration of the lost empire started as soon as he took office as president. In addition to the aforementioned changes in military doctrine, Putin pushed ahead with the country's economic development and, once stability was achieved, insisted on centralizing sources of revenue for his future military ambitions. Numerous investigations by the team of the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny illustrate how *Gazprom* amassed the country's profits from oil and gas trading and became "Putin's wallet" – both for foreign policy and for maintaining the kleptocratic regime.<sup>48</sup> It was precisely in these early years that the Russian president built two main rocks of his authoritarian rule: *vertikal' vlasti* (the verticality of power) and the group of *siloviki* (people of power). Hannes Adomeit explains:

“...The system he [Putin] has built has aptly been called ‘Putin System’. It is authoritarian, autocratic, and increasingly centralized [...]. Decisions of any significance in domestic and foreign policy cannot be made without participation and consent of the Kremlin's chief. That applies even more to the formation of basic foreign directions.”<sup>49</sup>

The “military adventure” in Ukraine in 2022 gives rise to the observation that it is not only in domestic and foreign policy that the most important decisions are rubber-stamped by the Kremlin ruler. On the battlefield, too, decisions are often made according to Putin's political needs rather than operational-tactical calculus.

Putin's belief in Russia's historical hegemony has evolved, as can be seen from the rhetoric of the past two decades, from the idea of rebuilding a state within Soviet borders to the concept of the Russian Empire – a modern superpower. Especially in recent years, the Kremlin leader has increasingly lauded about Russian imperial glory, comparing himself to

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47 Putin, Vladimir: Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, Kremlin, 10 February 2007.

48 More on Alexei Navalny's investigation of Gazprom, see <https://miller.navalny.com/>.

49 Adomeit, Russia's Strategic Outlook and Policies, 2022, pp. 17–18.

Peter the Great.<sup>50</sup> However, his foreign policy suggests that Putin wants to restore the supremacy of the Russian Empire from the time of Alexander I (1777–1825). This was not only the height of the Russian Empire's military power, but also the height of Russian influence in Europe, when the Russian leaders were feared as the “gendarmes of Europe”.<sup>51</sup> This elevation of Russian supremacy in Europe was secured by victory in the Napoleonic Wars. In modern times, the Russian “patriots” would expect the same gesture of gratitude from “the West” for the liberation of Europe from the Nazi occupation. During the war in Ukraine in 2022, Putin repeatedly echoed in his speeches<sup>52</sup> the ideas of Russian imperialistic and chauvinistic philosopher Ivan Ilyin about the political infallibility of Russia, the idea of the “closeness” Russian people and the “fraternal unity” of neighboring Slavic nations around the Russians. Ilyin propagated a concept of post-Soviet Russia in which Ukraine (a non-existent state for him, he even put the word “Ukrainian” in quotation marks) would undeniably be a part of a new Russia.<sup>53</sup> These ideas are obviously essential determinants of Putin's foreign policy and his current expansionism in Ukraine.

The Russian neighborhood, however, clearly did not share the Kremlin's imperialist vision. When Eduard Shevardnadze, a pro-Moscow candidate for Georgian presidency, lost the 2003 election to Mikheil Saakashvili, Putin saw the danger of losing a strategically important Transcaucasia. Georgia, with its *Imperial Road* linking Russia to the Middle East, is integral to Russia's superpower status. In Putin's eyes, however, Georgia's Rose Revolution of 2003 that protested Shevardnadze's election fraud was by no means a free decision of the Georgian people, but a clear interference of “the West” (in this case, the United States) in Russia's natural hegemony.<sup>54</sup>

Non-violent regime change through an uprising of masses is something that a KGB man, who favors hierarchy and permissiveness for the strongest,

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50 Die Zeit: “Putin vergleicht sich mit Peter dem Großen”, 10 June 2022.

51 Greene, Robert: *The 33 Strategies of War*. Profile Books: London 2007, p. 424.

52 Putin, Vladimir: Подписание договоров о принятии ДНР, ЛНР, Запорожской и Херсонской областей в состав России [Signing of agreements on the admission of the DNR, LNR, Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia], Kremlin, 30 September 2022.

53 Tashevsky, Sergey: “Иван Ильин. Любимый философ Путина и война” [Ivan Ilyin. Putin's Favorite Philosopher and War], Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 19 July 2022.

54 Kommersant: “Блок НАТО разошелся на блокпакеты” [NATO bloc splits into bloc packages], 7 April 2008.

does not believe in. The Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005) (the so-called “color revolutions” in Russia’s 2013 foreign policy concept) were viewed by Putin as hybrid warfare by the West.<sup>55</sup> Nor was it in line with Putin’s belief that smaller sovereign states could (and should) decide their own foreign policy. Saakashvili’s radical democratic reforms, his fight against corruption, and his rapprochement with the EU and NATO were portrayed in Russian propaganda only as a “hostile Western hand”,<sup>56</sup> not as the will of the people to revamp their country. Even when Georgia’s 2008 application for NATO membership was rejected, Putin continued to see the Georgian development not only as a threat to the security of his state, but also to his system:

“To the extent that external factors influence foreign policy, it is mainly the Russian power elite’s concern that the West’s regulatory model and socio-economic attractiveness pose a threat to the legitimacy of its rule in Russia and undermine its influence in its declared sphere of interest.”<sup>57</sup>

The Russian-Georgian war (August 2008) clearly showed what the Russian armed forces learned from the confrontations of the 1990s. The toolboxes from Transnistria (the Russian army as a “peacemaking force”, “protection” of the Russian-speaking population, freezing the conflict, etc.) and Chechnya (disinformation campaign, aerial bombing) were applied. Henceforth, Putin has understood that it is time to expand his imperial project more intensely.

To achieve this goal, the Kremlin has always been flexible in its choice of mechanisms. In the “near neighborhood”, the installation of a “puppet government” (e.g. Yanukovich in Ukraine, Lukashenka in Belarus) or economic blackmail (e.g. “gas games” in Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania) have been used. But also in Europe, over the past decade, the agenda pursued by the Kremlin has been advanced through the use of hybrid methods, e.g. financial support for radical right-wing or left-wing parties, hiring of lobbyists, cyberattacks, or disinformation campaigns. *Nord Stream 2*, for

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55 Nikitina, Yulia: The “Color Revolutions” and “Arab Spring” in Russian Official Discourse. In: *Connections*, Vol. 14, Issue 1, 2014, pp. 87–104.

56 Stepovik, Mikhail: “Рука Запада’ или советский синдром?” [“Hand of the West” or the Soviet Syndrome?], *Deutsche Welle Russia*, 24 March 2005.

57 Adomeit, Hannes: “Altes Denken statt Neues Russland. Innenpolitische Bestimmungsfaktoren der Außenpolitik”, *Portal für Politikwissenschaft*, 26 September 2017.

example, indeed had an economic benefit for both sides, but the political perspectives were different. Even though Angela Merkel assured that it was about pure “*Verbindung durch Handel*” (connection through trade)<sup>58</sup> to create peace based on common interests, the development in 2022 shows that Putin actually considered this to be an economic weapon from the very beginning. He was forging the opportunity to become the second Alexander I for Europe, albeit this time with gas instead of a saber.

Similar to *Nord Stream 2*, optimism about stabilizing relations between the West and Russia was noted in the context of the 2010–2011 New START nuclear arms reduction treaty between Washington and Moscow. Russia's newly revised 2010 military doctrine actually limited the use of nuclear weapons to “critical situations for [its] national security”.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, conventional warfare remained a primary means for “local” and “regional” wars. Moreover, since the Georgian War, Russia has begun to actively modernize its armed forces, which has proven to be one of the country's most successful reforms in a decade.<sup>60</sup> Behind the curtain of Western enthusiasm over START, Russia reinstated a “puppet government” in Ukraine with Viktor Yanukovych and, with his help, actively reduced the Ukrainian army.<sup>61</sup> Whether or not there was a *détente* between Russia and the West, the Kremlin undoubtedly still aimed to regain influence in its immediate neighborhood.

The Ukrainian Maidan uprising (2013–2014) was apparently perceived by the Kremlin as nothing more than the West's encroachment on Russian hegemony. For Putin, Washington “blatantly and arrogantly” deceived Russia.<sup>62</sup> The Kremlin took advantage of an opportune moment (change of power in Kyiv) and a well-prepared background (weak Ukrainian army, presence of the Black Sea Fleet, propaganda, rhetoric of protection of the Russian-speaking population, etc.) and occupied Crimea within weeks. Such a triumph strengthened Putin's public support in the country, so the *siloviki* seized the opportunity and swiftly pushed ahead with the

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58 Die Zeit: “Angela Merkel verteidigt den Bau von Nord Stream 2”, 18 June 2022.

59 Sokov, Nikolai: The New, 2010 Russian Military Doctrine: The Nuclear Angle, Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, James Martin Center for Non-proliferation Studies, 5 February 2010.

60 Giegerich/Terhalle, The Responsibility to Defend, 2021, p. 98.

61 Starostin, Andrii: “Давайте пошвидше роззброюватися!” [Let's disarm as soon as possible!], *Militaryni*, 28 September 2010.

62 Burnos, Taras: “Путин о Майдане: попытка переписать историю” [Putin on the Maidan: an attempt to rewrite history], *Voice of America Ukraine*, 7 March 2018.

*Novorossiia* plan. According to the project's architects (headed by Patrushev, Kozak, and Surkov), the goal was to regain political influence in Ukraine and block its integration into the EU and NATO, meanwhile "on the overt level, this was done via the puppet statelets of Donetsk and Luhansk."<sup>63</sup> In this new confrontation in its immediate neighborhood, Russia again used the means and tools we have seen in previous attempts at expansion: disinformation, "protection" of the Russian-speaking population, "freezing" the conflict, cyberattacks, etc. The 2014–2021 Donbas crisis became a classic example of the hybrid warfare practice.

In the ongoing debate on the core reasons for the failure to resolve the Donbas crisis, the main arguments are fairly based on the assumption that the initiators of the Minsk agreement misunderstood Putin's beliefs, ideologies, and goals. Firstly, the Kremlin leader does not believe in the independent decision-making of a smaller sovereign state, so he wanted to "resolve the issue" between the superpowers and talk directly to the U.S. president, not Poroshenko or Zelenskyy. Secondly, for twenty years Moscow has cherished in its foreign policy and military doctrines the idea of regaining influence in the near neighborhood. Whether with hybrid or conventional warfare, this reclaim would inevitably be the case in Ukraine – regardless of any Western attempts to make peace. Thirdly, President Putin (after stabilizing the state's economy and centralizing the power), entered his own "Decade of Certainty". His main political goal was to put the Primakov foreign policy doctrine<sup>64</sup> into practice and to be assigned in the history books as a new Peter the Great or Alexander I.

In 2015, Putin intervened in the Syria war, where the Russian army and the notorious private paramilitary organization "Wagner Group" were able to drill conventional warfare. Step by step, Russia expanded its relations with China, even though the counterparts do not consider each other equals.<sup>65</sup> Putin tried to rally around his leadership the (mostly authoritarian) regimes that shared his rejection of the existing world order. In addition, the Kremlin carried out reforms in its domestic policy to take control of the Internet, get rid of the opposition, and harm the free press.

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63 Shandra, Alya/Seely, Robert: *The Surkov Leaks. The Inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine*, RUSI Occasional Paper, July 2019, p. 8.

64 In 2014, Russia again changed its military doctrine to more closely align with the Primakov doctrine. See Kainikara, "Russia's Return to The World Stage", 2019.

65 See Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Una Aleksandra: *Perfect Imbalance: China and Russia*. World Scientific Publishing Co: Europe 2022.



It also directed the preparation of the country's economy for war<sup>66</sup> and pushed through a series of constitutional amendments that secure Putin's authoritarian rule.

In 2018, Moscow unveiled a new Russian hypersonic weapon. The Russian president was clearly purposefully preparing for a large-scale war. Buoyed by the Crimea success story, "pacified" by "the weak West" and motivated to implement his imperialist goals according to Primakov's ideas, Putin launched a *blitzkrieg* in Ukraine in 2022. But the triumph of Crimea was not replicated:

"Applying Max Weber's typology of political systems, the Putin system can be classified as 'charismatic' and as such in need of constant legitimization through domestic and foreign policy victories. The annexation of Crimea was such a victory but one that may very well prove to have been exceptional."<sup>67</sup>

Despite the tremendous losses of manpower, equipment, and reputation in the second year of the declared "three-day war" in Ukraine, Putin and his *siloviki* still hold power in the Kremlin. Hence, the constant attempts, if not to revise, then at least to disrupt the world order, will continue.

## 5 Conclusion

Modern Russian expansionism and imperialism are based on old ideologies and rudimentary ideas that lie on the surface of Russian history. These ideas, synthesized over the decades and taken up by various political regimes and state leaders, are a useful handbook for understanding Russia's political motives and foreign policy goals. The present Russian regime is a product of Orthodox exceptionalism, the longstanding imposition of the rivalry of "us" *versus* "the West", belief in the concept of the Great(er) Russia, post-Cold War revanchism, and the Soviet lasting notion that Russia is the nation of victors that liberated Europe from the Nazi regime.

As expected, these ideas coalesced and transformed over time into the main determinants of Russian foreign policy, eventually presenting themselves in several similar foreign policy and military doctrines. Since the

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66 President of Russia: Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 02.07.2021 г. № 400 [Decree No. 400 of the President of the Russian Federation from 02.07.2021], Kremlin.

67 Adomeit, Putin's 'Greater Russia', 2018.

1990s, the Kremlin expressed its intention to reconquer the neighborhood states (*blizhnee zarubezh'e*), tried to confront the U.S. dominance, and wanted to destroy democratic world order. Already in the early 1990s, the Kremlin pursued the plan of “restoring historical justice” by using conventional warfare in its immediate neighborhood, Transnistria and Chechnya, to assert Moscow’s dominance. While in 2000s Russia invested in a more powerful military force for future ambitious operations, it adopted from its imperialist experience of the 1990s some primarily political and military tools that would soon be used in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine.

Thus, the ideas and goals of Russian expansionism and imperialism, as well as the mechanisms for achieving these goals, are strongly influenced by certain patterns. Consciously or unconsciously, this has long been overlooked in the West. In dealing with Russia, political judgment has often been made based on the background of Western ideas, values, and goals, which are obviously different from those of Russia. The last three decades of relations between Russia and the West have shown that even in the highest phase of *détente*, Russia still insists on its “natural right” to a Great(er) Russia. Putin, embracing the ideas of chauvinist thinkers and deriding the right of small sovereignties to independence, pursues an agenda of restoring Russian imperial glory. But Putin’s “new” Russia as a countervailing power to the West, regardless of his personal belief in the superiority of his system, simply does not have sufficient economic, political, and as the battlefield in Ukraine has shown, also military power to keep up.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has revealed several important lessons about Putin’s Russia. Firstly, although Russia has little potential to defeat the West by conventional means, the Kremlin’s mastery of hybrid warfare as well as the use of the nuclear blackmail can still harm the modern world order. Secondly, the Russian military failures in Ukraine combined with Putin’s dangerous play with the “nuclear taboo” have severely damaged the confidence of his partners (India, China, and Iran) in an anti-West coalition under the Kremlin’s leadership. But even if Russia has already squandered its chance to lead this axis, the rivalry between authoritarian regimes and democracies has not been swept off the table. Finally, this time the West should not just see what it wants to see and not repeat the same mistake regarding Russian imperialism. Even if Putin’s regime is overthrown and replaced by a less militant leader, this will not eliminate the Russian imperialist ideas. They are rooted in the history of this country and are unlikely to disappear any time soon. Therefore, the West must already rethink and reshape post-Putin relations with Russia in order to

protect Russian neighbors from Moscow's imperialism and prevent further expansionism.

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# Chapter 5: Russia's Dictated Non-Peace in the Donbas 2014–2022: Why the Minsk Agreements Were Doomed to Fail

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## Abstract

The Minsk Agreements concluded between Ukraine and Russia under mediation of the OSCE, Germany, and France were an expression of international legal nihilism and aggression obfuscation. Contrary to widespread perception, the documents Moscow imposed on Ukraine in September 2014 and February 2015 were not a solution but part of the problem. The self-contradictory Minsk Agreements were signed by Kyiv under massive Russian pressure. Their conclusion followed devastating military defeats inflicted on Ukraine by regular and irregular Russian forces shortly before. The agreements were a means for the Kremlin to reap the geopolitical and regional fruits of its initially covert military aggression against Ukraine. Western states – especially Germany and France – tacitly supported the overt Russian challenge to the European security order. Berlin and Paris pressured Kyiv to implement the inconsistent provisions of the Minsk Agreements with their questionable sequences and consequences. Moscow was not sanctioned for its violations of the agreements, subversion of basic principles of international law and democracy, and uncooperative attitude in the negotiations.

## Keywords

Minsk Agreement, Donbas, OSCE, Ukraine, Russia

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1 Jakob Hedenskog, Fredrik Löjdquist and John Zachau of the SCEEUS and Joachim Krause of the ISPK made valuable comments on an earlier version of the text. Responsibility for remaining inaccuracies rests with the authors. Shorter versions of the text previously appeared as a SCEEUS Report (No. 3, 2022) and in: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 6, Issue 3, September 2022, pp. 282–292.

## 1 Introduction

Three days before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, on February 21, 2022, Moscow recognized as states the *de facto* "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Lugansk People's Republic" regimes created by the Kremlin in a secret operation barely eight years earlier. Until then, many observers had seen in the so-called Minsk Agreements, i.e. the Russian-Ukrainian accords signed in the capital of Belarus in 2014–2015, a way to settle the Donbas conflict.<sup>2</sup> Kyiv signed the Moscow-drafted texts in light of the covert incursion of regular Russian troops into eastern Ukraine and an acute threat of their deep inland advances in 2014–2015.

From 2015 to the present, the discussion about ending Russia's aggression against Ukraine has been dominated by the failed implementation of the Minsk Agreements.<sup>3</sup> Various actors and observers still consider these agreements, also known as *Minsk I* and *Minsk II*, as a missed opportunity.<sup>4</sup> Some want to revive them or advocate a *Minsk III*. However, the Minsk Agreements did not represent a roadmap to peace. Contrary to a widespread view, even in the West, they were an inappropriate instrument for conflict resolution from the outset. They were an integral part of the tangle of problems that eventually led to the fateful escalation in February 2022.<sup>5</sup>

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2 OSCE: Protocol on the results of consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group, signed in Minsk, 5 September 2014 (Minsk Protocol); OSCE: Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements, 12 February 2015.

3 Hrant, Kostanyan/Meister, Stefan: Ukraine, Russia and the EU: Breaking the Deadlock in the Minsk Process, CEPS Working Document 423, 2016; Malyarenko, Tatyana/Wolff, Stefan: The Logic of Competitive Influence-Seeking: Russia, Ukraine, and the Conflict in Donbas. In: Post-Soviet Affairs, Vol. 34, Issue 4, 2018, pp. 191–212; Åtland, Kristian: Destined for Deadlock? Russia, Ukraine, and the Unfulfilled Minsk Agreements. In: Post-Soviet Affairs, Vol. 36, Issue 2, 2020, pp. 122–139.

4 Charap, Samuel: "The U.S. Approach to Ukraine's Border War Isn't Working", Politico, 19 November 2021.

5 Grigas, Agnia: Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire. Yale University Press: New Haven (CT) 2016; D'Anieri, Paul: Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge (UK) 2019; Kuzio, Taras: Russian Nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian War: Autocracy-Orthodoxy-Nationality. Routledge: London 2022.



## 2 The History of the Minsk Agreements

After years of political and economic meddling in Ukraine, Moscow moved to a covert armed attack on Russia's supposed brother nation in late winter 2014.<sup>6</sup> The Kremlin began a military occupation of Crimea with the help of unmarked regular Russian troops. In parallel with the annexation of the south Ukrainian Black Sea peninsula, Russia fomented unrest in mainland Ukraine and especially in the Donets Basin (Ukr.: Donbas).<sup>7</sup> Besides, Moscow tried to escalate local tensions in other southern and eastern parts of the country but was only successful in the Donbas.<sup>8</sup>

It also took the covert infiltration of a Russian combat force to transform some pre-existing social tensions in the Donbas into an armed conflict. From Crimea, which had already been annexed by Russia, an irregular unit led by the Russian citizen and former FSB officer Igor Girkin, known as “Strelkov”, managed to penetrate the Ukrainian mainland in April 2014 and spark a pseudo-civil war in the Donbas. Girkin later candidly explained, “I pulled the trigger on the war. If our unit had not crossed the border, everything would have turned out as [inconsequentially] as in Kharkiv and Odesa.”<sup>9</sup>

In May 2014, Moscow succeeded in establishing two unrecognized artificial mini-states, the “Donetsk People's Republic” (Russian acronym: DNR) and “Lugansk People's Republic” (Russian acronym: LNR).<sup>10</sup> The Kremlin

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6 Hurak, Ihor/D'Anieri, Paul: The Evolution of Russian Political Tactics in Ukraine. In: Problems of Post-Communism, Vol. 69, Issue 2, 2022, pp. 121–132.

7 The Donetsk Basin is not named after the city or region of Donetsk, as is sometimes assumed, but after the river *Siversky Donets*, which also flows through the Luhansk oblast. In terms of landscape, part of western Russia also belongs to the Donbas. However, the original landscape term has come to mean the easternmost part of Ukraine. In the Ukrainian context, it also carries socio-cultural connotations and is in some respects comparable to the German regional term “Ruhrpott”.

8 Umland, Andreas: “The Glazyev Tapes, Origins of the Donbas Conflict, and Minsk Agreements”, Foreign Policy Association, 13 September 2018.

9 Hans, Julian: “Russischer Geheimdienstler zur Ostukraine: ‘Den Auslöser zum Krieg habe ich gedrückt’”, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 21 November 2014.

10 Mitrokhin, Nikolay: Transnationale Provokation: Russische Nationalisten und Geheimdienstler in der Ukraine. In: Osteuropa, Vol. 64, Issue 5–6, 2014, pp. 157–174; Mitrokhin, Nikolay: Infiltration, Instruktion, Invasion: Russlands Krieg in der Ukraine. In: Osteuropa, Vol. 64, Issue 8, 2014, pp. 3–16; Mitrokhin, Nikolay: Bandenkrieg und Staatsbildung: Zur Zukunft des Donbass. In: Osteuropa, Vol. 65, Issue 1–2, 2015, pp. 5–22; Mitrokhin, Nikolay: Infiltration, Instruktion, Invasion: Russia's War in the Donbass. In: Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society, Vol.

used some of the same methods and personnel it had employed earlier in the non-government-controlled areas of Moldova and Georgia since the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> These include infiltration of agents, promotion of local separatism, non-fulfillment of ceasefire deals and other agreements, spoofing of international organizations, etc.<sup>12</sup>

After some territorial gains by paramilitary units sent or supported by Russia, Ukrainian forces launched an initially successful counteroffensive in the summer of 2014. Kyiv recaptured lost territory, including the strategically important port city of Mariupol. Apart from irregular fighters with both Russian and Ukrainian citizenship, only smaller regular units of Russian troops, such as special commandos of the GRU military intelligence service or the notorious “Buk” air defense system, had been deployed in eastern Ukraine up to that point. In mid-late August 2014, Moscow intervened in the Donbas for the first time with a large force of unmarked regular ground troops in support of its eastern Ukrainian proxy militias. Due to the subsequent defeat of the Ukrainian army in Ilovaysk and fear of further losses, Kyiv agreed to negotiate with Moscow in Minsk.

The so-called “Minsk Protocol”, also known as *Minsk I*, was signed in early September 2014 by official representatives of the OSCE, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine as members of the so-called Trilateral Contact Group (TCG).<sup>13</sup> Two envoys of the so-called “people’s republics”, Oleksandr Zakharchenko (now deceased) and Ihor Plotnitsky (now missing), also signed the protocol, but no mention was made of their pseudo-state offices. This formulaic compromise was due to the fact that Russia, but not Ukraine, considered the alleged “people’s republics” to be parties to the conflict. At the end of September 2014, *Minsk I* was supplemented by a so-called “memorandum” with some clarifications.

Although the Minsk Protocol and Memorandum paid tribute to Russian interests and a fragile ceasefire was reached, the two documents did not

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1, Issue 1, 2015 pp. 219–250; Melnyk, Oleksandr: From the “Russian Spring” to the Armed Insurrection: Russia, Ukraine and Political Communities in the Donbas and Southern Ukraine. In: *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, Vol. 47, Issue 1, 2020, pp. 3–38.

11 Kragh, Martin (Ed.): *Security and Human Rights in Eastern Europe: New Empirical and Conceptual Perspectives on Conflict Resolution and Accountability*. ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2022.

12 Zachau, John: *Russia’s Instrumentalisation of Conflict in Eastern Europe: The Anatomy of the Protracted Conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova*. In: *SCEEUS Reports on Human Rights and Security in Eastern Europe*, Issue 6, 2021.

13 Minsk Protocol, OSCE, 5 September 2014.

settle the armed conflict. Instead, the pattern of August-September 2014 was repeated in January-February 2015, with newly invading regular Russian troops inflicting another devastating defeat on Ukraine near Debaltseve. Faced with yet another threat of Russian advances inland, Kyiv signed what was called a “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements”. This accord, also called *Minsk II*, contains more detailed provisions than *Minsk I*. Immediately after its signing, the Minsk “package” was mentioned in a United Nations Security Council resolution.

On the one hand, *Minsk I* and *II* consist of various security-related measures. These include a ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy equipment from the line of contact, and disarmament of all illegal groups. On the other, they consist of political steps that Kyiv must fulfill. They include local elections in non-government-controlled areas in accordance with Ukrainian legislation and the granting of certain self-government rights to the regions. The provisions also called for restoration of full Ukrainian control over the border with Russia. The order of implementation of these provisions becomes a major point of contention.

The implementation of the agreements was to be negotiated in the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG). The negotiation process was overseen by the so-called “Normandy Format” consisting of Russia, Germany, France, and Ukraine. Positive consequences of the two agreements included a ceasefire, albeit temporary and fragile, partial troop withdrawals from the line of contact, some alleviation of humanitarian suffering, and the theoretical prospect of a future settlement of the conflict.

These or similar narratives are what many observers think of when they talk about the Minsk Agreements and their attempted implementation. Yet the “Minsk process”, the Ukrainian name for the trilateral negotiations, was paralyzed from the outset by at least three serious problems regarding the genesis, provisions, and consequences of the Minsk Agreements. Identifying these defects can help to avoid similar lapses in future agreements in Ukraine or elsewhere in the post-Soviet region.<sup>14</sup>

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14 Heinemann-Grüder, Andreas: Lehren aus dem Ukraine Konflikt: Das Stockholm-Syndrom der Putin-Versteher. In: Osteuropa, Vol. 65, Issue 4, 2015, pp. 3–24; Heinemann-Grüder, Andreas: Was lehrt der Ukraine-Konflikt? In: Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik, Vol. 11, Issue 4, 2018, pp. 521–531; Heinemann-Grüder, Andreas/Crawford, Claudia/Peters, Tim (Eds.): Lehren aus dem Ukraine Konflikt: Krisen vorbeugen, Gewalt verhindern. Verlag Barbara Budrich: Leverkusen 2021.

## 2.1 Legitimation of International Legal Nihilism

The biggest burden of the Minsk Agreements was their demonstrative disregard for Ukraine's sovereignty as a result of an inadequately denounced and only lightly punished radical breach of international law by Russia.<sup>15</sup> Ukraine complied with the agreements (if one wants to use that term at all) only under massive pressure. Moscow deliberately increased military pressure on Kyiv before the signing. This allowed the Kremlin to dictate the public definition and alleged resolution of the conflict in the signed documents.<sup>16</sup> More than seven years of futile attempts to implement the Minsk Agreements remained marked by a glaring lack of accompanying Western pressure on Russia and insufficient support for Ukraine.

The central premise of the Minsk Agreements was the allegation of a dominant and autochthonous will for separation in eastern Ukraine in 2014. However, this claim contradicted – as in the case of the Crimean secession – polling results in the ostensibly autonomist regions at the time.<sup>17</sup> The separatist proposition was nevertheless vehemently championed by Russia and underscored by the presence of “insurgents” (little more than local Kremlin stooges) in the TCG working groups.

The Russian narrative of secessions in southern and eastern Ukraine was widely accepted by Western diplomats, politicians, and observers, despite its destructive consequences for international law. In some cases, it was even seen as the most plausible interpretation of events on the ground. Most external policymakers and experts were also aware of Moscow's role in triggering and sustaining the violent conflict in the Donbas. Nevertheless, many actors and commentators treated this confrontation between Russia and Ukraine as if it were mainly a domestic issue within the latter, until February 2022.

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- 15 Grant, Thomas D.: *Aggression against Ukraine: Territory, Responsibility, and International Law*. Palgrave Macmillan: London 2015; Grant, Thomas D.: *International Law and the Post-Soviet Space II: Essays on Ukraine, Intervention, and Non-Proliferation*. ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2019; Zadorozhnii, Oleksandr: *Hybrid War or Civil War? The Interplay of Some Methods of Russian Foreign Policy Propaganda with International Law*. In: *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal*, Vol. 2, 2016, pp. 117–128.
- 16 Schneckener, Ulrich: *Hybrider Krieg in Zeiten der Geopolitik? Zur Deutung und Charakterisierung des Donbass-Konflikts*. In: *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, Vol. 57, Issue 4, 2016, pp. 586–613.
- 17 Umland, *The Glazyev Tapes*, 2018.

Instead, the 2014–2022 armed conflict in eastern Ukraine was a so-called “delegated interstate war”, in which the illegal organs and irregular troops of the so-called “people’s republics” acted as thinly veiled agents of Moscow on Ukrainian state territory.<sup>18</sup> The fundamentally international, if not geopolitical, character of the war is evident both in its antecedents and genesis as well as in the larger context and subsequent course of the Donbas conflict.<sup>19</sup> Although Russia was the initiator, controller, and beneficiary of the conflict, the Kremlin constantly denied these roles and presented itself as a mediator – albeit an admittedly partisan and not entirely uninvolved one. This obfuscation in the Kremlin’s public stance, to be sure, hardly escaped the notice of Western governments in the Normandy Format – Germany and France. However, they apparently assumed that, at the end, Moscow would nevertheless implement the agreements in more or less good faith.

Compared to similar situations in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and the Tskhinvali region (“South Ossetia”), the violent split of the Donbas was far more clearly and solely prepared, brought about, and directed by the

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18 Hauter, Jakob: Delegated Interstate War: Introducing an Addition to Armed Conflict Typologies. In: *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 12, Issue 4, 2019, pp. 90–103.

19 Sapper, Manfred/Weichsel, Volker (Eds.): *Zerreißprobe Ukraine: Konflikt, Krise, Krieg*. In: *Osteuropa*, Vol. 64, Issue 5–6, BWV: Berlin 2014; Sapper, Manfred/Weichsel, Volker (Eds.): *Gefährliche Unschärfe: Russland, die Ukraine und der Krieg im Donbass*. In: *Osteuropa*, Vol. 64, Issue 9–10, BWV: Berlin 2014; Sapper, Manfred/Weichsel, Volker (Eds.): *Zerrissen. Russland, Ukraine, Donbass*. In: *Osteuropa*, Vol. 65, Issue 1–2, BWV: Berlin 2015; Sapper, Manfred/Weichsel, Volker (Eds.): *Russlands Krieg gegen die Ukraine: Propaganda, Verbrechen, Widerstand*. In: *Osteuropa*, Vol. 72, Issue 1–3, BWV: Berlin 2022; Marples, David R./Mills, Frederick V. (Eds.): *Ukraine’s Euromaidan: Analyses of a Civil Revolution*. ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2015; Yekelchik, Serhy: *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2015; Grigas, *Beyond Crimea*, 2016; Beichelt, Timm/Worschech, Susann (Eds.): *Transnational Ukraine? Networks and Ties that Influence(d) Contemporary Ukraine*. ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2017; Bertelsen, Olga (Ed.): *Revolution and War in Contemporary Ukraine: The Challenge of Change*. ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2017; Marples, David R.: *Ukraine in Conflict: An Analytical Chronicle*. E-International Relations: London 2017; Soroka, George/Stepniewski, Tomasz (Eds.): *Ukraine after Maidan: Revisiting Domestic and Regional Security*. ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2018; Averre, Derek/Wolczuk, Kataryna (Eds.): *The Ukraine Conflict: Security, Identity and Politics in the Wider Europe*. Routledge: Abingdon (UK) 2019; D’Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia*, 2019; Wynnnyckyj, Mychailo: *Ukraine’s Maidan, Russia’s War: A Chronicle and Analysis of the Revolution of Dignity*. ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2019.

Kremlin.<sup>20</sup> As illustrated first by Nikolay Mitrokhin (University of Bremen) and later by, among others, Sanshiro Hosaka (University of Tartu), Vlad Mykhnenko (University of Oxford), Oleksandr Melnyk (University of Alberta), and Jakob Hauter (University College London), the Russian state and its agents as well as Moscow-directed mercenaries in Ukraine decisively determined both the run-up to and initiation as well as the subsequent course of the war.<sup>21</sup> From April 2014 at the latest, both regular and irregular Russian military units, with more or less covert leadership from Moscow, were in charge of the alleged “popular uprising”.

While the fake “secession” of Crimea in February-March 2014 happened on even more obvious initiative from Moscow, it was supported by at least some prominent figures on the peninsula, such as the speaker of the Autonomous Republic’s Parliament, Volodymyr Konstantynov.<sup>22</sup> The alleged rebellion of the Donbas, on the other hand, was not publicly led, initiated, or welcomed by any regionally prominent figures from the Basin. No nationally or at least regionally significant representatives of the political, economic, cultural, civic and scientific elite of the Donbas ever participated in a visible role in the region’s supposedly popular uprising.<sup>23</sup>

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- 20 Coppieters, Bruno: “Statehood”, “De Facto Authorities” and “Occupation”: Contested Concepts and the EU’s Engagement in Its European Neighbourhood. In: *Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 17, Issue 4, 2018, pp. 343–361; Malyarenko, Tetyana/Wolff, Stefan: *The Dynamics of Emerging De-Facto States: Eastern Ukraine in the Post-Soviet Space*. Routledge: Abingdon (UK) 2018; Zachau, *Russia’s Instrumentalisation, 2021*; Kragh, *Security and Human Rights, 2022*.
  - 21 Mitrokhin, *Transnationale Provokation, 2014*; Mitrokhin, *Infiltration, 2014*; Mitrokhin, *Bandenkrieg und Staatsbildung, 2015*; Mitrokhin, *Diktaturtransfer im Donbass, 2017*; Hosaka, Sanshiro: Welcome to Surkov’s Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War. In: *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 47, Issue 5, 2020, pp. 750–773; Mykhnenko, Vlad: Causes and Consequences of the War in Eastern Ukraine: An Economic Geography Perspective. In: *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 72, Issue 3, 2020, pp. 528–560; Melnyk, Oleksandr: From the “Russian Spring” to the Armed Insurrection: Russia, Ukraine and Political Communities in the Donbas and Southern Ukraine. In: *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, Vol. 47, Issue 1, 2020, pp. 3–38; Hauter, Jakob (Ed.): *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014–2020*. ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2021; Hauter, Jakob: *Russia’s Overlooked Invasion: The Causes of the 2014 Outbreak of War in Ukraine’s Donbas*. ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2023.
  - 22 Umland, Andreas: Inwieweit war Russlands Anschluss der Krim historisch gerechtfertigt? Zur Problematik “realistischer” Annexionsnarrative. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2018, pp. 162–169.
  - 23 See the debate: Kudelia, Sergiy: *Domestic Sources of the Donbas Insurgency*, PONARS Eurasia, 29 September 2014; Umland, Andreas: In *Defense of Conspirol-*

Even prominent, openly pro-Russian politicians from the Donbas did not play key roles in the local uprising of Russophile Ukrainians ostensibly supported by an overwhelming majority of the population. The only known temporary Ukrainian co-leader of the supposed rebellion was Oleh Tsarev, a former deputy faction leader of the Party of Regions in Ukraine's unicameral parliament, Verkhovna Rada (Supreme Council). Tsarev, however, is from the city of Dnipro, and not the Donbas. Like his various Russian and other foreign colleagues on the ground, he was a separatist who had migrated to the Donetsk Basin in connection with the war.

In the early months of the alleged popular uprising in eastern Ukraine, a number of key military and political figures were simply Russian citizens, mostly without any notable biographical or family ties to the Donbas. They crossed the border into Ukraine as direct agents of the Kremlin, as mercenaries paid by Moscow, or as irregular fighters coming from Russia or the freshly occupied Crimean Peninsula. It was only a few months after the founding of the two "people's republics" that most of the leadership positions in the pseudo-states, which were not even recognized by Russia at the time, were filled by local individuals who had been socially marginal and largely unknown in their region until then.

These and other aspects of the alleged "Donbas rebellion" constituted obvious violations of the sovereignty, integrity as well as border of the Ukrainian state, the European security order and international law in general. Yet, they were punished by the West only with relatively weak sectorial and some selected individual sanctions. The scope of punitive measures against Russia was disproportionate to the geopolitical significance of Russia's annexation of Crimea and pseudo-civil war in the Donetsk Basin. The leniency of the Western response was a signal to Moscow that both the illegal Crimean annexation as well as the covert intervention in eastern Ukraine, and with it quite a few blatant violations of the international order, were acceptable, as had been earlier the case in Moldova and Georgia.

The EU's only sectorial sanctions announced on July 29, 2014, were paradoxically imposed at a time when the Ukrainian army was on the offensive

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ogy: A Rejoinder to Serhiy Kudelia's Anti-Political Analysis of the Hybrid War in Eastern Ukraine, PONARS Eurasia, 30 September 2014; Kudelia, Sergiy: Reply to Andreas Umland: The Donbas Insurgency Began at Home, PONARS Eurasia, 8 October 2014; Matsiyevsky, Yuriy: The Limits of Kudelia's Argument: On the Sources of the Donbas 'Insurgency', PONARS Eurasia, 31 October 2014; Kudelia, Sergiy: Getting to the Bottom on the Sources of the Donbas Insurgency, PONARS Eurasia, 6 November 2014.

in the Donbas. At the moment of the introduction of these sanctions, which remained the severest such EU measures until February 2022, it was yet not foreseeable that the Ukrainian advance against Russia-directed irregular troops in Ukraine would become repulsed a month later, as a result of large-scale deployment of Russian regular troops. There was no urgent need, at this particular point, for the EU to impose novel and relatively tough sanctions regarding the Donbas war in late July 2014. It looked then as if Kyiv would soon win in eastern Ukraine.

These circumstances illustrate that this sanctions round had an only indirect relation to Ukraine itself. Its main reason was Russia's infamous mass killing of EU citizens – mainly Dutch – on flight MH17 on July 17, 2014, and not the Russian mass terror against Ukrainian citizens during the more than three months before. As a result of the sectorial sanctions' peculiar timing, the EU's fatal signal to the Kremlin was: "We care little about your war against Ukraine and the current course of the war. What is completely inadmissible, however, is the killing of EU citizens of a West (!) European country. In such a case, we will introduce sanctions if necessary, even if they make little sense in and of themselves in the specific war situation."

Worse, later the EU's sanctions became strangely dependent on the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. Between 2015 and 2022, the punitive measures' suspension was tied not only to a number of Russian actions but oddly also to certain Ukrainian steps to implement these agreements. That was although Ukraine had not been sanctioned. Originally, the dismantling of sanctions had only been dependent on Russia's unconditional withdrawal from eastern Ukraine. From 2015 onwards, the implementation of the Minsk Agreements became the main condition for end of the sanction regime.

## 2.2 Ignoring Basic Democratic Principles

Related to this oddity was another problem with the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, that supposedly provided for a reintegration of the *de facto* Russian-controlled territories into the Ukrainian state. This was the question of who exactly Kyiv's negotiating partner within the reintegration process should be. Initially, the Ukrainian leadership was inclined to swiftly fulfill the *Minsk I* commitments, in including the political provisions,



dictated by Moscow in September 2014, notwithstanding their humiliating and illegitimate character.

In the fall of 2014, the Verkhovna Rada passed a law on a special status for the occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Kyiv even scheduled local elections for December 2014 in municipalities in eastern Ukraine although they were no longer under government control. Had these elections been held in accordance with Ukrainian laws and international criteria, they would have provided an opportunity to establish legitimate negotiating partners in the occupied region. These could have replaced the *de facto* Russian-appointed representatives of the alleged insurgency. Such a procedure could have offered the chance to gradually push back Moscow's interference in the Ukrainian domestic political process.

However, this was precisely what the Kremlin did not want. A month before the scheduled elections under Ukrainian law in the occupied Donbas, the two Moscow-controlled *de facto* regimes unlawfully held their own so-called parliamentary and presidential elections of the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" in early November 2014. These largely staged votes were not coordinated with Kyiv. They were presumably initiated or at least tolerated by Moscow.

All-Ukrainian parties could not participate in these pseudo-elections – not even pro-Russian ones, such as the Communist Party of Ukraine or the groupings that emerged from the Party of Regions. Also, fighters from the irregular armed forces of the two "people's republics" were omnipresent during the voting process; they were obviously meant to suppress expressions of resistance to secession. The media of the occupied regions were controlled indirectly or directly from Russia. There was no international monitoring of the voting by relevant observer organizations, such as the OSCE.

The sham poll gave the leaders of Russia's satellite entities an artificially generated legitimacy. The results of the pseudo-elections and other similarly fraudulent votes were a key element in the Kremlin's propaganda and negotiations. Sadly, the para-democratically empowered leaders of the "DNR" and the "LNR" were sometimes perceived as emissaries of the people of the Donbas not only by Russian state actors but also by Western actors or observers. In the international media, they were often portrayed as representing a genuine regional conflict party opposing Kyiv.

The early and principled violation of the 2014 Minsk Protocol and Memorandum by Moscow and its agents in the "people's republics" that accompanied the pseudo-elections overshadowed all subsequent political

and diplomatic processes. Real elections in accordance with Ukrainian law and with participation of Ukrainian (including pro-Russian) parties would have been a crucial step in the reintegration process. Instead, the rigged November 2014 votes created unrepresentative local power bodies whose ostensible legitimacy allowed Russia to claim that they spoke for the “people of the Donbas”.

This led to a consolidation of the semi-autonomous institutions of the “people’s republics” by late 2014. In the following years, they were kept alive with heavy Moscow support, for example through illegal, cross-border “humanitarian convoys” which were apparently often also loaded with weapons and ammunition. The early pseudo-democratic undermining of Ukraine’s sovereignty with various sham votes became a fundamental obstacle to the reintegration of the seceded territories and the implementation of the political parts of the Minsk agreements.<sup>24</sup>

However, it did not trigger any appropriate response from the West. Instead of additionally sanctioning these and other violations of international law, in general, and the Minsk Agreements, in particular, the EU simply left the existing sectorial sanctions, which had been imposed *before* the signing of the Minsk Agreements, in place until 2022. Only some individual sanctions were added in 2015–2021.

A similarly muted reaction concerned Moscow’s increasing distribution of Russian passports to residents of the occupied territories. The Kremlin conducted an active policy of transferring Donbas residents to Russian citizenship even before Moscow recognized the two so-called “people’s republics” on February 21, 2022.<sup>25</sup> Although the distribution of Russian passports was another blatant Russian violation of international law and the Minsk Agreements, there were no Western moves to impose relevant penalties on Moscow for these new breaches. The Russian disregard for law and agreements was, to be sure, critically assessed by the Western European participants in the negotiation process, i.e. the German and French governments. Yet, with its inaction, the EU tacitly accepted Russia’s policies.

The staged elections in 2014 and later in the occupied territories not only complicated the task of determining a legitimately empowered and representative negotiating partner for Kyiv. They also raised the future

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24 Coynash, Halya: The Facts speak for themselves re Russia’s military involvement in Donbas – OSCE Chief Monitor, Human Rights in Ukraine, 2 November 2018.

25 Burkhardt, Fabian: Russlands “Passportisierung” des Donbas. In: SWP-Aktuell 58, 30 June 2020.

question of how to disempower the pseudo-legitimate authorities should a situation arise in which freely elected local deputies could take the helm. Moscow's endorsement, organization, and recognition of the pseudo-elections undermined the *Minsk I* negotiation process already in late 2014, even before *Minsk II* was signed in February 2015. This and the subsequent distribution of Russian passports, introduction of the ruble, and other measures indicated already back then where the journey was headed – successive illegal annexation of the occupied territories by Russia.

### 2.3 Letting the Aggressor Reap the Fruits of the Aggression

As noted, *Minsk I* and *Minsk II* were negotiated – if the word “negotiate” is even appropriate – against the backdrop of large incursions by regular Russian ground forces into eastern Ukraine in August 2014 and February 2015. The agreements were reached after devastating Ukrainian defeats that left hundreds dead, wounded, and captured in Ilovaisk and Debaltseve. Kyiv signed the Minsk Agreements primarily because it would have otherwise faced even deeper advances by Russia's army into Ukrainian territory.

Kyiv's official chief negotiator, Leonid Kuchma, Ukraine's second president, and Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine's president from 2014 to 2019, saw no other way out. They had to accept the humiliating texts largely prefabricated by Putin. Kuchma and Poroshenko did so regardless of the fact that the agreements contained provisions obviously aimed at undermining Ukraine's sovereignty, integrity, and statehood. This situation was worrisome enough in itself.

Even more worrying was the fact that the West allowed Moscow, or even supported the Kremlin, to use the Minsk Agreements to exert political and diplomatic pressure on Kyiv for years. Moscow often did so by referring to UN Security Council Resolution 2202 of February 17, 2015, and the explicit mention of the *Minsk II* Agreement. This official UN document reinforced the legal weight of the controversial agreement that had been signed five days earlier and which was an expression of international legal nihilism.

In fact, absurdities such as these were abundant in Moscow's rhetoric *vis-a-vis* Kyiv in 2014–2021. For example, Russia repeatedly urged Ukraine's decentralization with reference to a respective provision of *Minsk II*.<sup>26</sup>

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26 Alim, Eray: “Decentralize or Else”: Russia's Use of Offensive Coercive Diplomacy against Ukraine. In: World Affairs, Vol. 183, Issue 2, 2020, pp. 155–182.

However, in early April 2014 before the start of the Donbas War, a deep reform of Ukrainian local self-government and deconcentration of state power had already begun. Several months before the signing of the first Minsk Agreement, Ukraine had started complying with the loudly repeated Russian demands for decentralization.<sup>27</sup> The reason for this strange situation was that the leadership of the Russian Federation, which is *de facto* a centralist rather than federal state, wanted less a real decentralization than a “balkanization” of Ukraine.<sup>28</sup>

Instead of opposing these and similar Russian tactics, Western representatives repeatedly sought to persuade Kyiv to make concessions that would undermine Ukraine’s sovereignty. They recommended that Ukraine grant special constitutional status to non-government-controlled areas and hold local elections there even before Russia’s irregular forces in the Donbas have been withdrawn or disarmed. Western politicians and diplomats insufficiently opposed Russia’s refusal to allow permanent and complete observation of the Ukrainian-Russian state border by international organizations. Russia limited the scope of the OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, established in 2014 with Moscow’s consent. The Kremlin did this both through the OSCE headquarters in Vienna and on the ground in the Donbas, within the so-called “people’s republics”.<sup>29</sup>

Not only in the above mentioned or other individual issues, but also in the basic strategic orientation, the EU and its Western European member

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27 Romanova, Valentyna/Umland, Andreas: Ukraine’s Decentralization Reforms Since 2014: Initial Achievements and Future Challenges, Chatham House Research Papers, September 2019.

28 Rjabčuk, Mykola: Dezentralisierung und Subsidiarität: Wider die Föderalisierung à la russe. In: Osteuropa, Vol. 64, Issue 5–6, 2014, pp. 217–225.

29 Adamski, Łukasz: Beobachtung der Beobachter: Die OSZE und Russlands Aggression gegen die Ukraine. In: Osteuropa, Vol. 65, Issue 1–2, 2015, pp. 43–56; Haug, Hilde Katrine: The Minsk Agreements and the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission: Providing Effective Monitoring for the Ceasefire Regime. In: Security and Human Rights, Vol. 27, Issue 3–4, 2016, pp. 342–357; von Twickel, Nikolaus: Zwischen den Fronten: Was die OSZE-Beobachter in der Ukraine leisten können, und was nicht. In: Internationale Politik, Vol. 72, Issue 2, 2017, pp. 48–53; Kemp, Walter: Civilians in a War Zone: The OSCE in Eastern Ukraine. In: OSCE Yearbook 2017, Vol. 23, 2018, pp. 113–123; Härtel, André/Pisarenko, Anton/Umland, Andreas: The OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine: The SMM’s Work in the Donbas and Its Ukrainian Critique in 2014–2019. In: Security and Human Rights, Vol. 31, Issue 1–4, 2021, pp. 121–154; Kragh 2022.

states in particular remained on the wrong track for eight years.<sup>30</sup> The West ruled out the supply of even defensive heavy weapons to Ukraine until the beginning of 2022. The possibility of imposing additional relevant sectorial sanctions against Russia was not considered until the start of the major Russian troop buildup in 2021.

Instead, the already fuzzy message of the West's half-hearted initial reactions was further obfuscated. As mentioned above, the EU decided in 2015 to link the lifting of its Donbas-related punitive measures against Russia to the implementation of the Minsk Agreements in spite of their conclusion after the most important sectorial EU sanctions had been imposed in the summer of 2014. The formulation of the sanctions package had initially provided for a complete and unconditional Russian withdrawal from the Donbas as a precondition for the withdrawal of sanctions. By subsequently linking them to *Minsk I* and *II*, they were no longer tied only to the cessation of rule violations by Russia. Now the end of sanctions was also contingent on certain steps by Ukraine.

During the same period in 2015, the German government launched the infamous *Nord Stream 2* project, which – following the completion of the first *Nord Stream* project in October 2012 – would have not only further increased Germany's dependence on Russia.<sup>31</sup> Berlin also set out to further weaken Ukraine's already decreased economic leverage *vis-à-vis* Russia. Gazprom's second gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea to northeastern Germany was, like the first, presented as a private-sector project that posed no security threat to Ukraine.

The territorial “gains” Russia made during the first high-intensity phase of covert aggression against Ukraine in 2014–2015 became a new baseline not only for the Kremlin. They were also accepted in significant part by Western politicians and diplomats as new starting points for negotiations and frames of reference for a rapprochement between the two countries. Instead of being continually reminded that the novel political conditions in the Donbas and Crimea are fundamentally unacceptable, the Russian aggressor was implicitly rewarded by international mediators. The Kremlin

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30 Härtel, André: The EU Member States and the Crisis in Ukraine: Towards an Eclectic Explanation. In: Romanian Journal of European Affairs, Vol. 19, Issue 2, 2019, pp. 87–106; Barshadska, Iuliia: Brüssel zwischen Kyjiw und Moskau: Das auswärtige Handeln der Europäischen Union im ukrainisch-russischen Konflikt 2014–2019. ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart 2022.

31 Umland, Andreas: Germany's Russia Policy in Light of the Ukraine Conflict: Interdependence Theory and Ostpolitik. In: Orbis, Vol. 66, Issue 1, 2021, pp. 78–94.

was allowed to constantly harvest the fruits of the Russian military aggression in Moscow's international negotiations and public debates with its Ukrainian victim.

An example of the dubiousness of the February 2015 *Minsk II* Agreement was its Article 9, which provided for “[...] the restoration of full control over the state border by the Government of Ukraine throughout the conflict area, beginning on Day 1 after local elections.” This sequence anticipated a return of Kyiv control over the Ukrainian-Russian border along the occupied territories not before, but following, a political settlement. This would have meant that the Ukrainian government would have had to hold elections on territory that was still under *de facto* Russian control. Such a procedure would have given Moscow the opportunity, through its agents and proxies in the occupied territories, to undermine the political process ostensibly aimed at settling the conflict.

The problem with these and other contradictory formulations in *Minsk I* and *II* was not only, and not so much, that Russia had managed to sneak these provisions into the agreements through ruthless pressure on Ukraine. More problematic was the fact that Western governments and organizations accepted and elaborated on even the most absurd points in the two Minsk Agreements. In 2015, for example, French diplomat Pierre Morel and German Foreign Minister (and now German President) Frank-Walter Steinmeier submitted plans for conflict resolution that tacitly acknowledged the Kremlin's military gains that year and took Russian terrain gains as a starting point.<sup>32</sup> Under the so-called Morel Plan and Steinmeier Formula, Kyiv was now being urged not only by Moscow but also by Paris and Berlin to hold democratic elections in a territory *de facto* controlled by an aggressive neighboring state that, judging from the course of pseudo-electoral processes inside Russia, would do anything to manipulate the outcome of the elections.

In the following years, German politicians and diplomats repeatedly advised the Ukrainian government to implement the Steinmeier Formula. They tended to focus on concessions by Ukraine regarding, for instance,

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32 Getmanchuk, Alyona/Solodkyy, Sergiy: German Crisis Management Efforts in the Ukraine-Russia Conflict from Kyiv's Perspective. In: German Politics, Vol. 27, Issue 4, 2018, pp. 591–608; Wittke, Cindy/Rabinovych, Maryna: Five Years After: The Role of International Actors in the “Ukraine Crisis”. In: East European Politics, Vol. 35, Issue 3, 2019, pp. 259–263; Wittke, Cindy: The Minsk Agreements – More than “Scraps of Paper”? In: East European Politics, Vol. 35, Issue 3, 2019, pp. 264–290; Åtland, Destined for Deadlock?, 2020.

local elections and a constitutionally enshrined “special status” for the occupied territories. Effective steps explicitly directed against Russia’s fundamental violations of international law and the European security order, on the other hand, were less in evidence of the German and French governments. Berlin, in particular, urged Kyiv to engage in questionable procedures, even though there it was becoming increasingly clear that Moscow was not interested in genuine conflict resolution.

Meanwhile, Russia posed on the global political stage in the role of mediator and strove steadfastly to transform the international conflict initiated by Moscow into an internal one and to profit from the violation of Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Moscow used the two “people’s republics” as instruments to undermine Ukraine’s internal stability and foreign relations. This was a strategy that the Kremlin had used, long before 2014, for over twenty years in Moldova and Georgia.

The price Moscow demanded for a partial return of the east Ukrainian acquisitions from its hybrid aggression was to get its foot back in the door of the entire Ukrainian polity. Between late 2020 and early 2021, the Kremlin concluded that it could not achieve this by merely diplomatic, political, and hybrid means. Putin began to implement Plan B to subjugate Ukraine, concentrating troops on the Russian- and Belarus-Ukraine borders as well as in Crimea for a conventional and overt military invasion.

### *3 Conclusions and Recommendations for Action*

The dictated non-peace of the Minsk Agreements was supported by initiatives such as the Normandy Format or Steinmeier Formula but should never have been accepted by the West. As we now know, the Minsk Agreements did not de-escalate the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, but rather exacerbated it. They could not prevent its violent escalation in February 2022.

France and especially Germany were involved in many rounds of negotiations, mainly for humanitarian reasons. The OSCE was also highly present.<sup>33</sup> Seen from today’s perspective, such engagement appears as an

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33 Tanner, Fred: The OSCE and the Crisis in and around Ukraine: First Lessons for Crisis Management. In: OSCE Yearbook 2015, Issue 21, 2016, pp. 241–250; Guliyev, Farid/Gawrich, Andrea: OSCE Mediation Strategies in Eastern Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh: A Comparative Analysis. In: European Security, Vol. 30, Issue 4, 2021, pp. 569–588.

attempt to compensate for the lack of military and economic support for Ukraine and for more decisive sanctions against Russia. The physical and media presence of international organizations in the supposed conflict resolution process functioned as a fig leaf for the West rather than as a real instrument of peace-making in eastern Ukraine.<sup>34</sup> Against the backdrop of the 2014–2022 experience, it is questionable not only on normative and ethical grounds for the West to demand compliance with unjust and manipulative ceasefire agreements such as the Minsk Agreements. As the disastrous finale of the negotiations demonstrated, it is also strategically unwise to engage in implementation of such deals.

The frequent repetition of well-meant recipes and melodious concepts cannot alleviate the fundamental problem of gagging agreements imposed by force and threats. Formulas such as “peaceful conflict resolution”, “confidence-building”, “promoting dialogue”, etc. may be subjectively taken seriously by many Western politicians and negotiators. Objectively, the pursuit of such approaches in the post-Soviet space serves the function of a smokescreen that obscures the bitter reality of actual ambitions, forces, and events on the ground. Instead of receiving effective assistance, the victim of aggression is left to fend for itself in the face of the aggressor, who interprets Western attempts at mediation as signs of weakness.

High mediative and political activity with the purpose of implementing initially dubious documents becomes a mere cover, in such situations, for substantive inaction and lack of results, in terms of upholding the international order. Misapplied diplomacy toward imperialist powers can prolong and escalate conflicts rather than defuse them. By allowing actors like Russia to reap the fruits of their aggression, the West sends dangerous signals to all parties involved – and possibly to leaders in other regions of the world.<sup>35</sup>

In 2014–2022, the West created a wrong impression in the Kremlin. It conveyed to Moscow that by creating a *fait accompli* on the ground, Russia can set a new frame of reference for subsequent negotiations. To be sure,

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34 Puglierin, Jana: OSZE dient Kreml als Feigenblatt, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 6 September 2016.

35 Suško, Oleksandr/Umland, Andreas: Unrealistisches Szenario: Anmerkungen zum “Pluralen Frieden”. In: Osteuropa, Vol. 67, Issue 3–4, 2017, pp. 109–120; Umland, Andreas: Kein fauler Kompromiss! Der Donbass, die Ukraine und der Westen. In: Osteuropa, Vol. 71, Issue 8–9, 2021, pp. 61–68; Umland, Andreas: Should Washington Have Pressed Kyiv into a Compromise with Moscow? In: World Affairs, Vol. 185, Issue 2, 2022, pp. 319–330.



military aggression was rhetorically strongly condemned and even partly sanctioned. But the new state of affairs resulting from occupation was still accepted as the new baseline for subsequent search of compromise.

According to Russian doctrine in such affairs, the stronger side can and should use its military power, systematic violation of rules, and methodical ruthlessness to improve its negotiating position. This *message* from Brussels, Berlin, and Paris encouraged Moscow to once again shift, in February 2022, the matters on the ground in Ukraine in the direction it wanted. Let's hope that politicians and diplomats in the West and elsewhere have learned the bitter lessons from the Minsk disaster.

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## Chapter 6: Germany's "Ostpolitik" until Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

*Joachim Krause*

### Abstract

Germany's *Ostpolitik* (Eastern policy) has largely focused on Russia since 1999, not only neglecting relations with the other states of Eastern Europe and East Central Europe, but also the alliance policy in general. Russia's authoritarian regression, which could not be overlooked, and its extensive military preparations for attack were constantly ignored by the German government. Instead, it pursued increased dependence on Russia for natural gas supplies, despite the European Union's decision since 2010 to become less dependent on Russia. Berlin responded to Russian belligerence against Ukraine since 2014 with a policy of appeasement and arms control rhetoric that have cast considerable doubt on the strategic judgment of the last two coalition governments under Angela Merkel's chancellorship. German *Ostpolitik* was guided by an idealization and stylization of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* and an unreflective, revivalist pacifism. It has indirectly contributed to Russia's renewed war against Ukraine because it has facilitated Russia's risk calculus. With an *Ostpolitik* that was firmly anchored in the Western alliance and balanced between Russia's and the Eastern Europeans' concerns, Russia probably would not have launched the war in February 2022.

### Keywords

German foreign policy, German Ostpolitik, Russia, Ukraine, energy policy

### 1 Introduction

Former Ukrainian Ambassador to Germany Andriy Melnyk (2014–2022) drew much negative attention in Germany for criticizing German policy,

both before and after the war began. He blamed the German government for visibly underestimating Russia's aggression, for sticking to its partnership with Moscow (especially with the construction of the two Nord Stream pipelines), for refusing to supply arms and, thereby, undermining Ukraine's position in the dispute with Moscow – thus indirectly contributing to the war. There were many incendiary letters against Melnyk, up to petitions of outraged citizens that the German government should declare him *persona non grata*.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter examines the question to what extent Germany's *Ostpolitik* since 1990 might have worsened the security situation in Ukraine and, hence, contributed to the outbreak of the war. In the following, German *Ostpolitik* is understood as the policy of the German government towards Russia and its direct or indirect neighbors in East-Central Europe as well as in Eastern Europe.

In view of the enormous differences in interests and sometimes open hostilities between Russia and many of its neighboring states, German *Ostpolitik* has always had the character of a *balancing act*. This poses the question: has Berlin understood how to maintain this balance? Or has there been a stronger tendency to one side or the other? In addition, there is another dimension: *Ostpolitik* cannot be pursued without an *alliance* policy. Past experience has shown clearly that a policy towards Russia cannot be pursued without being embedded in the Western alliance and in consensus with the European Union (EU) member states. Therefore, it must also be asked whether German policy has satisfied these alliance policy and European policy aspects. Taken together, German *Ostpolitik* must be questioned as to whether it has succeeded in maintaining a *balance between the triad of Russia policy, policy toward the neighboring states to the east (including Ukraine), and Western ties*. The thesis of Melnyk and many other observers is that this balance has not been maintained, but that Germany has closely aligned itself with Russia. If this thesis proves to be correct, then the next step is to ask whether Germany thus contributed directly or indirectly to the outbreak of war in February 2022.

Roughly speaking, German *Ostpolitik* since 1990/92 can be divided into five phases: (1) the phase of the Christian-Liberal coalition led by Helmut

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1 Tagesspiegel: "Sächsischer CDU-Mann forderte Ausweisung; Vorsitzender Merz will sich nicht zu Affront gegen Melnyk äußern", 30 August 2022; see also Deutschlandkuri-er: "Skandal-Botschafter: Altparteien und Medien tanzen nach der Melnyk-Flöte", 7 April 2022.



Kohl (until the end of 1998), (2) the phase of the Red-Green coalition under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, (3) the phase of the grand coalition of the CDU/CSU and SPD under Angela Merkel (2005–2009), (4) the phase of the Christian-Liberal coalition under Angela Merkel's chancellorship (2009–2013), and (5) the renewed phase of the coalition of the CDU/CSU and SPD under Chancellor Angela Merkel (2013–2021). In all five phases, efforts can be identified to maintain the balance between the three concerns mentioned above. However, the respective balance turned out very differently. It can be said that during Chancellor Kohl's term in office (until the end of 1998), a policy was pursued in which relations with Russia and the Eastern European states played an equally important role and in which there was little reason to doubt Germany's anchoring in NATO and the EU. This changed in the era of the Red-Green coalition under Gerhard Schröder (1999–2005), in which the SPD in particular began to prioritize relations with Russia unequivocally and transatlantic and EU anchoring was repeatedly emphasized but hardly practiced. Anyone who had hoped that the coalitions led by Angela Merkel with the SPD (2005–2009, 2013–2021) or the FDP (2009–2013) would change anything about this imbalance was disappointed. The CDU/CSU parties (and, incidentally, the FDP as well) did nothing to counter the SPD's direction regarding its Eastern Policy and the increasingly nebulous and dubious alliance policy. Instead, the focus remained on Russia – even after the Ukraine crisis in 2014 – and the alliance policy ended in disaster.

The question of whether Germany contributed to the outbreak of war must be answered in a discerning manner. There is no doubt that Germany did not directly cause the war, but it did indirectly contribute to influencing Russia's risk calculations at the end of 2021 in such a way that the decision to go to war was made. The last two coalitions of the CDU/CSU and the SPD under Angela Merkel's chancellorship bear particular responsibility for Russia's decision to embark on this war.

## 2 *The Years of the Kohl Government (1990–1998)*

Even during the negotiations on German reunification and the challenging years that followed between 1991 and 1997, then-Chancellor Kohl and his foreign ministers from the FDP (Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Klaus Kinkel) were concerned, on the one hand, with maintaining good relations with Moscow and, at the same time, with accommodating their Eastern

European neighbors on the issue of rapprochement with European and transatlantic institutions. This was not easy, as Russia's future orientation was hardly predictable and Russian President Boris Yeltsin was indeed open to suggestions from Bonn. But the domestic political situation in Russia was chaotic, and after the first free Duma elections in December 1993, it was foreseeable that democratic reform of Russia would fail to materialize and that nationalist, imperialist, and revisionist tendencies would gain the upper hand. Nevertheless, the German government's policy remained to support the forces of reason, economic, and political reforms in Russia as much as possible – mostly with capital and ideas. After all, Russian troops were still on the territory of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) until 1994. Germany's policy of caution in foreign deployments (the Bundeswehr did not participate in the liberation of Kuwait in 1991) was also part of this calculation. Toward Poland, Kohl had already initiated the Weimar Triangle in 1991. It was an attempt to establish a Franco-German-Polish consultation format that was intended to give the largest East-Central European state a say in European affairs.

With regard to the wishes of the neighboring Eastern European and East Central European states, it was Chancellor Kohl and the Christian Democratic Defense Minister Volker Rühle who wanted to give at least the states close to Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, a perspective for joining NATO. These countries wanted to join the EU and, above all, the North Atlantic Alliance as soon as possible after the results of the December 1993 Duma elections in Russia, in which nationalist, communist, and proto-fascist parties won a majority. It was also – but by no means solely – thanks to the efforts of the German government that an agreement in principle was reached between NATO and Russia in 1997 to accommodate the interests of Russia (which felt snubbed and potentially threatened by NATO enlargement) and the candidate states. The *NATO-Russia Act* stipulated that NATO could admit new members if it was ensured that no substantial (less than one brigade) foreign military units and no nuclear weapons would be stationed there. Also in effect was the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, which regulated troop levels and the number of weapons systems allowed in all countries and was intended to prevent any state or alliance from acquiring an invasion capability. NATO also unilaterally reduced its troop levels, so that after Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary joined, the total number of Western troops in Europe was smaller than before. The NATO-Russia Founding Act also included the creation of the *NATO-Russia Council*. Its purpose was to

create the possibility of continuous communication and contact-building between Russia and the Western alliance. For reasons of symmetry – and because it was not quite known at the time which direction Ukraine would take – a NATO-Ukraine Council was formed in parallel, but it remained without substance.

This agreement paved the way for the membership in NATO of the three aforementioned East-Central European states, and later of the Baltic states, as well as Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, and other Balkan states. Russia has always condemned this, yet a situation never arose in which Russia's security would have been endangered as a result of the enlargement of the alliance. The often invoked "encirclement" of Russia never took place.

In addition to this balanced *Ostpolitik*, the German government pursued an alliance policy that slowly but steadily adjusted to the need to reduce the Bundeswehr (from 650,000 soldiers at the end of 1990 to fewer than 370,000 as required by the Treaty on the Unification of Germany, the Two Plus Four Treaty) on the one hand, but to maintain key capabilities on the other. In this context, the German government sought to maintain alliance defense capabilities while being prepared for the alliance's new tasks, which were moving toward *out-of-area* operations. Under the impact of the liberation of Kuwait from the Iraqi invasion and the wars in the former Yugoslavia, NATO had turned more and more to such missions. In 1995, through a difficult and contradictory process, the Alliance was able to bring itself to intervene militarily in the conflict to enforce a ceasefire (Dayton). In the following years, there were further deployments of this kind, in Kosovo in 1999 and in Afghanistan in early 2002. Until 1995, the German government remained reluctant to participate in such operations, but in 1995 and 1999 it did participate in NATO operations against Serbia.

### 3 *The Phase of the Red-Green Coalition (1998–2005)*

When the Red-Green coalition under Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Joscha Fischer (Bündnis 90/Grüne) came to power in December 1998, initially nothing seemed to change. The new federal government took part in NATO's Kosovo mission, and the new foreign minister made a passable

debut by mediating an end to the war.<sup>2</sup> On May 13, 1999, however, Foreign Minister Fischer had to endure an attack by one of his party comrades with a paint bag. When, on September 11, 2001, Islamist terrorists from al-Qaida attacked the *World Trade Center* in New York and the Pentagon near Washington D.C., and hijacked and brought down another airliner, the German government immediately demonstrated solidarity with the United States (U.S.) and even sent German special forces to help the U.S. fight al-Qaida in Afghanistan. The German government's active involvement in bringing about the UN Conference on the Future of Afghanistan in November and December 2001 and Berlin's willingness to participate in a UN-mandated force to protect the reconstruction of Afghanistan (ISAF) also demonstrated a loyalty to the alliance that critics of the SPD and the Greens had not believed these parties capable of.

However, despite these encouraging beginnings in alliance policy at the structural level and at the level of the prevailing narratives, a paradigm shift in German foreign policy (and thus also in its *Ostpolitik* and, in the medium term, its alliance policy) took place with the advent of the Red-Green coalition. Many observers at the time did not expect this shift – which was to point beyond the period of the Red-Green coalition – to occur so radically. This paradigm shift had the following components:

- With the Greens and the SPD, forces came into central foreign policy and security functions that originated from the peace movement and represented an altered narrative of wars and conflicts than the CDU/CSU and the FDP. After the Bundestag's decision in October 1983 to implement the armaments part of the NATO dual decision, it had appeared as if the unworldly and idealistic ideas of the peace movement and the critical peace research that supported it intellectually would dry up. That was not the case. The Greens managed to enter state parliaments and the Bundestag as an unabashedly pacifist party, and in 1983 the SPD abandoned the foreign policy profile of its former chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, and adopted many of the positions that were familiar to the Greens. According to this Red-Green peace narrative, wars and conflicts were not the result of malevolent powers (especially not Russia, if more likely the U.S.), but the result of misunderstanding and mistrust.

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2 Krause, Joachim: Die deutsche Politik in der Kosovo-Krise. In: Krause, Joachim (Ed.): Kosovo. Humanitäre Intervention und kooperative Sicherheit in Europa, Leske und Budrich: Opladen 2000, pp. 103–119.

Both had to be overcome, especially by reducing the perception of threat. Since the perception of threat is aroused by weapons of the opponent, arms possession, arms production, and arms exports were castigated, and deterrence was described as warmongering. Crises and conflicts had to be dealt with politically and psychologically, and "escalation dynamics" had to be prevented (in particular, local wars should not degenerate into "wildfires") and wars could arise by accident. Arms races, which could be prevented by disarmament or arms control, were considered particularly negative. The Western alliance was still accepted by many as necessary to a certain extent, but basically NATO counted for nothing in this situation; the UN and multilateralism, on the other hand, were singled out as being particularly important. Germany was supposed to be a civilian power that served as a model for others and that excelled as an enabler of compromise, especially in multilateral bodies. In this sense, the Foreign Office in particular has been systematically reprogrammed since early 1999. Moreover, such insights gained support in the media (where the party preference of political journalists is most likely to be the Greens and also the SPD)<sup>3</sup> and among educational professions (schools, universities, adult education). The political climate of opinion in Germany has been decisively influenced by this until today – not least because no real counter-positions could be heard from the CDU/CSU and the FDP.

- Within the SPD – but also among the Greens – a revival and reinterpretation of Willy Brandt's and Egon Bahr's *Ostpolitik* began, which moved in the direction of a pro-Russian position and which still guides large parts of the party and its sympathizers today. This revival was built on three assertions made by the main architect of Germany's *Ostpolitik* and then-Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in a 2008 speech,<sup>4</sup> one of which was half true and the other two of which were simply false. Firstly, Steinmeier said that *Ostpolitik* had made peace more secure under challenging conditions. In principle, that is correct. But it must be added that *Ostpolitik's* contribution to security in Europe remained modest. Brandt's *Ostpolitik* achieved relief in the human sector (which was important for those affected). It brought about a period of political

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3 Statista Research Department: Parteipräferenz von Politikjournalisten in Deutschland, 19 August 2010.

4 Speech by Federal Foreign Minister Steinmeier at the panel discussion at the Willy Brandt Foundation: "Auf dem Weg zu einer europäischen Ostpolitik", 4 March 2008.

*détente* – unfortunately only temporary – in relations between East and West, but it failed completely when relations deteriorated after 1975. And it had no influence at all on the reduction of military confrontation; instead, its representatives allowed themselves to be more or less instrumentalized by Soviet policy during the period of the debate over NATO's double-track decision in the early 1980s. Secondly, Steinmeier claimed that *Ostpolitik* had opened up new opportunities and freedom for democracy movements in Eastern Europe. This was not true at all. The basic principle of Brandt's and Bahr's *Ostpolitik* was to use the recognition of Russia's supremacy and the Communist parties in the GDR and Poland to bring about certain small and sometimes only climatic changes. Social Democratic politicians in the late 1970s and 1980s (even in 1989) were rather annoyed, even appalled, by the work of democratic opposition in Poland and other countries in the Soviet orbit, and condemned their actions as harmful because it was against the spirit of *détente* to challenge the supremacy of the Soviet Union and the Communist system.<sup>5</sup> This was, in a sense, the "dark" side of Brandt's and Bahr's *Ostpolitik*. Steinmeier's third assertion, according to which *Ostpolitik* played a decisive role in ultimately overcoming the bloc confrontation altogether, is also false. The SPD's *Ostpolitik* did not aim to overcome the East-West division, rather, it wanted to make it more bearable and controllable. That was a perfectly sensible concern in the 1960s and 1970s. At best, it was hoped for a slow process of change through rapprochement, but not for a quick end as it occurred in 1989/90. The end of the East-West conflict did not come about as a result of Willy Brandt's and Egon Bahr's *Ostpolitik*, but because Mikhail Gorbachev, who understood that Russia could no longer afford the East-West conflict economically and socially, was elected as General Secretary of the CPSU. Additionally, the Soviet Union's only trump card – superiority in conventional and nuclear capabilities – no longer held water with the implementation of NATO's rearmament decision for medium-range

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5 Hofmann, Gunter: Polen und Deutsche auf dem Weg zur europäischen Revolution. Suhrkamp: Berlin 2011, pp. 292f.; Krzemiński, Adam: Im Osten viel Neues. Deutsche Ostpolitik aus polnischer Perspektive. In: Zeitschrift für Außen und Sicherheitspolitik, Vol. 8, Issue 1, 2015, pp. 403–425; Urban Thomas: Verstellter Blick. Die deutsche Ostpolitik. edition.fotoTapeta: Berlin 2022.

missiles and the modernization and improvement of U.S. land and air forces (*AirLand Battle, Follow-on Forces Attack*) since the mid-1980s.<sup>6</sup>

In the combination of the two narratives mentioned here, a dangerous mixture of denial of reality, the canonization of a utopian pacifism, and a highly transfigured *Ostpolitik* emerged. This characterized German foreign policy in the years up to the end of the Red-Green coalition in 2005. In addition, the German government decided to phase out nuclear energy in 2001. Even then, it was foreseeable that there would be a combined exit from nuclear energy and coal in response to the climate crisis. This prospect, in turn, prompted important sections of German industry and the energy utilities to increasingly consider sourcing natural gas from Russia with as little disruption as possible. This laid the foundations for an illusory and utopian Russia policy, which was supported by parts of the business community.

One consequence of this slow but steady realignment was the focus of Germany's *Ostpolitik* on Russia at the expense of Poland as well as the other Central Eastern European and Eastern European states (including Ukraine). This policy was intensively pursued by the Chancellery. Its architect was then-Chancellor's office chief Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Chancellor Schröder also developed a friendly relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The latter had been elected to this office in 2000 after earning a reputation as a "doer" during the brutal suppression of the uprising in Chechnya. He was held in high esteem above all by members of the powerful security services, whose thinking was deeply rooted in Great Russian nationalism and imperialism. Putin presented himself as moderate and reform-minded to Schröder, and also impressed the latter with a speech in the German Bundestag in the summer of 2001. In fact, from the very beginning, his agenda was different – to restore Russia's imperial greatness.

In terms of alliance policy, the Red-Green coalition remained on course with the continuation and expansion of the Bundeswehr's involvement in ISAF. But the balance between foreign missions and alliance defense that had been maintained until 1999 was gradually lost. Alliance defense was considered obsolete, and the corresponding capabilities of the Bundeswehr were abandoned or neglected. Politically, the only important thing was to

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6 In a book published in 2013, former NVA Colonel Siegfried Lautsch vividly described how, even before Gorbachev took office, the Warsaw Pact had to change its offensive military concept because this strategy was no longer feasible due to Air-Land Battle and the Follow-on-forces attack. The demonstrations of the peace movement in West Germany obviously had no influence on the military planning of the Warsaw Pact.

maintain a small presence in Afghanistan (never more than 5,000 soldiers). In addition, the Bundeswehr was downsized and savings were made in all areas. Eventually, the German government took a critical course against the Bush administration in Washington on more and more issues.

These tendencies culminated in the controversies over the U.S. government's intention to overthrow Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq through international military intervention. In the summer of 2002, U.S. President George W. Bush had announced that his administration was determined to overthrow the criminal regime of Saddam Hussein, which was not complying with the conditions imposed by the UN Security Council in 1991 under ceasefire Resolution 687 (April 3, 1991) and other resolutions. The plan was not unwarranted, but the preparation and justification revealed significant shortcomings, and the Bush administration's handling of allies and friends who asked critical questions provided legitimate grounds for criticism.<sup>7</sup> But the way the Red-Green federal government handled the issue also aroused criticism.<sup>8</sup> It would have been enough if the federal government had made its rejection clear and not joined the international coalition. But in view of the upcoming Bundestag elections in September 2002, Chancellor Schröder apparently saw an opportunity to win the elections after all and embarked on a course in which he portrayed himself and the Red-Green federal government as defenders of peace against the "warmonger" George W. Bush. This campaign was accompanied by a wave of anti-Americanism in the German media as well as in the argumentation of the SPD and the Greens.<sup>9</sup> The Social Democratic federal minister Heide Däubler-Gmelin even accused Bush of using methods like Hitler's to distract attention from domestic problems.<sup>10</sup>

The outcome of the Bundestag elections proved Schröder right. With 38.5 percent, the SPD received as many votes as the CDU/CSU, and since the Greens did better than the FDP, the government was able to remain in office. However, the damage to alliance policy was enormous and has strained relations between the U.S. and Germany to this day. The distortions were also evident in *Ostpolitik*. Poland had spoken out in favor of the

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7 Halper, Stefan/Clarke, Jonathan: *America Alone. The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2004, pp. 201–230.

8 Shawcross, William: *Allies. The United States, Britain, Europe and the War in Iraq*. Atlantic Books: London 2003, p. 102ff.

9 On anti-Americanism among the German left, see Diner, Dan: *Feindbild Amerika. Über die Beständigkeit eines Ressentiments*. Propyläen: Berlin 2002, pp. 115ff.

10 *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: "Ministerin in Erklärungsnot", 9 September 2002.



Bush administration's policy in the Iraq conflict and supported the invasion in March 2003 with troops.<sup>11</sup> While Chancellor Kohl had established the Weimar Triangle (Germany, France, Poland), Chancellor Schröder, much to the annoyance of the Poles and the Balts, now preferred to meet *à trois* with French President Chirac and Russian President Putin – most recently in East Prussia.<sup>12</sup> In any case, Schröder's relationship with Putin became closer. Against the backdrop of increasingly critical reports about falsifications in the presidential elections in Russia and Putin's blatant interference in the Ukrainian elections (in which the candidate Yushchenko, who did not favor Russia, was poisoned by the Russian secret service), Schröder made the abstruse claim in a television program in November 2004 that Putin was a "flawless democrat" ("*ein lupenreiner Demokrat*")<sup>13</sup> – a claim that he then explicitly confirmed again in 2012 after the obviously manipulated presidential elections in Russia.<sup>14</sup> This commitment was to pay off materially for Schröder. At the end of his term of service, he joined the supervisory board of *Nord Stream AG*. Six months later, he became chairman of the supervisory board of the pipeline consortium *NEGP Company*, a subsidiary of the Russian state-owned *Gazprom*, and two years later he became chairman of the supervisory board of the largely state-owned Russian company *Rosneft*. His combined annual income from these positions was estimated at more than one million euros.

During these years, the conviction emerged in Poland, as well as in most Central Eastern European states and especially in Ukraine, that Germany, together with France, was acting in favor of Russia at their expense. At the center of concerns at that time was the *Nord Stream* pipeline project, which was supposed to connect Russia directly with Germany (bypassing Ukraine and Poland). In light of repeated disputes between Russia and Ukraine over the transfer of Russian natural gas through Ukraine and payment for gas delivered to Ukraine, Russian state-owned *Gazprom* had pitched the idea to German companies. After clear political support from Berlin, the corresponding agreement was signed in September 2005 in the presence of the still incumbent German Chancellor Schröder and the Russian President Putin.

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11 Krzemiński, *Im Osten viel Neues*, 2015.

12 Ludwig, Michael: "Putin, Schröder und Chirac – Zusammenkunft mit Tradition", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 3 July 2005.

13 *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 23 November 2004.

14 *Die Welt*: "Schröder verteidigt 'lupenreinen Demokraten' Putin", 7 March 2012.

*Nord Stream* went into operation at the end of 2011 and – as a knowledgeable observer quite rightly noted – this took an important means of pressure out of the Ukrainian government’s hands with which it could defend itself against Russian interference.<sup>15</sup> In February 2014, when President Yanukovich, who was well favored by Moscow, was forced to resign from office due to massive popular protests (the Euromaidan), it became clear what the loss of this leverage meant for Ukraine: Russia occupied and annexed Crimea and staged “civil uprisings” in the Donbas with special forces and free rioters, which then led to the intervention of Russian units to prevent the Ukrainians from retaking the territories. The German *Ostpolitik* of the Schröder government was thus partly responsible for this more or less hybrid attack by Russia on Ukraine.

#### 4 *The First Merkel Coalition (2005–2009)*

The federal elections of September 18, 2005, resulted in the loss of the governing majority of the SPD and the Greens. Although the CDU/CSU also suffered significant losses, the party still was entitled to the chancellorship because it was able to achieve the highest share of the vote with just 34.2 percent. A coalition with the FDP was not possible, so Angela Merkel’s chancellorship could only be realized through a coalition with the SPD. Those who had hoped that a change in German *Ostpolitik* and alliance policy would take place were soon disappointed. The architect of Schröder’s Russia policy, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, now became foreign minister and used this office to continue shaping relations with Russia, and less so with the other Eastern European states, in the tried and tested manner. Steinmeier’s goal was now to turn relations with Russia into a strategic partnership – something that the Kohl government had already tried to do with Russia under different domestic political conditions. Although Steinmeier repeatedly emphasized that his *Ostpolitik* was embedded in the Western alliance, this was rhetoric. As long as the Bush administration ruled in Washington, nothing changed in the strained German-American relations. German foreign policy focused on Russia, which was to be brought closer

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15 Umland, Andreas: Die friedenspolitische Ambivalenz deutscher Pipelinedeals mit Moskau – eine interdependenztheoretische Erklärung des Russisch-ukrainischen Konfliktes. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 4, Issue 3, 2020, pp. 293–303.

to the Western community through a policy of integration and rapprochement ("Wandel durch Handel").<sup>16</sup>

Steinmeier's policy was supported at the European level by close consultations with France and resulted in a kind of German or Franco-German hegemony within the EU as far as *Ostpolitik* was concerned.<sup>17</sup> Germany's Russia policy also dominated the EU's Russia policy. Among the countries of Eastern Europe and East Central Europe, this development triggered concerns, but these were not heeded in Berlin and Paris. According to a report in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, starting in 2005, the Foreign Office was working on a concept for a new Russia policy under the motto "change through interdependence" ("Wandel durch Verflechtung").<sup>18</sup> The planning staff of then-Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was responsible for this. The Chancellor had been skeptical about the project but had given Steinmeier a free hand. It was striking how little Steinmeier allowed himself to be distracted by reports that referred to the domestic situation in Russia (especially the authoritarian regression and disregard for human rights under Putin, as well as the increasingly recognizable kleptocratic character of the regime) and to Putin's dubious statements on foreign policy. In particular, his statement to the Duma in April 2005, according to which the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest strategic catastrophe of the century,<sup>19</sup> should have made alarm bells ring at the Foreign Office. The same was true of Putin's philippic speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007. But Germany's *Ostpolitik* remained fixated on Russia, even if there were repeated attempts of dialogue with Poland, which, however, proved increasingly complicated.

With the election of Dmitry Medvedev as President of Russia in March 2008, the prospect of a lasting strategic partnership seemed to open up for Steinmeier. Medvedev made statements that seemed promising. In fact, he was only a stooge for Putin, who, according to the constitution in force at the time, could not have stood for a third term and who, however,

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16 Adomeit, Hannes: Bilanz der deutschen Russlandpolitik seit 1990. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, Vol. 4, Issue 3, 2020, pp. 276–292.

17 Siddi, Marco: A Contested Hegemon? Germany's Leadership in EU Relations with Russia. In: *German Politics*, Vol. 29, Issue 1, 2020, pp. 97–114.

18 Wehner, Markus: "Rechtfertigt Steinmeiers Russland-Politik die Ausladung?," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 13 April 2022.

19 Sinyakov, Denis: "Putin: Soviet collapse a 'genuine tragedy'," *NBC News*, 25 April 2005; Osborn, Andrew: "Putin: Collapse of the Soviet Union was 'catastrophe of the century'," *The Independent*, 26 April 2005.

continued to determine policy as prime minister. Consideration for Russia was at the forefront of German politics. When, in April of the same year, a decision was to be made at the NATO summit in Budapest on the admission of Georgia and Ukraine to the Atlantic Alliance at the request of the Bush administration, this request was rejected by Germany and France with consideration for Russian concerns. Instead, both states were put off to an uncertain future. For both, it meant being thrust into a fatal strategic dark zone where Russia could harass them undisturbed.<sup>20</sup> The consequences of this decision did not seem to worry the chancellor or the foreign minister. Ukraine and Georgia were not of the interest for either of them. But as early as August of that year, Georgian Prime Minister Saakashvili was tempted by South Ossetian separatists to launch a military operation at the same time when a major Russian military exercise was taking place in Georgia's immediate vicinity. It took only a few hours for Russian troops to invade Georgia, resulting in the displacement of many Georgian people from their ancestral homes. Events in Georgia demonstrably had no impact on Germany's policy toward Russia, which continued to emphasize partnership (especially in Russia's modernization) and cooperation in the energy sector. Russia remained the primary partner within the framework of *Ostpolitik*.

One may ask in retrospect: how would Ukraine's situation have developed if it had been admitted to NATO in 2009 or 2010? One should assume that neither the annexation of Crimea nor the hybrid conquests in the Donbas would have taken place, and the attack of February 2022 would probably not have occurred. In the years leading up to 2010, of course, Russia could have tried to annex Crimea or occupy the Donbas. But the war against Georgia had shown clear weaknesses in the Russian military, and at that point Ukraine still had the option of threatening to cut off Russian natural gas supplies. NATO membership for Ukraine would, of course, have led to enormous anger in Russia and would have thwarted all German plans for a modernization partnership. In the event of Ukraine's admission to NATO, Germany's embrace strategy toward Russia would probably have failed. In retrospect, however, that would not have been detrimental, because it later failed miserably anyway. In 2010, Russia was not yet in a position where it could have made as strong military campaign as it did in 2014. But the coalition's preference was for Russia. The prospect for a domestic reform process and a modernization of its economy was

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20 Busse, Nikolas: "Die NATO und die Ukraine – Merkels strategischer Fehler", Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 4 April 2022.

considered superior to all other political goals. That is why Ukraine was denied accession to NATO.

It was astonishing that in the coalition led by Chancellor Merkel, there was no attempt on the part of the CDU/CSU to challenge the two foreign policy narratives of the Red-Green coalition cited above. Neither the utopian pacifism nor the glorified version of Brandt's *Ostpolitik* seemed to make the Union uncomfortable. Apparently, the chancellor was happy to live with it, and those voices in the party that still clung to Kohl-era beliefs were marginalized. Since the beginning of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Union parties had been the parties that stood for Western ties and defense within the framework of the Western alliance, for European policy, and for traditional Western values. In the Merkel era, this tradition largely disappeared from the parties (from the CSU even faster than from the CDU) within a few years, and the Union joined the Red-Green narrative without any criticism. Contributing to this was the fact that this narrative was strongly represented in the media (especially the public television stations). Dissenters were dismissed as "cold warriors" and largely kept out of the public sphere.

An example of this uncritical adoption of the Red-Green narrative is the following quote by former CDU politician Friedbert Pflüger from an open letter to then-Ukrainian Ambassador Melnyk in January 2022:

"As you know, I do not belong to Willy Brandt's party. But I am very glad that he existed and that he broke the escalating spiral of threats and bossiness of the Cold War with his policy. I still remember how Egon Bahr, his negotiator *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union, was attacked for making common cause with the Kremlin. Especially in crisis situations, there is a need for personalities who are also trusted on 'the other side' and who can convey fears, ambitions, and 'red lines' from there. Ah, if only we had an Egon Bahr now!"

Pflüger recommended to Melnyk that he should not focus on deterrence against Russia, but rather encourage a "climate CSCE". Moreover, he elaborated, "Maybe it's better to look for a balance of interests after all, instead of accelerating the existing fires."<sup>21</sup> Other examples of this kind were offered by the Prime Minister of Saxony, Michael Kretschmer, or the Bavarian Prime Minister, Markus Söder, who claimed that Putin was "not an enemy

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21 Pflüger, Friedberg: "Offener Brief an den ukrainischen Botschafter Andrij Melnyk", Cicero, 27 January 2022.

of Europe” just a few days before the Russian invasion began.<sup>22</sup> These years marked the end of the pro-Western foreign policy consensus that had characterized the foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany since the late 1950s. The SPD had already abandoned this consensus in the 1980s. Those who had hoped that the CDU/CSU would continue to represent it were now disappointed.

### 5 The Years of the Christian-Liberal Coalition (2009–2013)

In the September 2009 Bundestag elections, the CDU/CSU and FDP received enough votes to form a “bourgeois” coalition. However, there was no real change in Germany’s *Ostpolitik* (toward balanced relations with Russia on the one hand and the Eastern European and East Central European states on the other) and no more alliance-friendly policy. The FDP under its chairman Guido Westerwelle tried to improve relations with Poland, but he had also fully embraced the *Zeitgeist* of utopian pacifism and the glorification of Brandt’s *Ostpolitik*. No significant changes were made in relations with Russia and the other Eastern European states during his term in office, although he had promised to do so. Westerwelle, who had brought his party large electoral gains because he had competence in economic and financial policy, insisted on being given a position in the foreign ministry because he expected this position to boost his popularity. With his demand for the withdrawal of the last American nuclear weapons from German soil, he triggered a transatlantic crisis of confidence. So did his refusal to participate in the NATO operation to protect the people of Libya from Ghaddafi’s marauding troops. At the time, German political scientist Christian Hacke called Westerwelle “the most narrow-minded German foreign minister since Ribbentrop”.<sup>23</sup> But even the chancellor did not use the leeway to break free from the direction set by the SPD. Behind this was consideration for the German economy.

Parts of German industry and, above all, the major energy suppliers had been looking for secure sources of natural gas in view of the looming phase-out of nuclear energy and coal – under the conditions of the Renewable Energy Act. Russia came more and more into focus, and Ger-

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22 Frasch, Timo/Schuller, Konrad: “Markus Söder im Interview: ‘Russland ist kein Feind Europas’”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 January 2022.

23 SPIEGEL: “Kritik an Westerwelle: ‘Borniertester Außenminister seit von Ribbentrop’”, 22 April 2011.

many's *Ostpolitik*, which was fixated on Russia, fitted perfectly into this picture. The accompanying risks, which were clearly apparent in Russia, were ignored by German companies. They believed they could trust the German government, which had an intelligence service at its disposal and many professional diplomats who seemed to know Russia well. Already in the Schröder era, but more and more clearly in the Merkel era, a grand coalition of utopian pacifists, illusion-driven friends of Russia, and industry and energy suppliers emerged in this context. They were united in the naïve assumption that Russia was a reliable strategic partner with whom it was possible to trade, who did not exploit dependencies, and who did not embark on problematic military paths. Under the label "*German Ostpolitik*", a mix of peace policy revivalism, Russia-fixation, and commercial interests emerged, which structured policy in such a lasting way that warning voices from Germany and abroad were wiped away with incredible ignorance.

Incidentally, the alliance policy dimension did not fare much better. It is true that Barack Obama, a Democratic president, took office in January 2009, with whom the German chancellor developed a much better relationship than with his predecessor. But the main instrument of German alliance policy – an operational Bundeswehr – continued to suffer from her neglect. Here, too, the CDU/CSU, which had been the party of the Bundeswehr until the late 1990s, failed. Even the defense minister of the first grand coalition, Franz Josef Jung, no longer had any connection to the Bundeswehr. Under his successor, the media-savvy Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, who was looking toward higher office, the largest and most media-celebrated cuts to the Bundeswehr's operational readiness (including the suspension of conscription) occurred. His successor, Thomas de Maiziere, could not make up for Guttenberg's mistakes. Like Jung and zu Guttenberg, he had come to this office without preparation. Members of the Bundestag from the CDU/CSU faction who were equipped with defense policy expertise were not considered as "ministerable" or were placed in other ministries (like MdB Christian Schmidt, who became agriculture minister). The neglect of the Bundeswehr was viewed with great concern, especially in the U.S. The Chancellor and her responsible departmental ministers apparently did not share this concern.

6 *The Years of the Coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD (2013–2021)*

The outcome of the September 2013 federal election was disastrous for the FDP. It was unable to clear the 5-percent hurdle – not least because of the utter failure of its foreign minister – and Chancellor Merkel had to enter another coalition with the SPD despite her great success (the CDU and CSU received over 40 percent of the votes cast). The architect of Russia-oriented *Ostpolitik*, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, thus took up the post of foreign minister once again. He held this post until January 2017, after which he became Federal President. His successors as foreign minister were Sigmar Gabriel (January 2017 to March 2018) and Heiko Maas (March 2018 to December 2021) – both from the SPD.

At the beginning of the work of the coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD (fewer and fewer people wanted to talk about a “grand” coalition at that time, given the weakness of the SPD), one might have expected a reassessment of Russian policy. Two key developments that could not have been overlooked spoke in favor of this:

- Firstly, the re-election of Vladimir Putin as president of Russia in March 2012 took place under conditions in which it was no longer possible to speak of a fair and free election. There were massive protests in Russia, which were violently suppressed and which showed how repressive the system had become. There were more and more political murders of opposition figures, some of which took place abroad. At this stage, it became apparent that Putin was describing the protests as externally directed and accusing the U.S. and Western powers of trying to threaten Russia with “color revolutions”. The alleged instigation of “color revolutions” by Western forces was even listed in Russian military doctrine as one of the key threats to Russian security and, in turn, led to Russia increasingly attempting to destabilize Western democracies on its part. In 2012, a variety of laws and regulations were enacted that made it more and more difficult for opposition movements to pursue their activities in Russia. They had to register as foreign agents and their work was



obstructed wherever possible. Foreign non-governmental organizations had to leave Russia.<sup>24</sup>

- Secondly, the West became increasingly aware that Russia had embarked on an extensive military modernization program. This was initiated in 2008 after the experience with the war against Georgia. In this context, the State Armament Program for the years 2011 to 2020 was launched in December 2010. According to this program, Russia planned to spend 23 trillion rubles (755 billion dollars according to the exchange rate at that time) on the modernization of the Russian armed forces within the next decade.<sup>25</sup> This program fundamentally changed the reform plans. Whereas, until then, the main goal of modernization had been to ensure the ability to intervene in the area of the Commonwealth of Independent States, this modernization program was directed toward a major war – either against NATO or against Ukraine.<sup>26</sup>

Both developments mentioned above were registered with great concern, especially in Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, Great Britain, and the U.S. An analysis by the National Defense University in Tampere, Finland, concluded as early as 2013 that behind these modernizations was a strategic concept aimed at revising borders and threatening the security of Finland

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24 Adomeit, Hannes: Russland und der Westen. Von "strategischer Partnerschaft" zur strategischen Gegnerschaft. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für strategische Analysen, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2021, p. 114.

25 Ibid, p. 115.

26 Monaghan, Andrew: Russian State Mobilization: Moving the Country on to a War Footing. Royal Institute of International Affairs: London 2016; Connolly, Richard/Boulègue, Mathieu: Russia's New State Armament Programme. Implications for the Russian Armed Forces and Military Capabilities to 2027. Royal Institute for International Affairs: London 2018; Lavrov, Anton: Russian Military Reforms from Georgia to Syria. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS): Washington D.C. 2018; Johnson, Dave: General Gerasimov über die Entwicklungslinien der russischen Militärstrategie – Eine Analyse. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 3, Issue 3, 2019, pp. 255–261; Dick, Charles: Russian Ground Forces Posture Towards the West. Royal Institute of International Affairs: London 2019; Muzyka, Konrad: Russian Forces in the Western Military District. Center for Naval Analysis (CAN): Washington D.C. 2020; Hackett, James: Die Modernisierung der russischen Streitkräfte. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2021, pp. 125–139; Westerlund, Fredrik: The role of the military in Putin's foreign policy. An overview of current research. Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI): Stockholm 2021.

and other Eastern European states.<sup>27</sup> The authors pointed to the Russian armed forces' major procurement and munitions program. For the first time since the end of the Soviet Union, they argued, Russia has returned to massive serial production of weapons systems and munitions. Since conscription had not been lifted, the country could draw on a reserve of several million troops in addition to its roughly 700,000 active soldiers. The modernization of the armed forces and their operational-strategic orientation in the Baltic region would indicate a desire to be able to intervene militarily primarily in the neighborhood. The authors criticized that both Paris and Berlin failed to understand the strategic implications of this buildup. Rather, the two governments still regarded Russia as a strategic partner.

In September 2013, Russia and Belarus hosted the quadrennial *Zapad* military exercise. This provided numerous insights into the state of modernization of the Russian armed forces and, above all, into the strategic objective that had been pursued.<sup>28</sup> The stated objective – combating terrorist intruders who controlled entire cities and countryside – was in fact pursued to some extent. In the process, practices of “terrorist infiltrators” were examined and exercise-tested in combat, attempting to destabilize a country by occupying public buildings and news stations in order to then take control. These were the exact methods then used in Ukraine in the spring of 2014 by Russian special forces and “volunteers” in their occupation of Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine. As the exercise progressed, however, it became increasingly clear that Russian forces were also practicing combined, cross-strike warfare on a regional stage on a large scale, with the participation of Interior Ministry troops as well as civilian defense forces. Classic conventional warfare exercises were conducted against a well-armed adversary. Maritime and amphibious operations played a major role, as did airborne operations. There were also spectacular tests with the new *Iskander* missile system. *Su-34* aircraft also took part in the exercise for the

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27 Forss, Stefan/Kiianlinna, Lauri/Inkinen, Pertti/Hult, Heikki: The Development of Russian Military Policy and Finland. National Defence University, Research Reports No. 49, Tampere 2013.

28 See Zdanavičius, Liudas/Czekaj, Matthew (Eds.): Russia's Zapad 2013 Military Exercise. Lessons for Baltic Regional Security. Jamestown Foundation/National Defence Academy of Latvia: Washington D.C./Riga 2015.

first time. Unlike the *Zapad 2009* exercise, no nuclear strikes were practiced this time.<sup>29</sup>

These developments were not noticed by the German government or were dismissed as irrelevant. It can be assumed that the Federal Intelligence Service (BND) had pointed out the tightening of domestic politics in Russia and the ambitious Russian arms programs and had come to similar conclusions as the experts from Tampere. Warnings from Poland were also ignored.<sup>30</sup> Obviously, no one in the Chancellery and the Foreign Ministry seemed to care. Undeterred, the German government stuck to its policy of partnership with Russia. By 2013 at the latest, it had become clear that Russia was planning a revisionist confrontational course against the West and Ukraine (as long as the latter continued to move in the direction of the West) and that military means and the use of energy dependencies were to become central instruments of this policy. At this point, a general revision of Germany's policy toward Russia and the Eastern policy should have taken place. It did not come about since German Foreign Minister Steinmeier unwaveringly stuck to his course, because the Chancellor gave him more or less free rein, and because the new Defense Minister, Ursula von der Leyen, set other priorities. For von der Leyen, it was important that soldiers felt comfortable in the barracks and that the Bundeswehr's procurement system could be made more effective. For the latter, millions were spent on consulting services by the firm McKinsey, which in the end had no visible effect. In contrast, little money was allocated for analyses of the strategic situation. *The German government responded to an increasingly dangerous environment with strategic blindness.* In this context, it is hardly reassuring to note that a similar form of strategic blindness prevailed in France and that no impetus came from Paris that could have pointed in a changed direction. Until 2022, French President Macron stubbornly

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29 See Järvenpää, Pauli: ZAPAD 2013 – A View from Helsinki. In: Zdanavičius, Liudas/Czekaj, Matthew (Eds.): Russia's Zapad 2013 Military Exercise. Lessons for Baltic Regional Security, The Jamestown Foundation/National Defense Academy of Latvia: Washington D.C./Riga, 2015, pp. 43–57; Blank, Stephen: What do the Zapad 2013 Exercises Reveal? In: Zdanavičius, Liudas/Czekaj, Matthew (Eds.): Russia's Zapad 2013 Military Exercise. Lessons for Baltic Regional Security, The Jamestown Foundation/National Defense Academy of Latvia: Washington D.C./Riga, 2015, pp. 8–13.

30 Krzemiński 2015.

maintained that the main threat to Europe was Islamist fundamentalism and that Russia was a partner.<sup>31</sup>

The inevitable reality shock hit the German government in February and March 2014, when Russia first occupied Crimea with unmarked special forces (“green men”) and then, again with unmarked special forces and mercenary troops, seized public buildings and television stations in the Donbas and Odesa and proclaimed “people’s republics”. In Odesa, that plan failed with enormous bloodshed; in the Donetsk and Luhansk districts, the Russian irregulars were only able to keep areas under their control through interventions by Russian forces.

The German government responded to the Crimean occupation with attempts at diplomatic intervention in Moscow. These yielded no results. Demands by European states and the U.S. for massive sanctions were rejected by the German government. The main fear in Berlin was that the operation in Crimea was just a trap to induce the Ukrainians to launch a military operation to reclaim Ukraine. From there, the goal was not to influence the Russians, but to persuade the Ukrainians to show restraint.<sup>32</sup> The overriding motto was “de-escalation” – even though there was no evidence that any preparations were being made in Kyiv for military intervention in the direction of Crimea. Through this de-escalation strategy, the German government undermined a unified European Union approach against Russia. Many voices were there, especially among Eastern Europeans, in favor of strong sanctions. The German government prevented all of this. Even after the hybrid aggressions in the Donbas and Ukraine’s desperate attempts to regain control over its territory, the German government, together with the French government, primarily sought a ceasefire (Normandy format). This was appropriate given Ukraine’s difficult situation, but in the course of the process, Germany and France settled on a negotiating framework (Minsk I and Minsk II) in which the fiction was accepted that Russia was not a player in this game, but that it was only about an intra-Ukrainian civil war in which the Russian government (the real instigator) was acting as a mediator (see previous chapter). In addition, a settlement for the occupied territories was agreed upon that was contradictory and unworkable and

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31 E.g. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty: “Macron Says Russia, China Not NATO Allies’ Common Enemies – Terrorism Is”, 28 November 2019.

32 This phase is reviewed in Eitel, Peter: *The Russian Annexation of Crimea 2014: Which Role for Surprise, especially for Germany?* Dissertation of the Christian-Albrechts University of Kiel: Kiel 2021, Chapter III.

ultimately perpetuated Russian annexation. Germany and France, by their participation, more or less tacitly approved the fundamental questioning by Russia of the core norms of the European peace order as well as of the UN Charter.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, Germany's policy at the time was seen as less problematic in academic debates.<sup>34</sup>

The alternative would have been a decisive policy by the Western community to impose massive sanctions on Russia of the kind that did not occur until after February 24, 2022. This approach, favored by many European states and the U.S., failed in the spring of 2014 due to opposition from the German government and France. Only after the downing of a *Malaysia Airlines* passenger plane on July 17, 2014, by Russian irregulars who had "borrowed" an anti-aircraft missile from regular Russian troops, did the German government also move toward imposing sanctions. However, these sanctions remained relatively harmless, since the aim was not to break "the line of communication with Moscow".

Within NATO, too, the German government (mostly in conjunction with France) put the brakes on attempts to build up an effective conventional defense capability against Russia in the Baltics and East Central Europe. Although it was decided at the Wales, Warsaw, and Brussels summits that there should be small, multinational battle groups in the three Baltic states and Poland, these were to be at best battalion-sized.<sup>35</sup> The German government had emphasized that the 1997 NATO-Russia Act would not be violated by NATO under any circumstances. Once again, the otherwise breakable thread of conversation was invoked, even though Russia had already fundamentally violated the core provisions of the Act. The German government was unable to prevent the repeated description of the military threat posed by Russia at the above-mentioned summits and subsequent meetings of foreign and defense ministers. Although the Chancellor, the Foreign Minister,

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33 Essen, Hugo von/Umland, Andreas: Russlands diktiertem Nicht-Frieden im Donbas 2014–2022: Warum die Minsker Abkommen von Anfang an zum Scheitern verurteilt waren. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für strategische Analysen*, Vol. 6, Issue 3, 2022, pp. 282–292. This article can also be found as chapter five of this anthology.

34 See Siddi, Marco: German Foreign Policy toward Russia in the Aftermath of the Ukraine Crisis: A New Ostpolitik? In: *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 68, Issue 4, 2016, pp. 665–677; Forsberg, Tuomas: From 'Ostpolitik' to 'frostpolitik'? Merkel, Putin and German foreign policy toward Russia. In: *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, Issue 19, 2016, pp. 21–42.

35 Meyer zum Felde, Rainer: Abschreckung und Dialogbereitschaft – der Paradigmenwechsel der NATO seit 2014. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2018, pp. 101–117.

and the Defense Minister signed the documents in question, the relevant formulations were not reflected in their speeches. In fact, they continued to speak in public of the need for *détente*, confidence-building, and de-escalation.

At the summit meetings, the German government had made far-reaching commitments. It was promised, for example, that defense spending would rise from 1.1 percent to 2 percent. In addition, the Army's six brigades were to be made operational, growing to ten brigades by 2030. In the context of NATO's rapid reaction force, the German government promised to continue to maintain a division headquarters, division troops, and two combat brigades capable of deployment, beyond the tank company to be stationed in Lithuania, for the particularly rapidly deployable force (VJTF).<sup>36</sup>

These pledges were largely not kept. Within the federal government – and especially from the SPD parliamentary group – the 2 percent pledge was openly questioned and its implementation blocked.<sup>37</sup> Attempts by the Chancellor or Defense Minister von der Leyen to press for compliance with the pledges could not be observed. This disregard for the Wales and Warsaw agreements led to a profound upset in German-American relations when then-U.S. President Donald Trump criticized Germany's unwillingness and threatened that the United States might withdraw from the NATO treaty. The chancellor's response remained vague. What came to her rescue was the fact that Trump's rude tone turned most observers against him. Merkel was portrayed in the media as a calming factor. In fact, the German government's unwillingness to engage the U.S. (and not only Republicans) was a serious alliance policy shortcoming that raised and still raises considerable doubts about Germany's loyalty to the alliance.

However, a certain change in the German government's policy toward Russia could be observed: whereas Russian arms efforts had been largely ignored or deemed unimportant until 2014, the idea now took hold that Russia was so overwhelmingly militarily strong that it made no sense to help Ukraine arm itself against another Russian attack. Chancellor Merkel repeatedly rejected German arms deliveries to Ukraine because Russia was

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36 Meyer zum Felde, *Abschreckung und Dialogbereitschaft*, 2018, p. 114.

37 Meyer zum Felde, Rainer: *Deutsche Verteidigungspolitik – Versäumnisse und nicht eingehaltene Versprechen*. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, Vol. 4, Issue 3, 2020, pp. 315–332.

militarily superior anyway and Ukraine could not defend itself.<sup>38</sup> She also said that there were already enough weapons in the region.

In academic discussions – especially among experts on Russia and Eastern Europe – the German government was repeatedly criticized for this policy. But this advice was not heeded. The author of this chapter had a similar experience in 2014, when he made the statement in an article requested by the German Foreign Office for the *2014 Global Review* that Russia was seeking strategic confrontation with the West. The article was effectively pulled from circulation because it did not reflect the wishful thinking of the foreign minister and his advisers.<sup>39</sup> Rather, advice from peace researchers was listened to, such as the 2017 article by Matthias Dembinski and Hans-Joachim Spanger titled "Plural Peace: Guiding Ideas for a New Russia Policy".<sup>40</sup> In it, they acknowledged Russia's right to turn away from a liberal order which it understood as imperial and to implement its own conception of order in its environment. Their contribution amounted to the acceptance of a Russian zone of influence in Eastern Europe<sup>41</sup> and revealed the "dark" side of Brandt's *Ostpolitik*. This, too, was based on the recognition of a Russian supremacy, and it was Egon Bahr who assumed that only by accepting this supremacy contacts with Moscow could be maintained and diplomatic progress was possible. Under the conditions of the 1970s, when Soviet troops were deep in Europe, this may still have been "realistic", but under the conditions of the 21st century, it amounted to selling out Ukraine and recommending that it submit to Russian will.

The article by Dembinski and Spanger was torn apart by experts,<sup>42</sup> but it pretty much reflected the proto-realism of the coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD led by Angela Merkel. The policy toward Russia became – this was

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38 Heinemann-Grüder, Andreas: Russland-Politik in der Ära Merkel. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, Vol. 6, Issue 4, 2022, p. 366.

39 Documentation "Global Review 2014: Warnungen vor Russland gab es zu Genüge, sie wurden nur nicht beachtet". In: *Sirius – Journal of Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, 2014, p. 227.

40 Dembinski, Matthias/Spanger, Hans-Joachim: Pluraler Frieden. Leitideen für eine neue Russlandpolitik. In: *Osteuropa*, Vol. 67, Issue 3/4, 2017, pp. 87–96.

41 Heinemann-Grüder, Andreas: Russland-Politik in der Ära Merkel, 2022, p. 368.

42 Heinemann-Grüder, Andreas: Wider den Sonderfrieden. Eine Replik auf das Konzept vom "Pluralen Frieden". In: *Osteuropa*, Vol. 67, Issue 3/4, 2017, pp. 103–108; Meister, Stefan: Wasser auf Putin's Mühlen. "Pluralen Frieden" als russlandfixierte Ostpolitik. In: *Osteuropa*, Vol. 67, Issue 3/4, 2017, pp. 129–133; Sushko, Oleksandr/Umland, Andreas/Weichsel, Volker: Unrealistisches Szenario. Anmerkungen zum "Pluralen Frieden". In: *Osteuropa*, Vol. 67, Issue 3/4, 2017, pp. 109–120.

particularly evident in the Minsk process – a policy of appeasement, the main goal of which was to satisfy the Russian president so that he would not do more damage. In this context, Russia's arms policy was somehow taken as a given, to which nothing could be done. The pledges made to NATO to reinforce the Bundeswehr were not kept, and thus a military imbalance in Europe that was constantly shifting in Russia's favor was accepted as quasi-natural and unalterable.

Instead, the concept of arms control (which in Cold War times was a tried and tested means of understanding how to manage crises that might arise from armaments) was invoked whenever reference was made to further Russian armament measures. In the middle of the last decade, for example, it became apparent that Russia was building up a considerable arsenal of conventional and nuclear cruise missiles aimed at Europe and permitting pinpoint attacks.<sup>43</sup> This occurred both under the INF Treaty and in circumvention of the treaty. In fact, this buildup should have led to a discussion of countermeasures, or a combination of countermeasures and treaty offers. Instead, the U.S. government was criticized for abandoning one of the most important pillars of the European security architecture.<sup>44</sup> In 2018, the U.S. had terminated the INF Treaty after Russia had continuously breached it since 2013. The Obama administration had been reluctant to take this step out of deference to the German federal government after attempts to clarify the matter in consultations with Russia had failed. The Trump administration, on the other hand, was less reluctant.

Arms control became an ideology whose main purpose was, on the one hand, multilateral activism in the UN regarding future problems<sup>45</sup> and, on the other hand, to appease discussions about Russian arms efforts and, if possible, to blame the U.S. in the process. Its main ideologue was Rolf Mützenich, an SPD member of parliament and, since 2019, also parliamentary group leader, who invoked *détente*, arms control, and “cross-bloc [sic] *détente*”.<sup>46</sup> But former Foreign Minister and current German President

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43 Brauß, Heinrich/Krause, Joachim: Was will Russland mit den vielen Mittelstreckenwaffen? In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 3, Issue 2, 2019, pp. 154–166.

44 Cf. Auswärtiges Amt: Außenminister Maas zur Ankündigung der USA, sich aus dem INF-Vertrag zurück zu ziehen, 21 October 2018.

45 Krause, Joachim: Deutsche Rüstungskontrollpolitik im strategischen Niemandsland. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2021, pp. 157–164.

46 Mützenich, Rolf: “Für Ignoranz und Ausgrenzung ist Russland zu groß und zu mächtig”, Vorwärts, 20 December 2016; Mützenich, Rolf: “Echte Entspannungspoli-



Frank-Walter Steinmeier also expressed himself in this way. In June 2016, for example, Steinmeier criticized a NATO maneuver in the Baltics that was small in scope as "saber-rattling and warmongering". In this context, he said: "Anyone who believes that symbolic tank parades on the alliance's eastern border will create more security is mistaken. [...] We would be well advised not to provide pretexts for a new, old confrontation free of charge."<sup>47</sup>

The climax of the appeasement policy, however, was the German government's approval of the construction of another *Nord Stream* pipeline (*Nord Stream 2*). This approval was signaled by the German government at the end of 2014, but it always emphasized that the project was a commercial one. Unlike *Nord Stream 1*, this time *Gazprom* was the sole operator of the pipeline construction; *Wintershall Dea* and other companies had participated in financing the pipeline project as lenders. The project was immediately criticized throughout Europe because it ran counter to the European Union's policy, agreed at the beginning of the decade, that member states should become less dependent on Russia.<sup>48</sup> In addition, the German government, where responsibility for energy security rested in the Ministry of Economics, granted the Russian *Gazprom* corporation access rights to gas storage facilities in Germany. Until 2015, the German government even allowed up to 25 percent of Germany's gas storage capacity to belong to subsidiaries of the Russian state-owned *Gazprom*. The last transfer took place in 2015, when the large gas storage facility in Rehden was sold after mediation by former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder with the approval of then Economy Minister Sigmar Gabriel. According to *Wirtschaftswoche*, the Germans "gradually and with full awareness put themselves in Moscow's hands".<sup>49</sup>

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tik ist kein Appeasement", 19 January 2015; Mützenich, Rolf: "Entspannungspolitik auf der Höhe der Zeit", IPG, 17 January 2022. In the interview, he actually uttered the sentence: "In the long term, our goal must be a European security order beyond the blocs".

- 47 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: "Konflikt mit Russland: Steinmeier kritisiert Nato-Manöver in Osteuropa", 18 June 2016.
- 48 Umbach, Frank: Strategische Irrtümer, Fehler und Fehlannahmen der deutschen Energiepolitik seit 2002. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, Vol. 6, Issue 4, 2022, p. 378.
- 49 Güßgen, Florian: Warum gehört Deutschlands größter Gasspeicher Gazprom?, *Wirtschaftswoche*, 28 January 2022.

This dependence on Russian natural gas was definitely in the interest of German energy suppliers and large consumers, who were justifiably concerned about security of supply in terms of electricity supply following the accelerated phase-out of nuclear energy in 2011 and the likewise phase-out of coal-fired power. After all, security of supply was not the focus of energy policy, but rather the high-profile sending of environmental policy signals. However, Russian gas was by no means as cheap as advertised.<sup>50</sup> In order to prevent the German government from entering the global market for liquefied natural gas and building LNG terminals, opinion campaigns against LNG were launched from Russia to suggest that the U.S. wanted to use LNG to sell Germans expensive and dirty gas from fracking production. This disinformation was adopted uncritically by environmental and climate activists and has also influenced the policies of the German government.

The *Nord Stream 2* project once again caused a massive disruption in German-American relations and thus severely damaged the alliance, which was completely unnecessary. Not only the Trump administration in the person of the Ambassador Richard Grenell, but also the Congress was unimpressed by the arguments of the German government and imposed severe sanctions on companies involved in the *Gazprom* project. They, as well as most European governments and the European Parliament, were concerned that Germany was becoming so dependent on Russian state-owned companies for energy supplies (especially natural gas) that it was becoming entirely vulnerable to blackmail. In view of the events of the past two years, it has become clear that this concern was justified. At times, this project was described by the German Chancellor, the Minister of Economics, the Foreign Minister, and other government representatives as an expression of European sovereignty or as a politically insignificant, purely commercial project, which it undoubtedly never was.

### 7 How Much Did Germany Harm Ukraine?

If one summarizes the previous considerations, some assessments can be identified, which point to at least *seven cardinal mistakes* of German *Ostpolitik* since 1998:

1. The cross-party glorification of Brandt's *Ostpolitik* as the alleged cause of the end of the East-West conflict and as the preferred instrument for

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50 Umbach 2022, p. 384.

dealing with Russia, without the *dark side of Ostpolitik* (the recognition of Russian domination over other countries as a starting point for diplomatic relations with Moscow) having been even rudimentarily addressed or problematized.

2. The glorification of disarmament, arms control, multilateralism and "dialogue" as a panacea for solving political problems. Behind this is a revivalist pacifist worldview, according to which conflicts and wars arise solely from misunderstandings and it is necessary to build trust with neighboring states, relying above all on arms control and diplomacy, while deterrence should be rejected.<sup>51</sup>
3. Ignoring Russia's authoritarian regression and the creeping takeover of power by a kleptocratic and criminal power that pursued Great Russian imperialist goals and sought strategic conflict with the West and was therefore not interested in partnership. This policy could no longer be overlooked since 2012, at the latest since 2014, and yet was not perceived by the German government. Such a strategic blindness cannot be found in recent German history (since 1949). If one looks for historical parallels, the years between 1890 and 1914 was also a period during which a similar strategic blindness prevailed.<sup>52</sup>
4. Largely ignoring the re-emergence of a military threat to Europe from Russia, both in the conventional weapons and nuclear sectors.
5. Neglecting and belittling the legitimate concerns of Eastern Europeans, especially their threat fears regarding Russia.
6. The deepening of the energy partnership with Russia, which led to the German supply of natural gas being increasingly in the hands of Russian companies and resulted in a vulnerability that is now costing the Germans and their European neighbors dearly.
7. Germany's refusal to supply Ukraine with weapons with which it could have already protected itself against further aggression by Russia after 2014. Instead, the German government pursued a dialogue diplomacy that effectively served to politically secure Moscow's territorial gains in the 2014 fighting and which must be qualified as an *appeasement policy*.

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51 Adomeit, Hannes/Krause, Joachim: Der neue (Kalte?) Krieg. Das russische Ultimatum vom Dezember 2021 und die Folgen für die westliche Allianz. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 6, Issue 2, 2022, p. 140.

52 Krause, Joachim: Strategische Irrtümer deutscher Außenpolitik im Rückblick – die Jahre von 1890 bis 1914. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 6, Issue 4, 2022, pp. 394–414.

In what way did these mistakes harm Ukraine? This question is not so easy to answer. But some statements can certainly be formulated. They concern Moscow's risk calculation, because at the beginning of every war there is a consideration by the aggressor about which risks can be taken and which cannot. What is certain is that Germany's *Ostpolitik* and, in particular, its fixation on partnership with Russia, has influenced Moscow's risk calculus with regard to a full-scale war against Ukraine. The complete dismantling of Ukrainian statehood and an independent nation had been a clear objective in Moscow for many years. From Moscow's perspective, German policy (both *Ostpolitik* as well as alliance and defense policy) probably helped to determine the risk calculus in two respects:

- From a military point of view, the conditions necessary for a full-scale attack had to be in place, in Putin's eyes, when the modernization of Russia's armed forces had progressed to such an extent that a rapid victory over Ukraine was within the realm of possibility. Furthermore, as long as it was ensured that the armed forces of the largest central European state, the Federal Republic of Germany, would be incapable of intervening militarily, if necessary, together with other nations in favor of Ukraine. It was probably assumed by the Federal Government that, for the sake of a speedy peace, it was prepared to accept any kind of ceasefire in Ukraine and would oppose all efforts in the Western world to mount a military response. In fact, the Bundeswehr has been incapable of complex defense operations for many years. It currently stands "blank", as the Inspector of the Army put it in early 2022.<sup>53</sup> With their *de facto* self-disarmament and completely illusory peace policy, the federal governments of the past 23 years have indirectly contributed to Putin's cold-bloodedly calculating challenge to the West today and to his attack on Ukraine in retaliation for the rejection of the December 2021 ultimatum addressed to NATO. If the Bundeswehr had been ready to fight and capable of assuming alliance defense, Putin probably would not have issued the December ultimatum and presumably would not have attacked Ukraine.<sup>54</sup>
- As a result of Germany's high dependence on Russia for gas supplies, it was probably part of the Russian calculation in planning for war to assume that Germany would neither participate in military operations

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53 Thus the Inspector of the Army, Lieutenant General Alfons Mais, on 23 February 2022, quoted here by Christoph Rieke: "Bundeswehr steht mehr oder weniger blank da", Tagesspiegel, 24 February 2022.

54 Adomeit/Krause, *Der neue (Kalte?) Krieg*, 2022, p. 141.

(including arms deliveries), nor support the expected economic sanctions or would do so only after a long delay.

However, the Russian risk calculation – if it was as presented here – has turned out to be incorrect. Ukraine has not allowed itself to be subjugated, the West is helping Ukraine with weapons (even the Federal Republic of Germany), Germany is supporting the severe sanctions and is currently hastily and completely converting its gas import structure. Nevertheless, the war was started by Russia, therefore the German governments, especially the last two coalitions under Chancellor Merkel, have to accept the reproach that they allowed a situation to arise in which Russia believed it could attack Ukraine – probably in the hope that the takeover would happen quickly and in the belief that an invasion of the Baltic states would be possible afterwards – despite multiple warnings and indications.<sup>55</sup> Europe should be very grateful for the extremely courageous will of the Ukrainians to defend themselves. Had the Russian attack been launched first in the Baltics, NATO defenses would likely have collapsed and NATO would have been faced with two unpleasant alternatives: either accept Russian conquest or initiate a reconquest to which Russia could respond with the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons.<sup>56</sup> After Russia's extensive losses in Ukraine, this option is off the table for now. But the Kremlin's aggressive, revisionist policy will continue in the years ahead.

The last 23 years of *Ostpolitik* represent the darkest and most catastrophic chapter in the otherwise thoroughly commendable foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany. As Nikolas Busse of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) has written, the "GAU" (in German: "der größte annehmbare Unfall" – the largest imaginable catastrophe) of German foreign policy has occurred.<sup>57</sup> The government and the opposition CDU/CSU have undertaken to overcome this catastrophe. It is not yet clear whether they will succeed. What is actually needed is a reappraisal of the mistakes of the recent past described above, which the CDU/CSU and SPD, as well as the FDP and the Greens, have so far avoided. Statements by German

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55 These conclusions must be drawn from Russia's ultimatum to NATO and the USA in December 2021. Cf. *ibid.* p. 130f.

56 Kroenig, Matthew: Russlands Nuklearstrategie gegenüber Europa – wie organisiert man Abschreckung gegen Deeskalation mit nuklearen Schlägen? In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, Vol. 2, Issue 4, 2018, pp. 323–338.

57 Busse, Nikolas: "Nötig ist eine Zeitenwende im Kopf", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 30 March 2022.

politicians to the effect that they made a mistake or were deceived by Putin are not a way of coming to terms with the past, but simply shift responsibility away. The last 23 years of German *Ostpolitik* have made two mistakes clear: the tendency to cling to utopian theoretical concepts even when reality clearly militates against them, and the tendency, despite the emphasis on European and transatlantic solidarity, to ultimately pursue very narrowly defined national interests.<sup>58</sup>

As for the German penchant for utopias, let us add at the end a quote from the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who said:

“Utopias are not there to be realized. They provide images that maintain people’s healthy discontent. Beware of any attempt towards their realization, especially as far as German ideas are concerned. Germany, as the home of Karl Marx, is the greatest export nation for errors that moved the world. [...] Ideas that come from Germany have a dangerous tendency toward realization.”<sup>59</sup>

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58 Dieter, Heribert: Ein schwieriger Partner. Deutschlands eigennützige Außenpolitik. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 4, Issue 3, 2020, pp. 245–257.

59 Neue Züricher Zeitung: “Peter Sloterdijk: ‘Deutschland ist die grösste Exportnation für Irrtümer’”, November 24, 2022.

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## II. War Events and Developments



## Chapter 7: Russia's Strategy in the Ukraine War: Restoring Russian Greatness by Any Means

*Johanna Möhring*

### Abstract

Russia's Ukraine strategy is intimately linked to its quest to retain power nationally and internationally. From the perspective of Russian rulers, Ukraine must be deprived of its statehood and cultural identity to secure Russia's great power status. For this purpose, Russia has mainly used an indirect strategy in which military power, including nuclear weapons, plays a central role. Having failed to topple the government in Kyiv in February 2022, Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine bears features of a genocidal war of extermination. In the face of Russian military failures, Russia relies on its nuclear threat potential and indirect leverage to achieve its war aims.

### Keywords

Russia, Ukraine, neo-imperialism, imperialism, multipolar world, indirect strategy, nonlinear warfare, role of military, war of annihilation, nuclear weapons

### *1 Introduction*

As an irredentist territorial state pursuing the restoration of its former Tsarist (later Soviet) realm, Russia represents an anachronism in a post-imperial, post-colonial democratic Europe. Serving as a projection surface of Russian imperial ideas Ukraine is both a precondition of Russian great power status and an obstacle in nation-state form.

### 1.1 *Russia's Neo-Imperial Consolidation of Power and Systemic Competition*

Ever since the great empires in Europe disintegrated after World War I and the end of European colonial dominions overseas became foreseeable, Russia has been a political anachronism: an autocratic, imperial, multi-ethnic state with a colonial past, which first rose again under Bolshevik auspices and then officially as a nation-state after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has not yet come to terms with its imperial past, which obscures its (neo-)imperial present.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, after a brief phase of reckoning in the 1990s, state authorities have suppressed critical engagement with the crimes committed by the Soviet regime against its own populations, as well as in the countries that fell under its control.<sup>2</sup> Russia's current neo-imperial project seeks security in the expansion of its sphere of influence, thereby creating sense of encirclement.<sup>3</sup> It poses a major challenge to a largely post-heroic Europe that wants to root confrontation, especially of a military nature, firmly in the past.<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 According to common definitions of imperialism, which presuppose transcolonial possessions and the ability to permanently enforce imperial interests worldwide, the Russian Empire and its successor, the Soviet Union, are considered imperialist constructs to a limited extent. Thus, even at the height of its military power, the Soviet Union was economically incapable of influencing distant economies in the long run. See Osterhammel, Jürgen/Jansen, Jan C.: *Kolonialismus. Geschichte, Formen, Folgen*. 7th rev. ed., C.H. Beck: Munich 2012, p. 28. Since the late 1990s, Russia combines its neo-imperial drive to dominate other countries through power and influence with a "classical" imperial policy of territorial expansion, e.g. in Ukraine.
  - 2 On December 28, 2021, the Russian human rights organization "International Society for Historical Clarification, Human Rights and Social Welfare Memorial", which had taken on the task of documenting state crimes and political persecution in the USSR from the October Revolution to the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991, was "liquidated" (according to the wording of the ruling) by a high court decision. The human rights center "Memorial" in Moscow, which campaigns for the rights of political prisoners, minorities, migrants, and homosexuals, was also "liquidated" by local court decision the following day. Memorial received the Nobel Peace Prize on October 7, 2022.
  - 3 On this paradox, see Foucher, Michel: *Ukraine-Russie. La carte mentale du duel*. In: *Tracts*, Vol. 39, Gallimard: Paris 2022.
  - 4 The notion of "post-heroic societies" of Europe, marked by the horrors of World War I (and World War II) is closely associated with political scientist Herfried Münkler. The author points out that post-heroic need not mean unheroic. See Münkler, Herfried: *Kriegssplitter. Die Evolution der Gewalt im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert*. Rowohlt Verlag: Reinbek 2017, p. 143 ff.

Putin's Russia is striving to restore supposed past greatness. To this end, the influence of the United States, especially in Europe, must be pushed back<sup>5</sup> and the international normative and institutional framework changed to Russia's advantage. Though perhaps the central one, the Russian war against Ukraine, is only one arena of a systemic confrontation with the Western community of states under American leadership over the very nature of international relations.

### 1.2 Ukraine as the Key to Russian Great Power Politics

Ukraine, together with Belarus, occupies a central position in the illusory world of current Russian rulers as part of an imaginary, linguistically, religiously, and culturally homogeneous, Russian-dominated East Slavic space (*Russkiy Mir*).<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, the vision of Russia as a Eurasian power, dominating Europe, counter-model to and adversary of the U.S., could not be realized without the territory, economy, and population of Ukraine.

On the other, as a political alternative, a democratic, prosperous Ukraine anchored in Western institutions poses a threat to an autocratic system that siphons national wealth into the pockets of an elite tied to Vladimir Putin. Russia's ideologues not only oppose Ukraine's westernization, they reject an independent Ukrainian cultural identity as such.<sup>7</sup> The aim is to destroy

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5 See the two draft agreements published by the Russian Foreign Ministry on 17 December 2021, the "Treaty between the United States and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 December 2021, and the "Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of the Russian Federation and the Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 December 2021, which would divide Europe into Russian and U.S. zones of influence.

6 Autocratically-run Belarus had tried to chart its own independent course despite the existence of the 1997 Russian-Belarusian Union. From 2020 onward, it increasingly came under the influence of its neighbor as a result of the protest movement against the presidency of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. In the fall of 2021, Lukashenka and Putin agreed on a common economic space and greater military cooperation. It has since become an important base in Russia's war against Ukraine. See Rácz, András: Becoming a Military District. Deepening military Cooperation between Russia and Belarus, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 14 March 2022.

7 By rejecting Russian cultural domination, Ukraine has set a precedent not only for other states that are considered by Moscow to belong to the Russian "cultural space", but also for the multinational regions (*kraj*) of the Russian Federation.

Ukraine as a nation-state and cultural entity and to return a “denazified” Ukraine, deprived of its cultural specificity, to the Russian fold.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 Strategic Implementation of Russian Objectives

In order to consolidate its sphere of influence and to transform the international system, Russia’s rulers mainly use an indirect strategy in which military power is a decisive factor.

### 2.1 Russia’s Domestic and Foreign Policy Dual Strategy

While on the domestic level, the regime freezes power relations suppressing any credible form of political opposition, internationally, Russia strives to break up the structures of a rule-based state system perceived as constraining.<sup>9</sup> A “multipolar world” in which power can be exercised without restraint is closely linked to the goal of maintaining control at home.

Russia justifies its policy of “hard diplomacy and soft coercion”<sup>10</sup> since President Putin’s inauguration by the alleged threat from Western influence to Russian interests in its near-abroad. Domestically, the system that has emerged around President Putin nationalized criminal control of the economy and consolidated state security organs, all the while using the pursuit of Russia’s greatness as a basis for legitimacy.<sup>11</sup> The power structures, which carry pseudo-feudal features with the Russian Orthodox Church as one of its pillars, make use of a mixture of chauvinistic Russian resentment, religiously dressed-up geopolitical visions, and sympathy for Stalinism.<sup>12</sup>

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8 Thom, Françoise: “Russian Ideologues Aim to Liquidate the Ukrainian Nation”, Desk Russie, 8 April 2022.

9 See Covington, Steve: *Putin’s Choice for Russia*. Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Harvard Kennedy School: Cambridge MA 2015.

10 Sherr, James: *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion. Russia’s Influence Abroad*. Chatham House: London 2013, p.119.

11 On the dual criminal and intelligence services nature of the Russian state under Putin, see, for example, Belton, Catherine: *Putin’s people. How the KGB took back Russia and then took on the West*. William Collins: London 2020.

12 In his essay “Putinism is not to be treated as a political regime. It is banditry with ideas”, historian Yaroslav Shimov describes the current Russian regime as organized crime within an ideological shell. Shimov, Yaroslav: “К путинизму не относиться как политическому режиму. Это бандитизм с идеями”, Medusa, 15 June 2022.



Russian strategists openly acknowledge the expansionist nature of the Russian state, as well as its repressive nature.<sup>13</sup> The glorification of World War II, as well as the active preparation of the Russian population for a military confrontation with the West, including nuclear weapons with the help of an extensive propaganda machine is part of this approach.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.2 Permanent Confrontation by Indirect Means

On a spectrum of influence ranging from legal to illegal measures, Russia applies both non-military and military elements selectively and in combination, simultaneously and in different geographic theaters. This indirect strategy finds its inspiration both in the tradition of Tsarist intelligence and military services, as in the experience of Soviet security agencies. From the 1920s onwards, operating from a position of relative weakness, the latter used subversion as a foreign policy tool openly and covertly, with or without the use of force against their opponents. As the existence of nuclear weapons made direct confrontation unadvisable, the approach decisively shaped the systemic conflict between East and West after 1947.<sup>15</sup> At the beginning of the new century, Putin reactivated this strategy, which avoids direct military confrontation whenever possible to achieve political goals. For two main reasons: the influence of the security organs in the Russian governmental structure, including in Russian military circles, as well as the

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13 See, for example, the February 2019 article published in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, "Putin's Long State", by Vladislav Surkov, deputy prime minister from 2011 to 2013 and presidential adviser from 2013 to 2022. Surkov is considered a Kremlin ideologue and one of the architects of the annexation of Crimea and separatist movements in the Donbas. Surkov, Vladislav: "Долгое государство Путина. О том, что здесь вообще происходит", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 February 2019.

14 See, for example, Courtois, Stéphane/Ackerman, Galia (Eds.): *La Seconde Guerre Mondiale dans le discours politique russe à la lumière du conflit russo-ukrainien*. L'Harmattan: Paris 2016. It was no coincidence that in May 2008, shortly before the war with Georgia, Vladimir Putin again let weapons roll across Red Square for the May 9 parade celebrating the victory over Nazi Germany in the "Great Patriotic War".

15 Analysis and evaluation of Soviet, now Russian so-called "active measures" is difficult: firstly, because the archives of the Soviet security organs are not accessible, and secondly, because the information circulated after the end of the Cold War, partly through purchases of material and with the help of "defectors", may also have had the purpose of presenting Soviet influence abroad and intelligence capabilities in a particularly favorable light. See Knight, Amy: *The Selling of the KGB*. In: *The Wilson Quarterly*, Winter 2000.

realization of Russian weakness, especially given the impossibility of catching up economically with the West. Add to this the Russian interpretation of the “color revolutions” as orchestrated by the U.S., as well as the desire to beat the West at its own game of soft power (or influence) to make up for the defeat of the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> Russia sees its indirect strategy as a mirror response to Western approaches to harm Russia’s interests.<sup>17</sup>

Russia uses Europe’s willingness to cooperate and the openness of its political systems, economies, and societies to exert harmful influence. Financing extremist political parties and fanning existing social conflicts with the help of disinformation occupy a central place in the Kremlin’s confrontation strategy.<sup>18</sup> In addition to cyberattacks, Russia banks on Europe’s dependence on Russian raw materials, especially in the energy sector.<sup>19</sup>

The conceptual description and classification of this form of hybrid confrontation is a source of debate.<sup>20</sup> Western democracies still struggle to recognize this multifaceted attempt at subversion as a confrontation and as a threat, as it remains largely below the threshold of military force.<sup>21</sup> Russian security agencies test the resilience of Western societies persistently, resourcefully, and simultaneously in multiple geographic contexts. Russia may not be able to provide a credible alternative to the current interna-

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16 Minic, Dimitri: *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes. Du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine*, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, April 2023.

17 Klein, Margarete: *Russlands neue Militärdoktrin: NATO, USA und “farbige Revolutionen” im Fokus*. In: *SWP-Aktuell* 12/2015.

18 Yablokov, Ilya: *Russian disinformation finds fertile ground in the West*. In: *Nature Human Behavior*, Vol. 6, 2022, pp. 766–767.

19 In this context, the French historian Françoise Thom speaks of “parasitic coexistence”.

20 Conceptually, the term “hybrid warfare” is not without controversy, and it is also up for debate whether it is a novelty, or rather about a classic continuum of warfare, including in the Russian tradition. Russian analysts use the term “*nelinejnaja voïna*” (nonlinear warfare) to describe alleged hybrid attacks by NATO and the United States. See, for example, Galeotti, Mark: *The mythical ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and the language of threat*. In: *Critical Studies on Security*, Vol. 7, Issue 4, February 2018, pp. 1–5.

21 While former Soviet republics and former Warsaw Pact states warned of this type of confrontation as early as the 2000s, it took some time for more “western” NATO members to seriously address this issue. Since NATO’s collective defense is only activated in the event of an armed attack on a NATO member, it has deployed a “Hybrid Strategy” since 2015, to prepare for hybrid attacks, prevent them through deterrence, and should that fail, to defend NATO states. See *NATO: NATO’s Response to Hybrid Threats*, 21 June 2022.

tional order with its existing economic and military resources, but it can pressure, wear down, and thus destroy what exists through a “strategy of disorder”.<sup>22</sup>

### 2.3 *The Strategic Role of the Russian Military*

Russian rulers see the armed forces as an important power factor. Internationally, they allow Russia to implement its indirect strategy by using the Russian army as a deterrent “shield” that allows the “sword” of Russian intelligence to strike, in a variation of the motto of the former Soviet intelligence agency, the KGB.<sup>23</sup>

To restore its military to its former greatness following the collapse of the Soviet Union, over the past two decades, Russia has invested significant resources to modernize and reform its armed forces, focusing on weapon systems, readiness, and personnel (on the success of these reforms, see Section 4.1). In doing so, care was taken not to repeat the Soviet Union's mistake of weakening itself economically through disproportionate military spending. Likewise, Russia revised and adapted the conceptual foundations of its military strategy to the new security environment as seen from a Russian perspective. This resulted in a strategic approach that “combines nuclear, conventional, and informational (cyber) instruments of influence into an integrated coercive mechanism”.<sup>24</sup>

Nuclear weapons are an important element of this strategy internationally, but also regionally (for more on this, see Section 4.2.). From a conventional point of view, the Russian armed forces fulfill several tasks: firstly, they are intended to deter an attack on Russia, and secondly, to demonstrate Russia's power and operational readiness to an internal and external audi-

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22 Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin's former chief ideologue had called for exporting chaos around the world. See Surkov, Vladislav: “Куда делся хаос? Распаковка стабильности” [Where has the chaos gone? Unpacking stability], Actual Comment, 20 November 2021. For an inventory of subversive actions by the Kremlin against Western allies, see Mandraud, Isabelle/Théron, Julien: *Poutine, la stratégie du désordre*. Tallandier: Paris 2021.

23 This image is by Christopher N. Donnelly, British expert on the Soviet and Russian military. Both shield and sword adorn the coat of arms of the KGB, founded in 1954 and officially disbanded in 1991, which was resurrected as the FSB.

24 Adamsky, Dmitry (Dima): From Moscow with coercion: Russian deterrence theory and strategic culture. In: *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, Issue 1–2, 2018, pp. 33–60.

ence. To this end, Russia has been organizing large-scale maneuvers since 1999, including the involvement of its nuclear forces.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the Russian military is supposed to be able to conduct missions outside the country, to support friendly regimes or to project influence, whether in the “near neighborhood” or at a greater distance.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, private security and military companies operating in a legal gray zone play an important role. Chief among them the infamous *Wagner Group*, whose core of mercenaries has been recruited from the Russian armed forces benefitting from logistical support from the Russian military intelligence service GRU and the Russian army, as well as from financial subsidies from the Russian state.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding the informational element of Russian military strategy, it must be noted that the idea of subversion has a long tradition in Russian strategic thinking, going back to the Imperial Russian school of military strategy.<sup>28</sup> Among other things, it involves approaches and considerations that Western armies which fought in colonial wars should be familiar with. As for nonlinear warfare, the Russian military has developed concepts of “psychological-informational confrontation” that are used in both peacetime and wartime, e.g. in Ukraine and Syria.<sup>29</sup>

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- 25 On the utility of military exercises, see, for example, Heuser, Beatrice/Heier, Tor-mod/Lasconjarias, Guillaume (Eds.): *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact*. NATO Defense College NDC Forum Papers Series, Rome 2018, p. 9.
  - 26 Russia currently has a military presence in Armenia, Abkhazia, Belarus, the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, South Ossetia, Sudan, Syria, Transnistria, Ukraine and Venezuela, among others, either permanently with military bases or on an ad hoc basis, whether with official soldiers or with Wagner troops.
  - 27 On Wagner and its relations with the Russian state, see, for example, Østensen, Åse Gilje/Bukkvoll, Tor: *Private military companies – Russian great power politics on the cheap?* In: *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 33, Issue 1–2, 2022, pp. 130–151. After its aborted march on Moscow in June 2023 led by its then head, Yevgeny Prigozhin, Vladimir Putin stated that Wagner had received 86,26 billion rubles (around 930 million euros) in state support between May 2022 and May 2023 (27 June 2023, meeting with service members at the Kremlin).
  - 28 This school of thought was also maintained by military thinkers in exile, whose writings were received in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this context, Ofer Fridman particularly highlights Evgeny Messner’s “The face of Contemporary War”, which was published in Buenos Aires in 1959. On the roots of Russian military art, see Fridman, Ofer: *Strategiya: The Foundations of the Russian Art of Strategy*. Hurst & Company: London 2021, p.13 ff, p.235 ff.
  - 29 Minic, Dimitri: *La guerre informationnelle psychologique dans la pensée militaire russe et ses applications en Ukraine et en Syrie*. In: *Annuaire français des relations internationales*, Vol. 22, 2021, pp. 523–533.

### 3 Russia's Indirect and Direct Strategy to End Ukrainian Statehood

Ukraine's central place in the geopolitical and spiritual conception of Putin's Russia explains why, at least since the "Orange Revolution" in 2004, the Kremlin has not limited itself to determining Ukraine's political and economic orientation. Rather, it has used indirect and direct means to destroy a Ukrainian nation-state as a functioning political and cultural entity.

#### 3.1 Preventing Western Integration through the Annexation of Crimea and War in Eastern Ukraine

The Russian approach of binding Ukraine to the East with the help of Russia-friendly forces in politics and business faltered as a result of the planned EU Association Agreement and the 2013–2014 "Euromaidan" protest movement in response to Russian pressure not to turn toward Europe. In response, Russia opted for a strategy of indirect confrontation, which combined kinetic elements, such as the use of paramilitary troops and the undercover deployment of Russian military forces, with non-kinetic elements, such as economic, diplomatic, cultural, psychological-informational, and cyber operations.

Spring 2014 saw the annexation of Crimea by Russian soldiers without troop insignia as well as the start of a war in eastern Ukraine. Russia provided training, equipment, guidance, and direct military support to separatist forces, and launched disinformation campaigns to discredit Ukraine's political institutions at home, in Russia, and in other European countries.<sup>30</sup> As a result, Ukraine accepted the 2014 and 2015 *Minsk Agreements* under the aegis of France, Germany, and Russia, which were never fully implemented. *Minsk I* and *II* established a negotiating format that allowed Russia (officially not a party to the conflict) to exert pressure on Kyiv. In almost entirely dependent on Russia separatist "people's republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk, dictatorial, quasi-state structures emerged, and Russian passports were distributed. The contact line in the Donbas remained relatively

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30 Lange-Ionatamišvili, Elina: Analysis of Russia's information campaign against Russia. Examining non-military aspects of the crisis in Ukraine from the strategic communications perspectives. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence: Riga 2015.

static despite permanent fighting. Together with Crimea, Ukraine had lost approximately seven percent of its territory.<sup>31</sup>

Even if it had failed to provoke open conflict between Russian-speaking and non-Russian-speaking segments of the Ukrainian population, and the dysfunctional Ukrainian state structures had withstood the combined kinetic and non-kinetic Russian onslaught, Russia had achieved an important objective. As a theater of war for the foreseeable future, Ukraine's integration into Western structures seemed illusory, despite international support for Kyiv.

### 3.2 Genesis of a "Regime Change by Military Means"

As negotiations in the *Normandy Format* and continued application of its indirect strategy failed to improve the *status quo* achieved in Ukraine in 2014/15 further, Moscow sought a new approach. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian president, living in seclusion, reportedly engaged in intensive personal studies of Ukraine.<sup>32</sup>

Domestically, the constitutional reform orchestrated in 2020 had cleared the path for Putin to remain in office until 2036, with presidential elections scheduled for 2024. Externally, the conditions for a "liberating blow" seemed favorable: Western counterparts appeared weak and divided in light of the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the imminent completion of the controversial *Nord Stream 2* pipeline. Putin's calculation that he could succeed with an open attack on Ukraine, however, can be traced primarily to longstanding failures by the West to act against the Kremlin's numerous activities undermining its interests. Russian leaders simply did not seem to have anticipated that Europe and North America would view the renewed attack on Ukraine as a direct threat and provide decisive political, financial, intelligence, and military support to Kyiv.

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31 This represent about 44,000 km<sup>2</sup> of the total 603,000 km<sup>2</sup> of Ukrainian territory. By early 2019, an estimated 13,000 people, including more than 3,000 civilians, are also believed to have died in fighting in eastern Ukraine. See RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty: "Death Toll Up To 13,000 In Ukraine Conflict, Says UN Rights Office", 26 February 2019.

32 See, for example, Vladimir Putin's article published in July 2021, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", in which he invokes, among other things, the "trinity" of Great, Little (by which he means Ukrainians), and White Russia. Putin, Vladimir: Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев, 12 July 2021.

The Russian assault on Ukraine in February 2022 can also be explained by underestimating the Ukrainian military, especially its willingness to learn and to adapt, as well as by disregarding the resistance and resilience of the Ukrainian population.<sup>33</sup> From massive support to their government, to spontaneous engagement in, for example, disaster relief and medical services, to attacks primarily on supply convoys and weapons and gasoline depots of Russian units – Russian planners seemed instead to have expected to be greeted as liberators with bread and salt by large segments of the population.<sup>34</sup>

This underestimation of a genuine Ukrainian will to survive met its equivalent in an overestimation of Russia's real military capabilities.<sup>35</sup> Decision-makers took past successes of Russia's indirect strategy, e.g. during the Crimean annexation or in Syria, in which only limited forces were deployed as proof that Russian troops would perform as well against Ukraine in 2022 as in scheduled large-scale exercises against an imaginary NATO enemy.

Another reason that may have motivated President Putin to attack Ukraine is domestic. Even if the war objectively entails negative consequences for Russia in the form of sanctions, among other things, it has the advantage of mobilizing the Russian population in the period leading up to the next presidential elections in 2024, beyond conquest and the course of the war. War becomes a goal in itself, as the systematic destruction of social values and the demoralization of the Russian population as a result perpetuates the need for simple truths and clear instructions.<sup>36</sup> It also contributes to the growing isolation of Russian society in Europe.<sup>37</sup> However, continued "partial mobilization" ordered in the face of military defeats could shake the Russian social consensus not only regarding the war against Ukraine.<sup>38</sup>

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33 On the importance of resilience in wartime, see, for example, Braw, Elisabeth: The UK's Integrated Review: The Centrality of Resilience Concepts, RUSI Commentary, 6 April 2020.

34 Antonova, Natalia: "Argument: Russians Believe Ukrainians Want to Be 'Liberated'", Foreign Policy, 2 December 2021.

35 Putin's overestimation of the Russian armed forces was matched by erroneous Western assessments of Russian military power.

36 See Medvedev, Sergey: "Мать родна. Сергей Медведев – о войне как национальной идее" [Mat' rodna. Sergey Medvedev on War as a National Idea], Radio Svoboda, 18 July 2022.

37 See Krimer, Ksenia: "Die Gesellschaft der Gewalt", Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 31 July 2022.

38 Kremlin: Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 21 September 2022. Mobilization is supposed to be limited to a Russian reserve of 300,000, but can *de*

#### 4 The Russian “Special Military Operation” in Ukraine

What was promised was a quick victory, with an airborne operation aimed at Kyiv and the “denazification” and “demilitarization” of the whole of Ukraine. Faced with fierce Ukrainian resistance, Russia’s “special military operation” has concentrated on the “liberation” of the Donbas instead, a battle it is neither winning nor losing. Russian combat operations bear signs of a genocidal war of extermination. In the context of the “special operation”, the nuclear element is omnipresent.

##### 4.1 The Failure of Russian Warfare

After Putin recognized the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics” on February 21, 2022, Russia’s military assault on Ukraine began on February 24 with a combination of artillery and air force bombardments of strategic and civilian targets, cyberattacks on Ukrainian army command structures, the deployment of elite airborne forces around Kyiv, and the entry of approximately 120,000 of the 190,000 Russian ground troops massed on the border, which advanced into Ukraine from the north, north-east, south-east, and south.<sup>39</sup> The attack was preceded by a Russian campaign of infiltration of Ukrainian defense, security, and law enforcement agencies.<sup>40</sup>

Beginning in late March, after suffering heavy losses, the Russian army withdrew from the north and northwest to concentrate its offensive on increasing Russian separatist-controlled portions in the east of the country.<sup>41</sup> In late August and early September 2022, the Ukrainian army managed to recapture territory in the northeast and south of the country through counteroffensives. Ukrainian reconquests continued despite Russia’s sham

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*facto* be extended at will. Often carried out chaotically, it triggered a mass flight of men fit for military service from Russia. A disproportionate number of Russia’s ethnic minority have been mobilized.

- 39 This is an estimated seventy percent of Russia’s operational land forces. The 190,000 troops include separatist units from the Donbas as well as Russian security forces for manning.
- 40 See Saito, Mari/Tsvetkova, Maria: “The enemy within. How Russia spread a secret web of agents across Ukraine”, Reuters, 28 July 2022.
- 41 See Utz, Tobias/Serif, Moritz/Hoppe, Constantin/Akkoyun, Nail/Stör, Christian/Neumeyer, Sarah: “Schwere Verluste für Russland: 44.700 Soldaten gefallen, 1900 Panzer zerstört”, Frankfurter Rundschau, 21 August 2022.



referenda in violation of international law and annexation of the Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions. In the summer of 2023, a Ukrainian counteroffensive planned over many months was launched.

What explains the bad performance of Russian troops? To be sure, reforms undertaken during the past fifteen years have created better trained and more operational Russian armed forces than those of the 1990s. However, after reform efforts beginning in 2007 under Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, followed in 2012 by further reforms under the aegis of Sergei Shoigu, Russia has neither a streamlined professional army nor Soviet-style armed forces capable of mass mobilization. The asymmetric weapons systems developed exist in too small numbers to be decisive in war. Likewise, endemic corruption in the armed forces could not be brought under control.<sup>42</sup>

The serious logistical deficiencies in planning, the replacement of virtually all commanders of the “special operation”, the lack of coordination between units, and the almost complete absence of combined arms operations speak a clear operational language.<sup>43</sup> It is Wagner troops which lay claim to the only recent battlefield success, the Pyrrhic victory at the town of Bakhmut in May 2023. Also striking are the low combat morale, and the high casualty rates among Russian soldiers, including senior officers, which cannot be compensated for by reserves and recruitment in the short and medium term. In addition, there is lack of military equipment, including communications technology and supplies for troops. The rapid consumption of ammunition and wear and tear on military equipment, for which adequate replacements are not available, are also a Russian cause for concern. Russia also lacks military satellites for reconnaissance, the Russian air force can only be used to a limited extent, and the Russian navy is completely marginalized in the Black Sea.

Although the Russian military performance in Ukraine has been anything but stellar, Russia has made some progress toward its goal of weakening Ukraine as a national entity with its “special military operation”. At the time of writing of this chapter, close to one-fifth of Ukraine’s territory is still occupied by Russia, including high-value agricultural land. Ports on the Black and Azov Seas, the North Crimean Canal, and the Zaporizhzhia

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42 Donnelly, Chris N.: Ukraine Update. Renova Associates Report, Private Briefing Paper, 22 May 2022.

43 Kofman, Michael/Lee, Rob: “Not Built for Purpose: The Russian Military’s Ill-Fated Force Design”, War on the Rocks, 2 June 2022.

nuclear power plant, the largest plant in Europe, remain under Russian control.

In the absence of military subjugation of Ukraine, Russia is focused on destroying the country. Civilian energy and water infrastructure, hospitals, rail networks, roads, and factory facilities are being targeted by bombardment. The Russian siege and shelling of Ukrainian cities suggest comparisons with Russia's strategy of terror in Chechnya and Syria, a situation partly remediated by deliveries of Western air defense systems towards the end of 2022. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 5.5 million people, mostly women and children, have fled the country.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, nearly one million Ukrainians are believed to have been deported to Russia against their will from occupied parts of the country, including more than 19,000 children separated from their parents.<sup>45</sup> The withdrawal of Russian troops reveals systematic human rights abuses and war crimes against Ukrainian civilians and Ukrainian soldiers in liberated areas.<sup>46</sup> Russia stands accused of destroying the Kakhovka dam in Southern Ukraine in June 2023 causing long-term environmental devastation. All of this suggests the classification of Russian combat operations in Ukraine as a war of extermination with genocidal features.

#### *4.2 The Russian War against Ukraine in the Shadow of Atomic Weapons*

After a "long decade" of their marginalization after the end of the Cold War, nuclear weapons returned to the strategic conversation of Europe with Russia's war in Georgia in 2008, and at the very latest with Russia's annexation of Crimea. Since then, nuclear weapons again define the relationship between Russia and the members of NATO and the EU.

As for Russia's 2022 war against Ukraine, all its stages are marked by the existence and possible use of Russian nuclear weapons. Whether it is joint military exercises with Belarus with a nuclear component in the run-up to

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44 See Santos, Sofia/Pitet, Benjamin: "Deported civilians: How civilians are illegally deported to Russia", Center for Information Resilience, 5 August 2022.

45 See the Ukrainian government website, "Children of war", <https://childrenofwar.gov.ua/en/>. See also Tsui, Karina: "At Least 900,000 Ukrainians 'Forcibly Deported' to Russia, U.S. Says", Washington Post, 13 July 2022.

46 See, for example, Koch, Matthias: "Kriegsverbrechen mit System. Das Geheimnis der russischen Grausamkeit", Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland, 2 August 2022.

the attack on Ukraine in February,<sup>47</sup> nuclear saber-rattling in presidential addresses,<sup>48</sup> raising the alert level of nuclear forces at the start of the war,<sup>49</sup> and the occupation of and combat operations around the Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia nuclear facilities – Putin operates with the nuclear threat in all forms, especially the fear of nuclear catastrophe in the broadest sense.

Nuclear armaments play a central role for Russia in the international, but also in regional and local contexts. On the international level, they classically serve to deter an attack with weapons of mass destruction on Russian territory and that of its allies, with the threat of inflicting unacceptable damage in retaliation with nuclear-tipped land-, air-, and sea-based missiles. Russian military strategies published since 2000 also envision the limited use of nuclear weapons in a conventional confrontation. For this reason, since the early 2000s, the simulation of a limited nuclear strike has been part of Russia's regular large-scale maneuvers.<sup>50</sup>

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47 Belarus abandoned its non-nuclear status and announced plans to allow the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons on its territory. On June 25, 2022, Putin declared that the *Iskander-M* tactical missile system, which can fire missiles with both conventional and nuclear warheads, would be moved to Belarus. It is supposed to have arrived in Belarus in June 2023. See Painter, Sandra: "Putin promises Belarus nuclear-capable missiles to counter 'aggressive' West", Reuters, 25 June 2022.

48 "Whoever tries to obstruct us, much less create a threat to our country, to our people, must know that Russia's response will be immediate and will lead to consequences such as you have never experienced in your history." This phrase is widely interpreted as a threat of possible use of nuclear bombs. See Kremlin: Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 24 February 2022. See also the President's address of September 21, 2022, again announcing the possible use of nuclear weapons, and Putin's speech of September 30, 2022, in which he referred to the "precedent" of Hiroshima (President's Address "Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia", 30 September 2022).

49 See Kremlin: Meeting of Vladimir Putin with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov, 27 February 2022, Moscow. However, this raising of the alert level appears to be limited to increasing the number of staff in the command centers of the strategic missile forces and the two nuclear fleets, Northern and Pacific, and does not appear to involve any changes as to the status of mobile intercontinental ballistic nuclear missiles or other elements of the nuclear triad. The situation regarding tactical nuclear weapons is more difficult to assess. See Faucon, Isabelle: *Guerre en Ukraine: le sens du signalement nucléaire russe*. In: *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, Vol. 30, 26 July 2022.

50 In contrast to the Cold War, the targets of a limited use of nuclear weapons of a strategic and sub-strategic nature in past military exercises were military rather than population or economic centers. See Sokov, Nikolai: "Russian military doctrine calls

The concept of limited use of nuclear weapons is explained by fears, triggered by the 1999 Kosovo war, that technologically-superior NATO states might interfere militarily in “Russian internal affairs”.<sup>51</sup> While Russian military doctrine in 2000 speaks of nuclear weapons use “in response to large-scale aggression using conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of the Russian Federation”,<sup>52</sup> as of 2010, the threshold for using nuclear weapons in the event of a conventional conflict was raised, and limited to the case of an existential threat to Russia.<sup>53</sup> The six-page presidential decree “Foundations of State Policy in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence”, published in 2020, confirms the same wording of a use of nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict “in the case of aggression against Russia with conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy”.<sup>54</sup>

In 2018, the Pentagon underlined in its “Nuclear Posture Review” that Russia could use a low-yield nuclear weapon to persuade its adversaries to relent in a confrontation.<sup>55</sup> Among experts, the concept “escalate to de-escalate” is subject of debate,<sup>56</sup> but it does not appear in official Russian documents.<sup>57</sup> At the regional level, Russia could theoretically conduct a military operation and seize territory under a nuclear “shield”. Thus, nuclear

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a limited nuclear strike ‘de-escalation’. Here’s why”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 8 March 2022.

- 51 Ball, Joshua: “Escalate to De-Escalate: Russia’s Nuclear Deterrence Strategy”, *Global Security Review*, 7 March 2022.
- 52 See “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation”, April 2000.
- 53 See “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation”, February 2010 and “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation”, December 2014; See also Ven Bruusgaard, Kristin: Russian nuclear strategy and conventional inferiority. In: *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 44, Issue 1, 2020, pp. 3–35.
- 54 Kremlin: Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 02.06.2020 № 355 [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation № 355 from 02.06.2020]; this point was reaffirmed in March 2022 in an interview by Dmitry Medvedev, current Vice President of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. Medvedev, Dmitry: “Однополярному миру конец, США больше не хозяева планеты Земля” [The unipolar world is coming to an end, the United States is no longer the master of planet Earth], *RIA Novosti*, 26 March 2022.
- 55 See, for example, the foreword by the U.S. Secretary of Defense (page I and pages XI-XII) *Nuclear Posture Review*, The Pentagon: Washington 2018.
- 56 See, for example, Olikier, Olga/Balitskiy, Andrey: “The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian ‘De-Escalation’: A Dangerous Solution to a Nonexistent Problem”, *War on the Rocks*, 20 February 2018.
- 57 From the Russian perspective, Russian nuclear doctrine is primarily intended to prevent the risk of a first strike potentially disarming Russia. See Roberts, Cynthia:

weapons would fit into a continuum of “*anti-access/area denial, A2/AD*” defense,<sup>58</sup> which Russia applies in the Arctic, the Baltic, and Crimea, among other places.

Would Russia use one or more of its 4,310 nuclear warheads in any form in the war against Ukraine? On September 21, 2022, the Russian president warned that he could employ nuclear weapons in the event of a threat to Russia's territorial integrity, which would constitute a break with Russia's official nuclear doctrine.<sup>59</sup>

The Russian president's sometimes eschatological rhetoric regarding Ukraine poses the question as to how a threat to Russian state existence or Russian territorial integrity might be defined. Here, the linkages between ecclesiastical political and military authorities fail to reassure. In the nuclear forces, as in other parts of the military, the Orthodox priesthood has permeated all levels of command, and the church positions itself as the guardian of the state's nuclear potential.<sup>60</sup>

Putin's (political) survival depends on an outcome of the fighting in Ukraine that can be portrayed as a success in domestic political terms. His nuclear rhetoric reflects the aforementioned coercive Russian approach of using nuclear weapons not only to deter an NBC and conventional attack but also to intimidate its adversaries. Although the consequences of using nuclear weapons would be difficult for Russia to calculate and therefore would make it seem unlikely, a nuclear taboo-breaking by Russia cannot be completely ruled out.<sup>61</sup> However, giving in to nuclear threats or the use of nuclear weapons is not a viable option. Such a success for Putin would only make future armed conflict with Russia more likely and trigger a wave of nuclear proliferation in the world.

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“Revelations about Russia's Nuclear Deterrence Policy”, War on the Rocks, 19 June 2020.

58 An “anti-access/area-denial” (A2/AD) weapon system is a defensive device or strategy designed to prevent an adversary from occupying or transiting land, sea, or air space.

59 “И при угрозе территориальной целостности нашей страны, для защиты России и нашего народа мы, безусловно, используем все имеющиеся в нашем распоряжении средства. Это не блеф.” [If the territorial integrity of our country is threatened, we will certainly use all means at our disposal to protect Russia and our people. This is not a bluff]. Kremlin: Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 21 September 2022. Following the annexation of the territories of eastern Ukraine held only partially by Russian and separatist forces, Russia claims them as part of its national territory.

60 See Adamsky, Dmitry: Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy. Religion, Politics, and Strategy. Stanford University Press: Redwood City 2019.

61 Likewise, an attack with chemical weapons would be conceivable.

## 5 Outlook

Has Russia's direct military attack on Ukraine brought it closer to its goal of expanding its sphere of influence and to consolidating its great power status? Despite Russian territorial gains, civilian and military losses in Ukraine, and the infliction of massive damage, the Ukrainian state and nation have emerged stronger from the Russian attack, not least because of broad support from the international community. Russian armed forces have lost prestige as a result of the "special military operation". Internationally, Russia appears quite isolated, and domestically, critical voices have been raised regarding the conduct of the war.

However, Russia continues to have means at its disposal to pursue its strategic goals. Russian threats of military escalation could push Western countries to pressure Ukraine to return to the negotiating table. The global economic crisis, exacerbated by a Russian-induced shortage of energy resources, grain, fertilizer, and other raw materials, also provides Russia with many opportunities to pursue its indirect strategy of undermining its adversaries. Similarly, targeted sabotage of critical infrastructure of Western societies by Russia cannot be ruled out.

Whatever the outcome of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, until Russia is ready for a post-imperial future, the fate of Ukraine, but also that of the countries of the Western Balkans, Moldova, Georgia, or Armenia, and the future of Europe remain inextricably tied. The attempt after the end of the Cold War to integrate Russia into a rule-based European security architecture, which does not recognize any "zones of influence", must be considered a definitive failure since February 2022 at the latest. The confrontation with Russia on multiple, constantly changing playing fields of international and national politics, as well as the shaping of a new relationship with Moscow will require enormous political, military, economic, and cultural efforts coordinated between partners.<sup>62</sup>

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62 See, for example, NATO's new June 2022 Strategic Concept.

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## Chapter 8: Operational-Tactical Approach of the Russian Army in the 2022 Ukraine War

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### Abstract

Since the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces on February 24, 2022, the use of mechanized formations, massive artillery, and the hitherto unheard-of mass deployment of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones has become part of everyday life in Ukraine. The Russian “battalion tactical group” is now also receiving increased public attention, but its success is questioned in contrast to 2014.

### Keywords

Russian war of aggression, battalion tactical group (BTG), “special operation”, Donbas, “Russian steamroller”, Western weapons systems, mobilization, Ukrainian offensive in Kharkiv and Kherson

### *1 Introduction*

The combat and tactical deployment of Russian forces has been the subject of public comment and debate since the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian troops.<sup>1</sup> The structure and deployment of the Russian battalion tactical group (BTG) in the Donbas is the subject of ongoing military assessments. Indeed, a current assessment alone falls short. It is critical to also consider the invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops in the summer of 2014. At that time, several Russian BTGs were deployed for the first time. The success of the Russian invasion of Ukraine at that time was the basis for planning for the Russian attack in February 2022. The deployment of Russian BTGs

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1 Zagorodnyuk, Andriy: “Ukrainian victory shatters Russia’s reputation as a military superpower”, Atlantic Council, 13 September 2022.

in the summer of 2014 led the Russian General Staff to believe that their use could be successfully brought to bear under the right conditions and in compliance with operational doctrines and reasonable tasking. The successes of the battles in the Donbas in 2014 and 2015 convinced the Russian side that simultaneous attacks conducted narrowly and deeply on multiple fronts can provide a desired rapid advance. It can therefore be assumed that the planning of the Russian attack on February 24, 2022, was quite significantly influenced by this experience.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the Ukrainian side also learned its lessons. The Ukrainian General Staff realized that it was not possible to repel invading Russian forces in the immediate vicinity of the border. Already the deployment of Russian artillery from the Russian territory could not be countered, since any counterfire would have provided an immediate reason to invade. The following simultaneous approach, on the other hand, could not be repelled, especially in the open and flat border area. It was thus clear that in the event of a renewed Russian attack, any defensive success could only be achieved in the depths of Ukrainian territory. The Russian enemy therefore had to be allowed into the country in order to be fought there in a targeted manner.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 The Russian Battalion Tactical Group (BTG)

The war in Georgia in 2008 showed that, from the Russian point of view at the time, the division and regiment structure was not very suitable for modern operational command. As a result of the reform process of the Russian armed forces that began in 2008, the brigades or regiments were given the task of using the available professional cadres to form small, *ad hoc* deployable units, so-called “BTGs”. The first deployment of these forces took place when Russian forces invaded Ukraine in the summer of 2014. The BTG is a tactical formation that is essentially a reinforced combat battalion. It consists of mechanized and motorized infantry and

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- 2 Reisner, Markus/Hahn, Christian: Die russische Dampfwalze – Eine erste Zwischenbewertung. In: Truppendienst, Vol. 3, Vienna 2022.
  - 3 Jensen, Benjamin: “Ukraine’s rapid advance against Russia shows mastery of 3 essential skills for success in modern warfare”, Yahoo News, 16 September 2022; Poulsen, Niels Bo/Staun, Jørgen (Eds.): Russia’s Military Might – A Portrait of its Armed Forces. Djøf Publishing: Copenhagen 2021.

battle tanks, extremely strong artillery elements as well as reconnaissance, engineer, anti-aircraft, electronic warfare, and supply elements.<sup>4</sup>

The BTG can independently conduct linked-arms combat but is hardly in a position to implement major operations without appropriate logistical support. Due to its self-sufficiency, the BTG has only a limited ability to conduct “deep operations”, which was previously possible at the division level at the earliest. In such tasks, BTG commanders are confronted with situations involving the coordination of a wide variety of weapons and troop types and the need to ensure complex logistical planning. This requires a high level of training. From the perspective of the Russian armed forces, the deployment of BTGs in Ukraine in 2014 was a success. They wanted to replicate this success in February 2022.<sup>5</sup>

### 3 Phase 1: The Russian Attack on February 24, 2022

On February 24, 2022, Russian troops invaded Ukraine in a “special operation” declared by President Putin himself. The prelude was targeted cyberattacks and air strikes against the political and military leadership’s communications infrastructure, fixed long-range air defenses and air forces as well as an attempted decapitation strike in Kyiv.<sup>6</sup> The use of Russian long-range precision weapons was scaled. This is an indication that large and sustained Ukrainian resistance was not expected. The nearly 200,000 Russian troops assembled in the months leading up to the attack were deployed in five major force groupings. Each force grouping was provided by one of Russia’s five military districts. The Western, Southern, Central, Northern, and Eastern Military Districts each formed forces ranging in strength from 30,000 to 50,000 troops. The headquarter of a military district is capable of conducting its own inter-force operation. It can also employ its own organic resources for all required areas of effect. The military districts are under the control of the Joint Strategic Command in Moscow in peacetime as well as in action. The latter had defined the combat tasks of the five attacking force groupings before the attack began

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4 Reisner/Hahn, Die russische Dampfwalze, 2022.

5 Reisner, Markus: Krieg in der Ukraine – Die “Bataillonstaktische Gruppe” im Angriff, Österreichs Bundesheer, 17 March 2022.

6 Kofsky, Jeremy: “An Airfield too far: Failures at Market Garden and Antonov Airfield”, Modern War Institute, 5 May 2022.

on February 24, 2022. Each military district command was therefore tasked with independently winning the set attack target.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.1 Deployment of Combined Armies

The Russian armed forces have a total of twelve so-called “combined armies”. These are the link between the military district headquarters and the divisions, brigades, and regiments. The combined armies perform the functions of operational-tactical headquarters. All twelve combined armies were involved in the “special operation” in Ukraine from the beginning. They were additionally reinforced by other forces (e.g. airborne units and artillery units, as well as paramilitary units “Rosgvardia” and a private military company “Wagner Group”). The respective combined army was composed in its structure so that it could fulfill the task assigned to it. The invasion of Ukraine was carried out in the following structure:<sup>8</sup>

Force Grouping “Kyiv Northwest” (provided by the Eastern Military District):

- 35th and 36th Combined Armies;
- Parts of the 98th and 106th Airborne Division

Force Grouping “Kyiv Northeast” (provided by the Central Military District):

- 2nd and 41st Combined Army;
- Parts of the 98th and 106th Airborne Division

Force Grouping “Kharkiv” (provided by the Western Military District):

- 6th and 20th Combined Armies;
- 1st Guard Tank Army

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7 Reisner, Markus: Der Krieg um die Ukraine – Die Schlacht im Donbass. Eine Kurzzusammenfassung nach 70 Tagen. In: Austria Institut für Europa und Sicherheitspolitik (AIES), Focus 4/2022, 5 May 2022.

8 Reisner/Hahn, Die russische Dampfwalze, 2022; Poulsen/Staun, Russia’s Military Might, 2021.

Force grouping “Donbas” (provided by the Southern Military District):

- 8th and 49th Combined Armies;
- Parts of the 150th Motor Rifle Division

Force Grouping “Crimea” (provided by the Southern Military District):

- 58th Combined Army;
- Parts of the 76th Airborne Division

In addition, there was the “Brest” force grouping with brigade-sized forces from each of the 5th and 29th combined armies. At the time of the invasion, a combined army usually consisted of two to four brigades. Most of them were mechanized infantry brigades, in rare cases armored brigades. In addition, there were missile, artillery, anti-aircraft, engineer, reconnaissance, NBC, electronic warfare (EW), telecommunications as well as logistics units. There was not always enough equipment available. Thus, often only individual TOS-1 rocket launchers, but not entire batteries, were assigned to the units. A brigade or regiment formed up to two BTGs. A combined army has an average of eight to ten BTGs. A special feature was the 1st Guards Tank Army. This consisted of the 2nd Motor Rifle Division, the 4th Armored Division, the 47th Guards Tank Division, and the 27th Motor Rifle Brigade. These units formed nearly twenty BTGs.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2 *The Defensive Success of Ukraine*

In the first days, the Russian advance proceeded swiftly. However, in contrast to the attack by Russian forces in August 2014, this time Ukrainian conventional forces did not attempt to stop the Russian army near the border. In 2014, this resulted in the massive Ukrainian casualties mentioned earlier. This time, the Russian forces marched in and were only slightly engaged by the Ukrainians in delaying action for the time being. Russian formations were allowed to advance for nearly a week until their supply lines were overstretched and vulnerable without security. Targeted bridge blasts caused further delays. Then Ukrainian Special Operations Forces and National Guard units struck. In dozens of ambushes and in concert with armed drones, they destroyed Russian supply convoys that were on

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9 Reisner, *Der Krieg um die Ukraine – Die Schlacht im Donbass*, 5 May 2022.

the move.<sup>10</sup> In addition, there was the decentralized use of their own artillery combined with a time- and space-optimized system of fire request (software application GIS “Arta” or “Kropyva”). When, after five days, the Russian forces took a first operational break to refresh themselves, they found that they had been cut off from supplies. The troops now had to be deployed to provide security. These forces were missing from the units on the fronts from this point on.<sup>11</sup>

Here, the limitations of the Russian BTGs quickly became apparent. In the face of adversity, the Russian side abandoned individual weapon systems (e.g. entire anti-aircraft batteries) and took fuel from the abandoned vehicles in order to be able to continue advancing by looting Ukrainian gas stations. This was especially evident in the north and northeast. In the flat terrain of the south, where Ukraine had not blown up all bridges on the extensive river system as planned,<sup>12</sup> the advance continued apace. Mariupol was encircled by the end of the first week. The first weeks of the war, however, were marked by reports of success on the Ukrainian side. Images of burning Russian tanks and infantry fighting vehicles and of successful attacks on supply and resupply convoys of Russian forces dominated the media. In particular, the low proportion of infantry forces in the Russian BTGs was now causing major breakdowns within them.<sup>13</sup> It became increasingly obvious that the BTG’s outline – guarantor of success in 2014 – was unable to successfully complete the required combat tasks.<sup>14</sup>

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10 Reisner, Markus: Der Einsatz von Drohnen im Ukrainekrieg, Österreichs Bundesheer, 28 April 2022.

11 Reisner, Markus: Der Einsatz der ukrainischen Artillerie. In: Truppendienst – Magazin des Österreichischen Bundesheeres, 29 June 2022; Reisner, Markus: Die Erfolgsgeschichte der ukrainischen Artillerie, Österreichs Bundesheer, 19 May 2022.

12 Карпуук, Oleksandr: “Історія оповита чутками: чому не підірвали міст з Кримом” [History is full of rumors: Why didn’t they blow up the bridge to Crimea?], Focus.ua, 16 May 2022.

13 Reisner, Markus: Erfolgreiche Abwehr einer russischen Kampfgruppe in einem Vorort von Kiew, Österreichs Bundesheer, 10 March 2022.

14 Reisner/Hahn, Die russische Dampfwalze, 2022; Spencer, John/Collins, Liam: “Waterworld: How Ukraine flooded three rivers to help save Kyiv”, Modern War Institute, 1 July 2022.



#### 4 Phase 2: The Formation of a New Russian Heavyweight

After initial successes and with the increasing arrival of intelligence data and weapons supplies from the U.S. and NATO, Ukrainian forces first went on the offensive in early April. Breakdowns in the Russian command cadres began to increase. Ukrainian forces managed to decisively delay and even sustainably repel the all-out assault by Russian forces in the Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy areas of northern and northeastern Ukraine. At the end of the sixth week, therefore, there was a change of strategy in the Russian operational command. After several weeks of operations, it was clear that the planned “deep engagement” by Russian forces had failed. The assault by five force groupings on four fronts had failed. The siege of Kyiv had to be abandoned on the west and east banks of the Dnipro after nearly forty days. Kharkiv, a significant railroad hub and major operational target (expressed by the approach of the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army), also withstood the attacks. With the help of fighter aircraft, drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles, Russian forces continued to destroy targeted weapons caches, artillery, and communications nodes in Ukraine, but on the ground the offensive stalled.<sup>15</sup>

The Russian leadership now set an attack on the Donbas as an achievable goal. The “special operation” was to be continued successfully by forming a new center of gravity. Russian troops therefore attempted to move the central heavyweight to the Donbas starting in the sixth week of the war. There, a preliminary decision was to be sought in a new phase of the war by encircling the Ukrainian forces. Within ten days, beginning in the seventh week, the forces of the two northern force groupings (a total of four combined armies and airborne units with still a total of 40,000 to 50,000 troops at that point) were moved by rail to the Donbas, nearly 1,000 km away. Here, a regrouping of forces took place. After the Russian forces withdrew to Belarus and Russia by early April, the western and eastern banks of the Dnipro River near Kyiv to the Belarus border could be retaken by Ukraine. This was celebrated as a great success. Meanwhile, in the Donbas, Russian troops were preparing for the next phase.<sup>16</sup>

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15 Reisner, Markus: Der Krieg um die Ukraine – Eine Bilanz nach 40 Tagen, Österreichs Bundesheer, 4 April 2022; Reisner, Der Krieg um die Ukraine – Die Schlacht im Donbass, 5 May 2022.

16 Reisner, Markus: Ukraine Krieg: “Zum Sterben zu viel, zum Leben zu wenig”, Österreichisches Bundesheer, 17 August 2022.

#### 4.1 The “Russian Steamroller”

In the Donbas, the Russian forces were now to attempt to force a regional decision at the line of contact by encircling the Ukrainian forces. Targeted advances from the Izyum and Volnovakha areas were to form a pocket with a northern and southern perimeter. From the ninth week, therefore, Russian forces began attacking in the Donbas in a pincer movement from the north (south of Izyum) and south (southwest of Donetsk). The approach was now slow, broad, and with massive artillery support. For this purpose, the forces were completely reorganized. Two to three BTGs were combined into regimental combat groups. Combat support was spun off, consolidated into separate groupings, and additional artillery was brought in from Russia. The overall command of the operation was handed over to two military districts. Thus, the Kharkiv to Donbas area and the Kherson to Mariupol-North area are under one command. Since it was already operating in the Donbas, the southern military district took command there. The Russian advance is slow (at about 1.5 kilometers per day), in combat form, with infantry support and extensive artillery preparatory fire. As a rule, Russian units fight for just around five days before being rotated out. Rotation and the start of the attack are accompanied by massive artillery fire. Even during the advance, any detected resistance is suppressed with artillery fire as a priority. The objective of an encirclement has also been made spatially shorter.<sup>17</sup>

Until the twelfth week, the Russian pincer movements hardly gained any ground, nevertheless, day by day steady gains in terrain were achieved. Along the river Siverskyi Donets fierce battles raged. With the help of pontoon bridges, both sides kept trying to advance at unexpected places. In the night of May 5/6, 2022, this new traditional operation finally gained ground. At Popasna, the Russian forces achieved the decisive breakthrough for the time being. It was finally possible to form a cauldron measuring 40 by 40 kilometers in mid-May.<sup>18</sup> This was squeezed to a narrowness of 20 kilometers on the western edge and thus operationally closed, for the Ukrainian supply lines were now under control of Russian artillery fire.<sup>19</sup>

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17 Reisner, Der Krieg um die Ukraine – Eine Bilanz nach 40 Tagen, 4 April 2022.

18 Reisner, Markus: Der Krieg um die Ukraine – Die Schlacht im Donbass I, Österreichs Bundesheer, 20 May 2022.

19 Reisner, Markus: Die Schlacht im Donbass II – Eine Bilanz nach 96 Tagen, Österreichs Bundesheer, 30 May 2022.

To counter the fierce Russian attacks in the Donbas, the Ukrainian side attempted to hit Russian forces in inconvenient locations. To this end, localized counteroffensives were launched in April and May 2022 in the area north and northeast of Kharkiv and near Kherson. All attacks were repelled by Russian forces. Here, too, Russian troops took a force-saving approach to defense. Thus, they often fell back on defensible terrain.<sup>20</sup>

### 5 Phase 3: The Ukrainian Counterattack

Since the end of August 2022, the Ukrainian armed forces have been able to achieve further sustained successes against Russian troops thanks to the offensives in Kherson and Kharkiv. In order to understand how this was possible against the supposed superiority of Russian troops, both Ukrainian offensives will now be examined in more detail. The four factors of terrain, forces employed, time, and information serve as the starting point for the analysis of the two offensives.

#### 5.1 The Offensive in the Kherson to Lyman Area

The Ukrainian offensive in the Kherson region of southern Ukraine began on August 29, 2022, and the volatile fighting continues to this day.<sup>21</sup>

#### Factor Terrain

Already at the beginning of the war the Russian forces were able to capture the western bank of the Dnipro River. Since then, they have held a bridgehead there that stretches from the mouth of the Dnipro River in the southwest through the city of Kherson to the northeast. In July and August 2022, the Ukrainians managed to deploy forces to create the conditions for a possible offensive. The preparatory phase was mainly characterized by the attempt to isolate the Russian bridgehead. The goal was to destroy the three main crossing points over the Dnipro River – a bridge near

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20 Reisner, Markus: Die Schlacht im Donbass III – Luhansk ist gefallen – Eine Bilanz nach 170 Tagen, Österreichs Bundesheer, 8 July 2022.

21 Reisner, Markus: Alles auf eine Karte – Die ukrainischen Offensiven in Charkiv und Cherson, Österreichs Bundesheer, 12 September 2022.

Kherson, a railroad bridge near it, and another bridge near a power plant to the east. These three bridges represented bottlenecks for the supply of Russian troops. After this *shaping*, the Ukrainians' intention was to tie down the Russian forces with two attacks to the north and south. After that, it was intended to form two cauldrons between the Dnipro River and the Ukrainian forces with a central thrust. Subsequently, it would have been the intention of the Ukrainian forces to break one encirclement after the other.<sup>22</sup>

### Factor Force

The weapons systems supplied by the West were an essential prerequisite for the possible success of the offensive. Particularly worthy of mention should be the T-72 tanks supplied from Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as BMP infantry fighting vehicles. These formed the spearhead of the attacks. The multiple rocket launcher system HIMARS, on the other hand, also proved effective in destroying the bridges. The use of mobile artillery, such as the Polish KRAB system, was also essential. The attacks themselves were carried out by three mechanized battle groups and, more importantly, mobile units designed to enable the Ukrainians to quickly take possession of sections of terrain after a breakthrough. The example of HIMARS illustrates the impact of Western weapons systems. As of October 2022, some 16 multiple rocket launcher systems have been delivered to Ukraine, which were used to attack more than 400 Russian targets. This had a major impact on the logistics of Russian troops, as important ammunition depots and bases were destroyed, among other things.<sup>23</sup>

### Time Factor

Russian forces used drones to reconnoiter Ukrainian deployments. This presented the Ukrainians with the challenge of deploying their forces in open terrain without immediately becoming the target of shelling. The flat terrain left little opportunity for cover. Video footage show the Russian

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22 Reisner, Alles auf eine Karte – Die ukrainischen Offensiven in Charkiv und Cherson, 12 September 2022.

23 Reisner, Markus: Schwere Waffen für die Ukraine, Truppendienst – Magazin des Österreichischen Bundesheeres, 17 August 2022; Reisner, Markus: Schwere Waffen für die Ukraine: Heavy Metal & Rock 'n Roll, Österreichs Bundesheer, 17 June 2022.

side using artillery to repeatedly target the few hedge strips where the Ukrainian side had taken cover. There are also photos from the beginning of the offensive showing the advancing Ukrainian formations in the open terrain and the impact of shells from the Russian artillery. It was not until the beginning of October 2022 that the situation improved for the advancing Ukrainian troops. After appropriate reconnaissance, they succeeded in identifying thinned-out areas in the Russian front line and breaking through them. The Russian troops were forced to retreat to prepared positions and bases in the depth (line Ishchenka-Dudchany).<sup>24</sup>

### Factor Information

The offensive began on August 29, 2022, in three places. On the one hand, with binding attacks in the southwest and in the northeast, respectively, as well as with the attempt of a central advance including a bridge or river crossing in the center. There, the intention was to form two cauldrons after destroying the bridges in the preparatory phase. Due to the high level of awareness of the Russian troops, it was possible for them to quickly wear down the Ukrainian attack peaks with counterattacks, artillery, and the use of combat helicopters. That is why there has probably been no significant advance by the Ukrainian side so far. However, the advance in the central area of the Russian bridgehead as well as in the northeast is noteworthy. The problem with the further development of the offensive is primarily the ongoing reconnaissance by the Russian side. The latter has also been digging in for months, especially in depth in prepared positions. Since October 2022, the Ukrainian side has been trying to force a resolution through massive artillery deployment. A clear indicator of this is the heavyweight use of HIMARS rocket launchers supplied from the USA with M30A1 projectiles (with area fragmentation effect against troop concentrations and defensive positions).<sup>25</sup>

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24 Reisner, Alles auf eine Karte – Die ukrainischen Offensiven in Charkiv und Cherson, 12 September 2022.

25 Ibid.

## 5.2 Offensive in Kharkiv

The Ukrainian offensive in the Kharkiv area began on September 6, 2022, and here a resounding measurable success was indeed achieved.<sup>26</sup>

### Factor Terrain

In the space of the second offensive, the Russian forces tried to attack further to the west after the success of the cauldron Battle of Lysychansk. For this purpose, another corps, the 3rd Army Corps, was formed. The assumed intention of the Russians was to advance from the Izyum area to the south and thus to decide the situation in the Donbas for themselves with one blow. Already since July, there had been repeated indications that Ukrainian forces would deploy in the Kharkiv area to prevent this Russian plan. In fact, under the utmost secrecy, the Ukrainians managed to deploy forces there. The plan was to push further east to the Oskil River. This would enable the Ukrainians to take possession of this area and encircle the Russian forces at Izyum.<sup>27</sup>

### Factor Force

Western military equipment was also decisive for the success in this second offensive. On the one hand, T-72 tanks from Poland and the Czech Republic played a major role again, but so did M113 infantry fighting vehicles. In addition, multiple rocket launchers of the MLRS type (multiple rocket launcher systems on tracks) were also used. The self-propelled howitzer 2000, which is capable of firing “Excalibur” type ammunition, was also used. Highly mobile units, some mounted on *pickups* or armored vehicles (e.g. “Bushmaster”), were also vital. That the morale of Ukrainian soldiers in this assault grouping is very high is demonstrated by a video taken just before the fighting began. It shows Ukrainian soldiers gathering once again and singing their national anthem. The use of special weapons systems also contributed to the success of this offensive. One example is the aforementioned “Excalibur” end-phase controlled artillery ammunition, which has

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26 Ibid.

27 Reisner, Alles auf eine Karte – Die ukrainischen Offensiven in Charkiv und Cherson, 12 September 2022.

high targeting accuracy. Another effective weapon system is the AGM-88 anti-radar missile from the USA. With this, Ukraine succeeded in destroying targeted Russian anti-aircraft systems and enforcing its own advance and the use of its own air force – albeit on a small scale.<sup>28</sup>

### Time Factor

The offensive began on September 6, 2022, and gained a foothold in a favorable location where more subordinate Russian units were engaged. A mixed battle group, driving ahead with tanks, was able to make a central breakthrough. This advance developed rapidly and continued centrally to the east. Finally, it was possible to bridge a distance of more than fifty kilometers in a short time. Thanks to this breakthrough, highly mobile Ukrainian units were able to quickly take possession of localities, raise the Ukrainian flag and share pictures of it on social networks. This gave Russian soldiers the impression that they were being increasingly surrounded and encircled. The result was eventually a flight of Russian forces eastward. Again, as military history shows, it was impossible to stop a large army formation that had once begun to break away in flight. The Russians did the only thing that was still possible at this point: they tried to set up a defensive position at the Oskil River and to pick up the returning units there. How precarious the situation was can be seen in several videos, which are supposed to show how Russian soldiers with heavy helicopters of the MI-26 type landed tanks and reinforced this line until late at night. In the end, the Russian troops left behind a lot of heavy equipment (one assumes the equipment of three tank regiments), because they had rushed off only with the light vehicles in the direction of the east, in the direction of the south or in the direction of Izyum.<sup>29</sup>

### Factor Information

The Ukrainian attack was carried out in the core by two mechanized brigades, an air assault brigade, territorial units, and additional elements in support. The Ukrainian forces advanced rapidly and managed to push

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28 Ibid.

29 Reisner, Alles auf eine Karte – Die ukrainischen Offensiven in Charkiv und Cherson, 12 September 2022.

the attack further east. This was possible primarily because of an existing detailed situational awareness. A result of close coordination between the U.S. and Ukraine and the result of the “in time” transfer of intelligence data. Ukrainian formations targeted their attacks in the identified gaps. The problem from the Russian point of view, on the other hand, was that they failed to break this attack momentum and were therefore overwhelmed by events.<sup>30</sup>

## 6 Historical Comparisons

In analyzing this offensive, one can draw historical comparisons. One example would be Operation *Cobra* in July 1944: the breakthrough of Allied forces from the Normandy bridgehead into the depths of the French lowlands. In this operation, the deployment of two armored divisions succeeded in pushing rapidly into the depths and setting the stage for the encirclement of Falaise. The German forces only managed to escape from this cauldron in flight, leaving behind a large number of weapons, equipment, and devices. The situation can also be compared with Operation *Bagratiön* in June 1944. There, a massive attack succeeded not only in driving the Russian side forward, but above all in driving the German side into an escape movement that could not be stopped permanently until almost the border of the German Reich. This event is also theoretically possible in Ukraine. However, it is also possible that the success will be short-lived, comparable to the German Ardennes offensive in December 1944, in which case the advance succeeded, but due to the superiority of the enemy, they were forced to abandon the gained ground again. It is possible, however, that the successes of the Ukrainian forces will lead to upheavals in Russia similar to those that occurred in October 1917. At the moment, there are no indicators of this, but it could well be that there will be signs of disintegration after further heavy defeats.<sup>31</sup>

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30 Reisner, Die ukrainischen Offensiven in Cherson und Charkiv, 5 October 2022.

31 Reisner, Markus: “Ukrainisches Fegefeuer” – Der Krieg um die Ukraine, eine Kurzzusammenfassung nach 250 Tagen, Österreichisches Bundesheer, 1 November 2022.



## 7 Summary and Outlook

During the Russian advance in February 2022, the limitations of the BTG structure quickly became apparent. Above all, the lack of massive infantry and the decentralized command structure, which predominated at the operational level, had a detrimental effect. It became apparent that the initial Russian force estimate of 200,000 soldiers, which was increasingly consumed, was already too low from the outset. The start of the Russian offensive in the Donbas also shows that Russian forces are still convinced, however, that they can achieve a decision in their favor on the battlefield. The shift to slow and traditional Russian combat techniques and tactics shows the signature of experienced commanders, and decisions are made not only for political but also for operational-tactical reasons. This also shows that Russian forces are capable of adapting to the tactics of Ukrainian forces. However, Russian forces have already suffered heavy losses and are challenged on three fronts (Donbas, Kharkiv, Kherson). Still possible success for the Russian side will depend on its ability to continuously supply its own forces and reserves and, in turn, cut off Ukrainian supplies in depth. For Ukrainian forces, on the other hand, there has been the ongoing challenge of attrition warfare since February 24, 2022. A major Ukrainian offensive appears possible only in the medium term, assuming massive Western military assistance. The West's goal in the medium term will be to deplete Russian reserves.<sup>32</sup>

Russia continues to control Crimea and Luhansk oblast, as well as a high proportion of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. Russian troops are also still managing to advance slowly in Donetsk. Here, just over fifty percent are occupied. Decisive advances have been made near Kharkiv and Kherson. This means the Russian-occupied terrain continues to diminish, to at least below twenty percent. After the successful execution of these Ukrainian offensives, the conflict now enters a new phase. The first phase was the attack and repulse of Russian forces in the Kyiv area. The second phase was the passing of the initiative of action to Russia and the attacks in the Donbas with the encirclement battle of Lysychansk. The third phase is characterized by the passing of the initiative to the Ukrainian side through the offensives near Kherson and Kharkiv, respectively. At present, it can be seen that the success of Kharkiv will be exploited by further Ukrainian

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32 Reisner, Markus: Der Kampf um unsere Meinung, Österreichs Bundesheer, 14 September 2022.

attacks in the Lyman area or across the Oskil River. Here, too, an encirclement may succeed. Southeast of Lyman, however, the Russians continue to advance slowly to the west. The goal is the complete capture of the Donetsk oblast.<sup>33</sup>

The tactical-operational successes in the Kharkiv and Kherson areas have shown that Ukrainian forces are capable of conducting an offensive and breaking the “Russian steamroller” after a buildup of forces and appropriate secrecy. The offensives also show that Western arms supplies can have a decisive impact on the battlefield. It now depends largely on whether the Ukrainian forces can build on this success. The outcome will be seen in the coming weeks and months. It will also depend on the impact of Russian mobilization and ongoing strategic attrition (ballistic missile, cruise missile, and drone attacks). Only in the spring 2023, therefore, it will be clear whether a turning point has indeed been reached in this war.<sup>34</sup>

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33 Reisner, Markus: *Die militärische Lage in der Ukraine – Die vier Herausforderungen*, Österreichs Bundesheer, 17 March 2022.

34 Reisner, Markus: “Ukrainisches Fegefeuer”, 1 November 2022; Gretskiy, Igor: *A War of the Final Soviet Generation: Russia's Demography, Society, and Aggression Against Ukraine*, International Centre for Defense and Security Estonia, 31 August 2022.

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## Chapter 9: Ukraine's Defense against Russia's War of Aggression in 2022

*Oleksiy Melnyk and Olha Husieva*

### Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine since February 24, 2022, has resulted in a colossal number of civilian and military casualties for Ukraine on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the country has demonstrated remarkable developments both on the operational-tactical and diplomatic levels – especially with regard to its resistance to the Russian aggressor. This chapter outlines three main keys to Ukraine's successful defense until now: the country's experience in the war with Russia since 2014, Western military support, and the morale of the Ukrainian people.

### Keywords

Donbas conflict, Ukroboronprom, Security Sector Reform (SSR), Ukrainian Armed Forces, NATO standards, Western weapons systems

### *1 The Ukrainian Defense Army until 2022: Experience is Gained*

The fact that the Kremlin was able to successfully carry out operations to immediately annex the Crimean Peninsula and establish separatist units in eastern Ukraine in 2014 was caused less by the high combat potential of the Russian army than by Ukraine's inability to resist. Primarily, this was due to the state of the Ukrainian army. According to a report by the then-newly appointed Defense Minister Ihor Tenyukh at the special meeting of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council on February 28, 2014, Ukraine managed to "gather from all over the country a military force of about five thousand troops capable of conducting combat operations",

which was a recognition of the fact that Ukraine had practically no means to defend the country.<sup>1</sup>

It is argued that the greatest damage to Ukraine's defense capability occurred during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich (2010–2013), when only pro-Russian individuals were appointed to senior positions in the security sector, some of whom even held Russian citizenship. It is likely that since 2010 there had been a Kremlin-directed process of undermining the combat capability of the armed forces as a key component of Ukraine's military security and defense, including actions to relocate military units and military command and control centers, which resulted in undermining the already limited capabilities of the defense posture toward Russia.

However, it should be noted that the actions of Yanukovich's team were not the only reason. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine inherited part of the second echelon of the Soviet military grouping in the western direction, which was stationed on its territory. In addition to the military infrastructure, armaments, munitions, and enterprises of the Soviet military-industrial complex, Ukraine had about one million military personnel (armed forces, internal, border, and railroad troops, civil defense forces). As is often the case, this legacy was both an asset and a heavy burden for a young independent state, as opportunities for savings in defense spending have not compensated for the cost of measures to maintain and reduce Ukraine's excessive military potential. In 1992–2014, the number of soldiers decreased from 720,000 to 120,900.

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1 *Ukrains'ka pravda*: “Стенограма РНБО: Україна могла зібрати для захисту лише 5 тисяч солдатів” [Transcript of NSDC: Ukraine was able to collect only 5 thousand soldiers for defense], 22 February 2016.

*Table 1: Number of personnel in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and number of major types of weapons (as of the beginning of the respective year)*

|   | 1992    | 2000    | 2005    | 2010    | 2014    |
|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| <i>Military personnel</i>                           | 720,000 | 310,000 | 180,000 | 150,000 | 120,900 |
| <i>Civilian personnel</i>                           | 180,000 | 90,000  | 65,000  | 50,000  | 44,600  |
| <i>Main battle tanks</i>                            | 6,500   | 4,000   | 771     | 776     | 723     |
| <i>Armored combat vehicles</i>                      | 7,000   | 5,000   | 1,884   | 2,332   | 2,164   |
| <i>Artillery with a caliber of more than 100 mm</i> | 7,200   | 4,000   | 1,364   | 946     | 633     |
| <i>Combat Aircraft</i>                              | 1,500   | 680     | 204     | 208     | 160     |

Source: Ministry of Defense of Ukraine: Стратегічний оборонний бюлетень України до 2015 року (Біла книга України) [Strategic Defense Bulletin of Ukraine until 2015 (White Book of Ukraine)], Kyiv 2004, p.22; Ministry of Defense of Ukraine: Біла книга 2005. Оборонна політика України [White Book 2005. Defense Policy of Ukraine], Kyiv 2006, p.13; Ministry of Defense of Ukraine: White Book 2010, Kyiv 2011; Ministry of Defense of Ukraine: White Book 2011, Kyiv 2012; Ministry of Defense of Ukraine: White Book 2013, Kyiv 2014.

The defense reforms that preceded the Russian invasion in 2014 were mainly declarative in nature, primarily due to resource constraints and underestimation of the likelihood of a large-scale armed attack. Ukraine's last prewar strategic defense bulletin stated that "armed aggression that could lead to local or regional war against Ukraine is unlikely in the medium term".<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the nature of Russian military aggression in the period from February 2014 to February 2022 was more in the format of a "special military operation" than a large-scale invasion, as the Kremlin tried every possible way to conceal the involvement of its regular troops in the conflict and refrained from extensive use of air power.

The year 2014 can be considered a turning point in the development of the national security and defense system. The experience gained by Ukraine created the basis for further steps at the political and practical levels in

2 Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine: Указ Президента України № 240/2016. Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 29 грудня 2012 року "Про стратегічну оборону України" [Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 240/2016. On the Decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine of December 29, 2012, "On the Strategic Defense of Ukraine"], 6 June 2016.

preparation for defense against total Russian aggression, which began in February 2022. According to the 2015 Military Doctrine of Ukraine, “large-scale armed aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine with operations on land, in the air, in space and at sea [...]” is defined as a priority military threat scenario.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the initial phase of the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine (2014–2015) objectively led to a clear definition of the source and nature of the military threat and the most likely scenario of its implementation, which was reflected in strategic documents and allowed for a clear formulation of reform priorities. The problem of limited material and human resources of the state was largely compensated by international assistance and active participation of civil society representatives. The list of priorities established by the Ministry of Defense can be roughly divided into three core areas:<sup>4</sup>

- *personnel* (improving the quality of education and training, developing the non-commissioned officer corps, increasing the attractiveness of the service, increasing the percentage of female soldiers, creating a highly qualified mobilization reserve);
- *equipment and weapons* (repair, modernization, development and purchase of new models of domestic and foreign production, international support);
- *comprehensive support* (centralized logistics system, separate medical support structure).

Since 2014, the Ukrainian authorities have conducted six mobilization phases and worked out mechanisms for building up and maintaining the required number of servicemen and servicewomen and procuring civilian material for defense needs. At the beginning of 2022, there were about 200,000 people with combat experience in the operational reserve of the armed forces, and a total of nearly 1.5 million people were listed in the mil-

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3 President of Ukraine: Указ Президента України № 555/2015. Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 2 вересня 2015 року “Про нову редакцію Военної доктрини України” [Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 555/2015. On the decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine of September 2, 2015, “On the new version of the Military Doctrine of Ukraine”], 24 September 2015.

4 Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine: Постанова Кабінету Міністрів України № 671. Про затвердження Положення про Міністерство оборони України [Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 671. On Approval of the Regulation on the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine], 26 November 2014.



itary registry. Volunteer battalions and territorial defense units established at the regional level in 2014 were gradually integrated into the armed forces and the National Guard or formed the basis for the creation of brigades (in each region and in the capital city), which were combined into a single territorial defense system and placed under the command of the armed forces.

Other important changes include the separation of the spheres of power of the Minister of Defense, the Commander-in-Chief, and the General of Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, which conforms to NATO standards and accordingly symbolizes a departure from Soviet rudiments of military administration. The conversion of headquarters to the *J-structure* (also according to NATO standards) has greatly simplified interaction and, accordingly, increased interoperability with partners.

At the end of 2021, the process of drafting a set of strategic documents and a regulatory framework for each element of the security sector was completed, providing the necessary basis for the transition to the next phase of reform.<sup>5</sup> Among the most important documents is the Law “On the Fundamentals of National Resistance”, which gives defense a comprehensive character, including changing the status of the Territorial Defense Forces (TDF) as part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. As early as January 2022, measures were taken to restructure the Territorial Defense Forces, whose personnel strength was to be increased to 10,000 regulars, with the possibility of a rapid increase to 130,000 men at the expense of the trained reserve.

## 2 Reaction to the Russian Invasion in 2022

Putin's “special military operation” was supposed to be a *blitzkrieg*, with minimal military, reputational, and economic losses. The potential military and international political risks were obviously infinitesimal compared to the expected gains. However, even in the early stages of the invasion, Ukraine was able to demonstrate a resilience and capability whose magni-

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5 President of Ukraine: Указ Президента України № 392/2020. Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України “Про Стратегію національної безпеки України” [Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 392/2020. On the Decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine “On the National Security Strategy of Ukraine”], 14 September 2020.

tude, while not yet a cause for great optimism, already called into question earlier pessimistic forecasts, at least in terms of the time frame of the Kremlin's plans. The further course of hostilities gradually but consistently changed assessments of possible scenarios for the end of the conflict. At the time of writing<sup>6</sup> there is still a considerable degree of uncertainty, but more and more observers are inclined to believe that Ukraine has strategic advantages.

At present, it is difficult to give a clear answer to the question of what factors caused such changes in the course of the conflict. For example, the strategic misjudgments most often cited in connection with the Kremlin were probably also made by the Ukrainian military and political leadership. Both sides made significant efforts – within their means – to build military capabilities, which in the real situation confirms the thesis that quantity cannot necessarily be transformed into quality.

The Ukrainian army could count on preserving its dignity not only according to Kremlin strategists, but also according to the overwhelming majority of military experts – a valiant but short-lived resistance to an incomparably stronger enemy in the face of inevitable defeat. Such obvious predictions about the possibilities of ending the war were based primarily on a comparison of the military capabilities of the parties. The Russian army had a numerical superiority of more than four times its troop strength and three to ten times that in certain types of major weapons.<sup>7</sup>

The first hours and days after the Russian invasion left external observers – even major Ukrainian sympathizers – in no doubt about the accuracy of earlier predictions.<sup>8</sup> Official Russian reports of the complete destruction of Ukraine's air defense system, air forces, and key military command and control centers were virtually unchallenged, given the pace of the columns' advance and the extensive dominance of Russian military aircraft in the airspace. Cautious optimism about the tactical successes of the Ukrainian side emerged as the first 72 hours – allotted for the capture of Kyiv –

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6 The original chapter in German was completed in November 2022 and translated into English in June 2023.

7 Peter, Laurence: "Putin warning: What does Russian military call-up mean for Ukraine?", BBC News, 21 September 2022.

8 Kagan, Frederick W./Barros, George/Stepanenko, Kateryna: "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment", Institute for the Study of War, 1 March 2022.

elapsed and reports of a slowdown in the Russian offensive accumulated, with pictures of destroyed Russian equipment.<sup>9</sup>

The first withdrawal of Russian troops from northern and eastern Ukraine at the end of March was not a “goodwill gesture” but an admission of failure of previous miscalculations by the Russian leadership in planning the operation. Experts have noted not only unrealistic military planning but also catastrophic problems in Russian logistics, ranging from planning to makeshift training of specialists and unfit transportation.<sup>10</sup>

Russian weapons, which, according to Vladimir Putin, “have no equivalent in the world”,<sup>11</sup> with all their undoubtedly destructive capabilities have not brought the expected scale of destruction to Ukraine's defense capabilities. This applies to both kinetic weapons and the use of cyberattacks. Despite an advantage in air and missile strike capabilities, Russia has failed to achieve strategic impact or maintain air superiority through massive strikes. The Russian integrated battlefield management system (command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance – C4ISR), developed over the years as well as reportedly tested in Syria and during the 2014–2021 fighting in the Donbas, proved ineffective under conditions of large-scale intensive combat operations in 2022.

Significantly, in 2014–2021, thanks to cooperation with NATO, the Ukrainian army adopted some key NATO standards that made an immense difference in the 2022 war. Compared to the Russian Army, Ukrainian units were able to move away from an archaic, lethargic Soviet decision-making process on the front lines. Ukrainian forces learned to take the initiative at the lowest level of the military hierarchy and make urgent tactical decisions – sometimes even without coordinating them with the high command.<sup>12</sup> In 2020, Ukrainian soldiers could still be punished for returning fire without clearance from headquarters when attacked by DNR and LNR.<sup>13</sup> It was not until 2022 that the new practice from the Western school of leaving the

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9 Mitzer, Stijn/Janovsky, Jakub/Oliemans, Joost/Dan, Kemal: *Attack On Europe: Documenting Russian Equipment Losses During The 2022 Russian Invasion Of Ukraine*, Oryx, March 2022.

10 Jones, Seth G.: *Russia's Ill-Fated Invasion of Ukraine: Lessons in Modern Warfare*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1 June 2022.

11 *Izvestiya*: “Путин заявил о не имеющем аналогов в мире новом российском оружии” [Putin announced new Russian weapons that have no analogues in the world], 23 February 2022.

12 Information from a soldier in the Ukrainian army (from a private source of the author, who wishes to remain anonymous), a conversation from 31.07.2022.

13 *Ibid*.

decision to the task forces was widely adopted – and it immediately favored the Ukrainian side.

### 3 *The Military Support from the West*

In the first phase of the war (from February 24 until April 1, 2022), Ukrainian defenders fought mainly with obsolete Soviet-made weapons and a small proportion of modernized or latest models. The Western weapons received shortly before the invasion were designed for close combat, since the most likely scenario of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict at that time was a quick occupation and a long guerrilla war. The first convincing tactical victories prompted the partners to radically revise the classification and scope of military support. Thus, in April 2022, the Contact Group for the Defense of Ukraine (informal coalitions supporting Ukraine in the *Ramstein* and *Copenhagen* formats) was established, providing the basis for systematic and long-term support to Ukrainian defense capabilities in the conflict, which subsequently evolved into a war of attrition.<sup>14</sup>

For the period from February to November 2022 alone, military assistance to Ukraine totaled 41.3 billion euros, with Poland and the Baltic states (e.g. Lithuania and Estonia, which provided 41 percent and 37 percent of their defense budgets, respectively) leading the way.<sup>15</sup> Germany, despite its initial reluctance to providing weapons for Ukraine, gradually evolved into one of the biggest financial donors. Indeed, the West rose to the challenge as a consolidated flank, even if there were disagreements in between over the nature, quantity, and timing of certain arms deliveries. During the first six weeks of the war, when Russian missile attacks on civilians were at their heaviest, the viral call #NATOClosethesky turned out to be not only part of the social media world. The leaders of Poland and the Baltic states

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14 Razumkov Centre: Роль і місце України в перспективних європейській та євроатлантичній системах безпеки [The Role and Place of Ukraine in the Future European and Euro-Atlantic Security Systems], Київ, 2022, pp. 21–22; Ukrinform: “Зустріч у Копенгагені стане розширенням формату ‘Рамштайн’ – Міноборони Німеччини” [Meeting in Copenhagen will be an extension of the ‘Ramstein’ format – German Ministry of Defense], 8 August 2022.

15 Ukrinform: “Союзники цьогоріч надали Україні зброї на суму, що становить 86% військового бюджету рф — Кислиця” [Allies supplied Ukraine with weapons worth 86% of the Russian military budget this year – Kyslytsia], 1 November 2022.

were the first Western politicians to travel to war-torn Kyiv,<sup>16</sup> yet their visit was not just a sign of extraordinary compassion and support. The Eastern European leaders considered providing vital support to Ukraine to improve its greatest weakness – the lack of air superiority. The countries briefly contemplated the option of forming a peacekeeping mission within NATO to intervene militarily in the war and close the airspace.<sup>17</sup> Even with the benefit of hindsight, it is difficult to weigh the possible pros and cons of such an operation in reality, although it would definitely affect the image of the the Western unity that Putin so vigorously tries to destroy.

Since February 24, 2022, the primary role in supporting Ukraine has remained on the U.S. side. At an initial turning point in the war, the battle for Kyiv and the towns of Moshchun and Irpin, the effective use of U.S. *Javelin* light anti-tank weapons and *Stinger* man-portable anti-aircraft missile systems provided the first signal of the need to urgently upgrade Ukraine.<sup>18</sup> Washington's initial deliveries of 155-mm howitzers enabled Ukraine to wage protracted battles in Severodonetsk that ultimately cost Russia a great deal of time and manpower to hold the city. This crucial operation reassured Western allies that Ukraine had a good chance of withstanding the onslaught and even launching a counteroffensive once a more dynamic arms delivery was enforced. Despite expected Russian failures in logistics, war management, and communications (due to deep-rooted corruption), as well as the collapse of army morale (due to delusional military goals and poor conditions for servicemen), Russian forces during the first six months at least felt confident about the amount of weapons and ammunition they had against Ukraine: in June 2022, the ratio between the artillery units of the Ukrainian and Russian armies was 1:15 respectively.<sup>19</sup>

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16 Podolsky, Yevhen: “Візит солідарності до Києва: Президенти Польщі та Прибалтики зустрілися із Зеленським” [Solidarity Visit to Kyiv: Meeting of Presidents of Poland and Baltic States with Zelenskyy], DIP, 13 April 2022.

17 Wądołowska, Agnieszka: “Poland to call for peacekeeping mission in Ukraine at NATO summit”, Notes from Poland, 18 March 2022.

18 Ukrinform: “Інтерв'ю з Деном Райсом, спеціальним радником Валерія Залужного” [Interview with Dan Rice, Special Advisor to Valeriy Zaluzhnyi], 19 May 2022.

19 Epstein, Jake/Haltiwanger, John: “Ukraine says Russia has 10 to 15 times more artillery than its military, warning that its survival hinges on the West sending more weapons”, Business Insider, 10 June 2022.

Another triumph on the Ukrainian battlefield was the UAV systems supplied mainly by the U.S. (*Switchblade*, *Phoenix Ghost*, *RQ-20 Puma*)<sup>20</sup> and Turkey (*Bayraktar TB2*). Due to the simplicity of production and efficiency of use, Ukraine has launched its own production line of strike, corrective, and reconnaissance UAVs, the test phase of which ended in October 2022.<sup>21</sup> The delivery of a powerful artillery system, the multiple rocket launcher *HIMARS*, enabled Ukraine to undertake an impressive offensive in Kharkiv and Kherson in September 2022, even hitting military targets on Russian territory. The French *CAESAR* self-propelled howitzers complemented and partially replaced the Soviet *2S7 Pion* 203-mm guns or *2S3 Akatsiya* 152.4-mm guns in Ukrainian artillery brigades. Despite some skeptics in the West who feared that Ukrainian soldiers were not sufficiently trained on the Western systems, the brigades that used *Pion* or *Akatsiya* successfully adapted *CAESAR* and the German *Panzerhaubitze 2000* in a very short time.

An essential “tool” for a more successful fall offensive of Ukraine would certainly be the supply of battle tanks. Initially, the West had decided to provide Ukrainian forces with Soviet tanks from its depots – in April 2022, the Czech Republic and Poland initiated the delivery of hundreds of *T-72* and *BMP-1* tanks.<sup>22</sup> NATO allies kept their distance from the decision to supply newer vehicles, although this would clearly accelerate the recapture of Ukrainian territories. Ukraine states that the largest “sponsor” of tanks for the Ukrainian army currently remains to be Russian BTGs, as they often leave tanks behind as they withdraw. However, despite this “lend-lease” from the Russian army of nearly 400 main battle tanks and 170 artillery systems (as for October 2022),<sup>23</sup> the lengthy front line requires even more

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20 Mirer, Polina: “Яку зброю та на яку суму Україна отримала від США з початку війни” [What weapons and for how much money has Ukraine received from the U.S. since the beginning of the war], Suspilne Media, 12 May 2022.

21 Bunetsky, Дмитро: “Перетворити війну артилерії на війну дронів: у чому суть і як працюватиме програма розвитку безпілотників в Україні” [The transformation of artillery warfare into drone warfare: what is the essence and how will the drone development program work in Ukraine?], Dev.ua, 15 October 2022.

22 The Page: “Від партизанських Javelin до ракет та ЗРК: яку зброю Захід дав Україні за три місяці” [From guerrilla Javelin to missiles and SAMs: What weapons the West gave Ukraine in three months], 26 May 2022.

23 Dazenko, Volodymyr: “‘Ленд-ліз’ по-російськи. Як Росія стала найбільшим постачальником важкого озброєння України у 2022 році” [“Lend-lease” in Russian. How Russia Became the Biggest Supplier of Heavy Weapons to Ukraine in 2022], Forbes, 28 September 2022.

heavy weapons to stand up to the Russian troops. While Germany is still avoiding taking a leadership role in supplying the latest battle tanks, sooner or later this will be a logical step for all allies.<sup>24</sup>

One of the West's greatest successes in the Ukraine war is indeed the triumph of its intelligence services. The British and U.S. agencies, in particular, provided accurate prediction of Putin's military plans before February 24 and continue to provide Ukraine with accurate, vital information about its enemy in real time to this day. The West's "strategic warning"<sup>25</sup> combined with an extensive system of agents of Ukraine's Defense Ministry Main Intelligence Directorate, located on Russian territories, enabled Ukraine to slow the Russian advance within the first two months by destroying logistics and supply centers even on the Russian mainland<sup>26</sup> – indeed an unprecedented turn of events for the Kremlin.

Moreover, a new type of foreign support for the Ukrainian defense sector has emerged – non-governmental support by private individuals or companies. The personal decision of the CEO of *SpaceX* to deliver the Starlink satellite dishes in the shortest possible time or the commitment of the director of *Baykar Technology* to accelerate the production and delivery of UAVs represented a rapid and effective change on the battlefield in favor of Ukraine.

#### 4 National Weapons Development and Production in Ukraine

Despite its critical dependence on Western aid, Ukraine itself has made remarkable progress in developing and producing some complex weapons. As mentioned earlier, Ukraine inherited much of the Soviet military-industrial complex. However, it was not a self-sufficient production cycle, and due to

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24 As expected, after a prolonged debate in the European capitals, the "tank taboo" was indeed lifted, and by February 2023, Berlin announced the first delivery of Leopard II. In the circumstances of the Russo-Ukrainian war, such a deceleration turned out to be devastating for the *momentum* of the Ukrainian defense, drastically affecting the progress of not only the fall counteroffensive 2022 but also the spring counteroffensive 2023.

25 Abdalla, Neveen Shaaban/Davies, Philip H. J./Gustafson, Kristian/Lomas, Dan/Wagner, Steven: "Intelligence and the War in Ukraine: Part 1", War on the Rocks, 11 May 2022.

26 ZN,UA: "Атака та знищення об'єктів у Белгороді може ускладнити для РФ атаки на Харків — розвідка Британії" [Attack and destruction of facilities in Belgorod could complicate Russian attacks on Kharkiv — British intelligence], 2 April 2022.

the economic crisis in the 1990s, demilitarization, and heavy dependence on the Russian military-industrial complex, the industry faced a number of challenges, especially after the outbreak of war in 2014.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently, the Ukrainian government approved a *roadmap* for the period 2016–2022,<sup>28</sup> that allowed for the development of original weapons, which also play a significant role currently.

The sinking of the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in April 2022, the missile cruiser *Moskva*, will certainly go down in the history books. This military success is attributed to the *Neptune* anti-ship system with a range of 280 kilometers developed by the *Luch* Design Bureau in Kyiv.<sup>29</sup> The *Pivdenne* Design Bureau in the city of Dnipro developed the *Typhoon-1* missile for the *Grad* MLRS, which has a double range of up to 40 kilometers, as well as a high-precision version, the *Typhoon-IM*. Another project to develop 122-mm systems such as *Verba* and *Berest*, as well as the 220-mm *Bureviy* MLRS, significantly improved the effectiveness of Ukrainian artillery.<sup>30</sup> If Ukraine had been able to implement its military-industrial projects on schedule by 2022, a later Russian attack would have met a much more serious response.

The proven success of Ukrainian-made weapons on the battlefield also opens a new phase for Western cooperation with Ukraine in the military-industrial sphere. Closer cooperation in this area would benefit both sides.

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27 Militarnyi: “Як Україні виготовляти сучасну зброю?” [How can Ukraine produce modern weapons?], 14 February 2022.

28 Dubensky, Vitaliy: “Порошенко ввів у дію заходи з розвитку українського ОПК” [Poroshenko takes measures to develop Ukraine’s defense industry], Deutsche Welle, 3 August 2016.

29 Vadrak, Dmytro: “Новітня українська зброя. Топ-10 останніх досягнень державних підприємств” [The Latest Ukrainian Weapons. Top-10 latest achievements of state-owned enterprises], Glavcom, 3 September 2020.

30 Defense Express: “Найцікавіші розробки оборонно-промислового комплексу України, які можуть вийти на полігони у 2021 році” [The most interesting developments of Ukraine’s military-industrial complex that could be on the training ground in 2021], 3 January 2021.



### 5 The Non-Material Component of Ukrainian Defense: A Factor of Morale

“Ukraine depends on morale and Russia depends on mercenaries”,<sup>31</sup> stated *The Guardian*, emphasizing once again, and echoing Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, how essential this principle is to victory. In contrast to the Russian challenges in the fall of 2022 to mobilize 300,000 soldiers, the queues outside military recruitment offices in Ukraine during the first months of 2022 clearly showed that motivation was high. Both Ukrainian military personnel and civilians demonstrate impressive morale in the face of outside observers. Whether these observers are from Europe or Russia, their astonishment probably stems from a lack of knowledge of the country's history. Just as the Ukrainian military-industrial sector and command have had eight years to adapt, fill in gaps, and study Russian tactics, the Ukrainian people have had hundreds of years to learn Russian methods of repression and thus develop immunity – something that people in Europe are only now beginning to learn in the face of the Russian disinformation campaign.

The essential core for Ukraine's morale rests on two key concepts that are easy for the majority of the population to understand. Firstly, Putin is violating international law and human rights – the attacks in both 2014 and 2022 are undoubtedly unlawful and as such widely perceived as unjust. Secondly, as one knows from “family history”,<sup>32</sup> average Ukrainians lose more when they refuse to fight the Russian invader regime, whether it is a Tsarist, Soviet, or Putinist one. Once the invader gets the upper hand, a person of Ukrainian origin can be deported, ostracized, sexually assaulted, castrated, punished, or killed.

The liberated towns of Bucha, Irpin, and Izyum offer a tragic picture of Russian methods in war zones, which have been used repeatedly throughout history (e.g. Caucasian wars, Chechen war, Syria etc.). Long before the scandalous article “What Should Russia Do to Ukraine?”, published by the Kremlin propaganda newspaper *RIA Novosti*, suggested mass ethnic cleans-

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31 Sabbagh, Dan: “Ukraine depends on morale and Russia on mercenaries. It could decide the war”, *The Guardian*, 17 September 2022.

32 Such as the Holodomor (an artificial famine arranged by the Communist Party in 1932–1933 in areas predominantly inhabited by Ukrainians), Stalin's repressions in the late 1930s, the laws banning Ukrainian language and culture (e.g. Valuev Circular of 1863, Ems Decree of 1876), the deportation of wealthy Ukrainian farmers (“kulaks”) after confiscating their land and material goods and many other oppressive events.

ing,<sup>33</sup> the applied methodology “on the ground” already showed where this would lead. Thus, the vast majority of Ukrainians believe that it is better to fight than to give up and experience the fate of Mariupol – to be erased from the face of the earth.

The Russian leadership has clearly not learned the lesson of the last years and is still committed to breaking Ukrainian morale. After the failures on the battlefield in the fall of 2022, the Kremlin continues to use asymmetric methods of warfare, such as blackmail (e.g. nuclear threats), disinformation (e.g. Ukraine’s alleged manufacture of a “dirty bomb”), and terrorism (missile and drone attacks on civilian infrastructure). Indeed, such attacks create significant complications in Ukrainian daily life, as power outages cripple industry in particular, threaten medical care, and affect logistics. However, these attacks are unlikely to remain effective for the Russian leadership and break Ukrainian morale. Not only is Ukraine introducing new air defense systems in alliance with its Western partners, but Ukraine’s supply system is more resilient than expected. Communal services manage to repair damage in a very short time precisely because Ukraine inherited a Soviet infrastructure that took decades to remodel and upgrade with additional security resources to withstand a potential attack by the West during the Cold War.

Another Ukrainian social phenomenon in this war, the volunteer movement, emerged on the Maidan and spent eight years before the full-scale invasion equipping Ukrainian servicemen and women in the Donbas. In 2022, hundreds of cells and units, thousands of independent people, managed to raise resources via *crowdfunding* and buy needed goods for civilians or military: from provisions and medical kits to impressive campaigns to buy *Bayraktar TB2* drones or British *Spartan* infantry fighting vehicles for the army.<sup>34</sup> In the conditions of a total war, where everyone in Ukraine is a target of Russian warfare, such voluntary engagement is seen as a deliberate and unquestioned personal contribution to the country’s survival. Thus, while the Western public is astonished by Zelenskyy’s statement “I need

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33 Sergeytsev, Timofey: “Что Россия должна сделать с Украиной” [What Russia Should Do to Ukraine], RIA Novosti, 3 April 2022.

34 Муруненко, Тома: “Фонд Сергея Притулы объявил сбор на бронетранспортеры Spartan. Цель – 200 млн грн” [The Serhiy Prytula Foundation has announced a fundraising campaign for Spartan armored personnel carriers. Goal – 200 million hryvnias], Forbes, 2 November 2022.

ammunition, not a ride",<sup>35</sup> his reaction in Ukraine is perceived as common-sense.

A protracted invasion by Russia has actually united Ukrainians and contributed to the nation's maturation. Since 2014, resilience, morale, and adaptability have improved, creating a robust obstacle to Putin's expansionism. At the same time, such continued attrition of the population by Russia reduces Ukraine's chances of agreeing to a compromise. Currently, both the population and the political leadership believe that a peace agreement can only be signed on the condition of the 2013 border line, with reparations paid and a tribunal arranged. But there is already a small segment of society that sees Ukraine as a state with a stable security only after the collapse of modern Russia and they are ready to fight until then – until "*Carthago delenda est*". The ongoing Russian attacks are unlikely to break Ukrainian morale, whichever new creative forms these attacks may take. However, there is a high probability that the war crimes, which keep increasing on the account of the Russian army, will radicalize Ukrainian society. Europe must prepare for such scenario as well, although helping Ukraine to win this conventional war as soon as possible is one of the solutions to prevent the above-mentioned radicalization.

### *6 Ukraine's Security Cooperation with the West: From Formal Contacts to Existential Partnership*

For a number of reasons (e.g. failure of economic reforms in the 1990s, pro-Russian policies, corruption, centralized economy, oligarchy), Ukraine was unable to follow the path of the Baltic states – an integration into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture immediately after the collapse of the USSR. Since the beginning of security sector reform (SSR) in 1991, the partnership between Ukraine and the West in the defense sector has been constant but hardly consistent.<sup>36</sup> For both sides, it was less of an enduring

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35 Kessler, Glenn: "Zelensky's famous quote of 'need ammo, not a ride' not easily confirmed", *The Washington Post*, 6 March 2022.

36 Melnyk, Oleksiy: "Putting Democratic Values at the Centre of International Assistance to Ukraine", *PeaceLab*, 14 September 2020.

strategy and more of a litmus test, depending on the personal preferences of frequently changing leaders.<sup>37</sup>

Many European capitals were also very receptive to the Kremlin's intentions to keep Ukraine as a *buffer zone*<sup>38</sup> between NATO and Russia. Putin's large-scale incursion in 2022 scuppered the idea that Ukraine was a "neutral" state, and so did the West's long refrain from supplying heavy weapons to Ukraine.

The U.S. remains the largest partner of the Ukrainian defense sector – through financial assistance, training programs, and military equipment (including the delivery of *Mark VI*, *Island*, and *Sea Force* patrol boats, mortar radars, all-terrain armored vehicles, *Javelin* anti-tank missiles etc.).<sup>39</sup> Canada and the UK traditionally rank second in financial donations to the Ukrainian security sector, focusing mainly on training, medical equipment, and financial assistance.<sup>40</sup> The leading list of defense sector partners includes Turkey, with which Ukraine has signed three direct foreign economic contracts for the supply of arms and military equipment not manufactured in Ukraine (corvettes, unmanned aerial vehicles, and ammunition) by 2022.<sup>41</sup>

Europe's own existential dependence on closing gaps in the Ukrainian defense sector, as well as simply the moral intent to stop the heinous crimes of the Russian army in Ukraine, or even to prevent Putin's fascist intention to destroy the neighbor state,<sup>42</sup> forced the Western partners to start something that was unimaginable at the end of 2021: delivery of heavy weapons.

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37 Razumkov Centre: Ukraine: 30 Years on the European Path. Zapovit: Kyiv 2021, pp. 329–340.

38 A buffer state means that it is neutral. However, Ukraine was not neutral in 2010–2013 but pro-Russian. For more on the characteristics of a "buffer state", see Krause, Joachim: Wird Russland in Belarus militärisch intervenieren?, Institut für Sicherheitspolitik an der Universität Kiel, Policy Brief No. 8, August 2020.

39 Ukrainian Ministry of Defense: Аналіз стану міжнародного співробітництва в Міністерстві оборони та Збройних Силах України за 2020 рік [Analysis of the state of international cooperation in the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine and the Armed Forces of Ukraine for 2020], 11 June 2021.

40 Ukrainian Ministry of Defense: Кількісні показники міжнародного співробітництва у 2014–2017 рр. [Quantitative indicators of international cooperation in 2014–2017].

41 Ukrainian Ministry of Defense: Аналіз стану міжнародного співробітництва в Міністерстві оборони та Збройних Силах України за 2020 рік [Analysis of the state of international cooperation in the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine and the Armed Forces of Ukraine for 2020], 11 June 2021.

42 Sergeytsev, What Russia Should Do to Ukraine, 3 April 2022.

The earlier demand to first complete reforms in the judicial and economic sectors and to overcome corruption in the security sector (*Ukroboronprom* reform) remains the main condition for Ukraine's NATO accession,<sup>43</sup> but is definitely no longer an obstacle to close cooperation in the defense sector.

### 7 Complicated but Vital Relations between Ukraine and Germany in 2022

Compared to 2014, the unity of Western allies in the face of the challenge posed by Russian aggression has definitely endured and even grown stronger. Nevertheless, Kyiv (and probably sometimes Washington and Brussels) was expecting a stronger reaction from some European states to the registered war crimes and violations of international law by the Russian army. Among the "most problematic partners" for the Ukrainian government, Berlin with its *Ostpolitik* often left the Ukrainian side perplexed. While the German government was praised as one of the pioneers in taking in Ukrainian refugees, it also drew attention in the Ukrainian media for multiple scandals surrounding Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his pro-Russian *Ostpolitik*, the talks about Olaf Scholz reacting like a "*beleidigte Leberwurst*" ("sulking liver sausage"), or the repeatedly interrupted or delayed arms deliveries.

Germany has proven to be a complicated but indispensable partner for Ukraine. Nevertheless, hardly anyone in Ukraine can forget the Merkel government's "pacification of the aggressor" since 2014, the "Steinmeier formula" that *de facto* froze the Donbas crisis, or the major victory of the Russian hybrid policy in Europe – the *Nord Stream 2* pipeline. Needless to explain why Ukraine was shocked when it heard from some German experts the rationale for exceptional relations with Russia in 2022. Berlin's "special historical obligation" to Russia, but not to Ukraine, which was largely destroyed by the Wehrmacht in 1941–1943 and carried with the Belarus people the highest human costs, was perceived by the people of Ukraine as nothing but imperialism.

Until February 24, 2022, cooperation between Germany and Ukraine in the defense sector was one of the weakest among all Western partners.

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43 Hetmanchuk, Alyona/Solodkyj, Serhiy/Akhurdinova, Marianna: "Маршрут до членства. Чому Україні варто запропонувати дорожню карту для вступу до НАТО?" [Road to Membership. Why Should Ukraine Be Offered a Roadmap for NATO Accession?], New Europe Center, 2021.

However, as Ukraine's third-largest donor, Berlin had traditionally taken over the area of development programs<sup>44</sup> and support for reforms in various sectors. Kyiv tried to build relations with its powerful Western neighbor rather cautiously, with constant reminders of German economic interests in Russia or Germany's traditional stance against arms deliveries.<sup>45</sup>

However, Robert Habeck's visit to eastern Ukraine, his advocacy for arms deliveries, and recognition of Ukraine's right to self-defense in May 2021<sup>46</sup> gave Kyiv hope that the change of government in Berlin would lead to a significant change in approach towards the Ukraine question. For Kyiv, the government of former German Chancellor Angela Merkel did not view Ukraine as a strategic partner, but rather "kept an eye on the overall strategic situation with Russia and brought this perspective to NATO consultations".<sup>47</sup>

Despite Putin's claims that he was being "pushed to the wall" by the U.S.,<sup>48</sup> the Ukraine crisis of 2014–2021 remained a purely regional affair. The U.S. even abstained from participating in the Normandy Format peace talks from 2014. Washington consciously or unconsciously left this matter to the Europeans, offering France and Germany the opportunity to take a leading role, to demonstrate Europe's autonomy in defense matters, and to take responsibility for its own security.

With the first ceasefire violation by Russian-backed separatists from the DNR in December 2014,<sup>49</sup> as well as with "full support" for Gazprom's *Nord Stream 2* project, European states, including Germany, have failed to defend Europe. Over the past eight years, Berlin has avoided recognizing

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44 Brady, Kate: "What does Germany do for Ukraine?", Deutsche Welle, 26 September 2019.

45 However, the latter still evokes a slight cognitive dissonance in Ukraine, knowing that Germany and France were the leading arms exporters to Russia in 2015–2020 – despite the arms embargo, the annexation of Crimea, and Russia's presence in Syria (see Brillaud, Laure/Curic, Ana/Miñano, Leïla/Schmidt, Nico: "EU member states exported weapons to Russia after the 2014 embargo", Investigate Europe, 17 March 2022).

46 Rippert, Ulrich: "German Green Party leader Habeck wants to arm Ukraine against Russia", World Socialist Web Site, 28 May 2021.

47 Ibid.

48 Putin, Vladimir: Обращение Президента Российской Федерации [Address by the President of the Russian Federation], Kremlin, 21 February 2022.

49 OSCE: OSCE SMM Patrol caught up in small arms crossfire, 26 December 2014.

that Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity are also Germany's security interests,<sup>50</sup> for at least three reasons:

- a stable and resilient neighbor is economically advantageous for Germany;
- the integrity of Ukrainian territory ensures the rule of law and preserves modern security order in Europe;
- it was in Germany's interest to protect the regional *status quo*, in which Berlin played a leading role. The ongoing changes caused by the war dynamics could shift the axis further east and turn Eastern Europe into a new center of the EU, where Berlin's interests may also be pushed aside.

After nine months of war in Ukraine, despite Germany's mistakes and missed opportunities, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that Germany has made significant contributions to Ukrainian successes on the battlefield. Through special assistance from the German Federal Ministry of Economy and Climate Protection,<sup>51</sup> the Ukrainians received *M113* armored personnel carriers as early as June 2022.<sup>52</sup> These 54 AMPV units played an important role in the August-September offensive, when the Ukrainian command announced the Kherson offensive but in reality launched a counterattack around Kharkiv. With *M113*s the Ukrainian command ultimately gained a unique opportunity to move troops hundreds of kilometers in a very short time. Two of the most effective German air defense systems *Iris-T SLM*,<sup>53</sup> promised in April 2022, finally reached Ukraine in October 2022 and March 2023, and immediately delivered impressive results in countering Russian attacks on (critical) infrastructure. Berlin's consideration of delivering *Bergepanzer* (armored recovery vehicles) is also a creative way to avoid delivering main battle tanks: during the expected damp winter season, Ukrainian forces could pull out Russian tanks stuck in the mud and take them over for their own use.

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50 Melnyk, Putting Democratic Values at the Centre of International Assistance to Ukraine, 14 September 2020.

51 Information from a private source of the author, who wishes to remain anonymous, a conversation from 20.05.2022.

52 The Federal Government (of Germany): Military support to Ukraine, 25 October 2022.

53 Ibid.

## 8 Conclusion

Despite all the pessimistic forecasts, Ukraine has been able to withstand the Russian large-scale attack in 2022 and even achieve some impressive results while counterattacking. This is undoubtedly due to the resistance of the Ukrainian civilian population as well as the massive supply of weapons by the partners. The latter could well have continued to maintain their cautious support of Ukraine with limited type of weapons, as was the case after the Crimean occupation. However, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukraine did demonstrate an ability to withstand Russian forces in an impressive manner, so the West decided to provide the Ukrainian army with effective defense equipment. The Ukrainian successful fall offensive in the Kharkiv and Kherson areas, undoubtedly, are the result of such military support. This has further erased some NATO members' remaining skepticism about Ukraine's ability to adopt new weapons systems, creatively integrate them into the tactics and landscape of eastern Ukraine, and halt the Russian army's advance. The war has turned into a war of attrition, and now, thanks to dedicated Western military support as well as strong Ukrainian morale (resilience and perseverance), Kyiv has a significant chance of winning – whether the definition of such victory is the Western or the Ukrainian one.

In the back of many Ukrainian minds, however, still remains the thought that much earlier Western support for the Ukrainian army could have made the Russian damage to Ukraine and Europe much less severe. Given the missed opportunities, it is therefore important that Western allies – and Berlin in particular – devise a new, sensible strategy for both Ukraine and Eastern Europe after February 24. Thus, Berlin must also recognize that Germany, as well as the entire democratic world, depends on Ukraine's success in the war against Russia – not least to prevent the war from spreading to other countries.

The non-hesitant deliveries of the latest NATO military systems and ammunition *en masse* can bring an end to the ongoing brutal war in Ukraine and prevent further escalation in Eastern Europe. It is also important that the political and financial aspects of German assistance to Ukraine, as well as Germany's strategic interest in Ukraine as an investment in common



European security and in Germany's own security, are recognized and clearly communicated to its own population.<sup>54</sup>

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54 For more on this, see the chapter by Dr. Timo Graf in this anthology.

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# Chapter 10: The Russian War of Aggression against Ukraine: A Classification under International and Human Rights Law

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## Abstract

This chapter examines the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine from the perspective of international and human rights law. First, the framework of general international law, in particular the prohibition of the use of force under international law, is discussed. Hereupon, the conflict is assessed from the perspective of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and international criminal law. Ukraine's institution of proceedings before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is also examined. The chapter shows that the Russian attack on Ukraine is a clear violation of international law. Fundamental rules of general international law, human rights, international humanitarian law, and international criminal law are violated. However, the response options of the international community are limited, given the fact that Russia is a permanent member of the Security Council with veto power.

## Keywords

Russian war of aggression, general international law, prohibition of the use of force, international human rights law, international humanitarian law, international criminal law

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\* The author thanks Philipp Janig for extensive research as well as helpful comments. The chapter was completed in September 2022.

## 1 Introduction

Russia<sup>1</sup> launched an armed war of aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, for some constituting a paradigm shift, a *Zeitenwende* (turning point), in international relations. Not only did the Russian Federation's attack on its neighboring country bring war back to Europe. From the perspective of international law, the war of aggression by a permanent member of the Security Council also invalidates the collective security system of the United Nations (UN) Charter as it was conceived after World War II. This is because Russia's veto prevents effective action by the UN Security Council.<sup>2</sup>

All this requires a classification of the Russian war of aggression in terms of international and human rights law. The range of international law areas involved is considerable. They include general international law, including the fundamental principles of international law as enshrined in the UN Charter; in addition, international humanitarian law (IHL), international human rights law (IHR), and international criminal law – all focusing on the protection of the individual – are particularly relevant. While the former regimes (IHL, HR) focus on the responsibility of states, international criminal law is concerned with the criminal responsibility of individuals.

The number of international institutions involved in the conflict is also extraordinary. To remain only within the scope of the areas of international law discussed here: the UN (Security Council, General Assembly, Secretary General, International Court of Justice (ICJ)), the Council of Europe (especially the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)), the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The latter has, *inter alia*, established two expert missions under the Moscow Mechanism activated for the conflict, which published *fact-finding* reports on violations of IHL, human rights, and international criminal law in April and July 2022.

In the following, the framework of general international law, the *ius ad bellum*, will be discussed first. This will be followed by an assessment from the perspective of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and international criminal law. The referral to the ICJ will also be examined.

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1 Russia is used interchangeably with Russian Federation in the following.

2 Details below, part 2.



## 2 General International Law: *ius ad bellum*

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is a clear violation of international law. The prohibition of force as enshrined in Art. 2(4) of the UN Charter,<sup>3</sup> the central rule of international relations, has been breached by the Russia's acts of aggression commencing on February 24, 2022. The threshold of an armed aggression is clearly reached.<sup>4</sup> However, the options for responding to this aggression within the UN framework are limited. The UN Security Council, which could adopt collective measures in the event of breaches of the peace and acts of aggression, is blocked because of Russia's veto.<sup>5</sup>

The UN General Assembly, in turn, has only certain limited options for dealing with Russian aggression. It has already used these to some extent. For example, the General Assembly has repeatedly condemned the Russian invasion<sup>6</sup> and, among other things, decided on April 20, 2022 – on the initiative of Liechtenstein – to convene a mandatory meeting after each exercise of the veto power in the Security Council to discuss the situation

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- 3 Art. 2(4) UN Charter: “The Organization and its Members shall act in accordance with the following principles in pursuit of the objectives set forth in Art. 1: [...] 4. All members shall refrain in their international relations from any threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State or otherwise inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations. [...]”.
  - 4 Art. 3 UNGA: Definition of Aggression, <https://daccess-ods.un.org/tmp/9177219.8677063.html>.
  - 5 Art. 39ff UN Charter; the right of veto is enshrined in Art. 27 UN Charter. For a more detailed history and context, see Hovell, Devika: “Council at War: Russia, Ukraine and the UN Security Council”, EJIL: Talk! Blog of the European Journal of International Law, 25 February 2022.
  - 6 On March 2, 2022, the UNGA condemned the invasion of Ukraine by a large majority, called on Russia to withdraw, and withdrew recognition of the so-called People's Republics (141 in favor | 5 against | 35 abstentions). On March 24, this was reaffirmed in a second resolution (140 for | 5 against | 38 abstentions). The whole thing was done under the “Uniting for Peace” framework. See <https://daccess-ods.un.org/tmp/2521322.07155228.html>; <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3966630?ln=en>; on the resolution, see Barber, Rebecca: “What can the UN General Assembly do about Russian Aggression in Ukraine?”, EJIL: Talk! Blog of the European Journal of International Law, 26 February 2022.

(“veto initiative”).<sup>7</sup> This is intended to increase the political costs.<sup>8</sup> The General Assembly also decided to exclude Russia from the UN Human Rights Council in April 2022.<sup>9</sup> These initiatives have high political symbolic power, but in practice they remain relatively toothless.

Similarly, the mediation efforts of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres have so far been comparatively unsuccessful. It is true that in July 2022, under his mediation (as well as that of Turkish President Recep Erdogan), an agreement was reached between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the export of Ukrainian grain.<sup>10</sup> However, efforts to declare the area around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant a demilitarized zone or, more broadly, to achieve a ceasefire have been fruitless.

The possibilities of the ICJ – the main judicial organ of the UN – are also limited, as will be shown in detail in Part 6. Thus, in the face of aggression by a permanent member of the Security Council, the UN has only a very limited set of instruments at its disposal for dealing with Russia’s war of aggression.

Ukraine itself is entitled to the right of self-defense in accordance with Art. 51 UN Charter<sup>11</sup> in view of the armed aggression by Russia. Thereby (theoretically) also other states may support Ukraine, upon its request, within the framework of collective self-defense in the military response to the Russian aggression. This would be in conformity with international law and within the scope of Art. 51 UN Charter.<sup>12</sup> However, military intervention by other states on the side of Ukraine makes these states parties to the

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7 UN Digital Library: Standing mandate for a General Assembly debate when a veto is cast in the Security Council, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3969448?ln=en>, 10 November 2022.

8 See Donaldson, Ben: “Liechtenstein’s ‘Veto Initiative’ Wins Wide Approval at the UN. Will It Deter the Big Powers?”, *PassBlue*, 26 April 2022.

9 93 states voted in favor, 24 against, and 58 abstained. See United Nations: UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council, 7 April 2022.

10 MDR Aktuell: “Russland und Ukraine unterzeichnen Abkommen über Getreide-Exporte”, 22 July 2022.

11 Art. 51 UN Charter: “Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations...”

12 In this respect, it must not be answered by countermeasures from the Russian side. See i.d.S. Krajewski, Markus: “Neither Neutral nor Party to the Conflict?”, *Völkerrechtsblog*, 9 March 2022.

conflict.<sup>13</sup> It risks an even further escalation: the danger of a “Third World War” has been raised repeatedly. Accordingly, the attempts are being made to avoid direct involvement as a party to the conflict, as can be seen, for example, in the consistent rejection of the establishment of no-fly zones by the USA/NATO. Military support and arms deliveries, including heavy military equipment, do not make a state a party to the conflict. Therefore, the question of whether and which weapons a state wants to supply to Ukraine is, in principle, dependent on political and military considerations.<sup>14</sup> This much needs to be said about the *ius ad bellum*, the prohibition of the use of force.

### 3 International Humanitarian Law (IHL): *ius in bello*

Moreover, also when considering the Russian war of aggression from the perspective of IHL, *ius in bello*, the laws of war, numerous violations of international law can be observed. The application of IHL rules is independent from the question of the (il)legality of the war (*ius ad bellum*). The rules apply to both sides, to Russia as well as to Ukraine.<sup>15</sup> Since this is an international armed conflict, the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, the First Additional Protocol relating to the protection of victims of international armed conflicts – ratified by Ukraine as well as the Russian Federation – and customary international law applicable to armed conflicts are particularly relevant. Furthermore, both states are parties to the 1907

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13 This would make the respective states parties to the conflict. However, an armed reaction of Russia against the respective states would violate the prohibition of the use of force of Art. 2(4) UN Charter and would therefore be contrary to international law. Within the framework of IHL, however, Russia would be allowed to attack military bases in other states, from which aircraft take off for military support of Ukraine, as a legitimate war target. The assessment from the perspective of *ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello* thus differs. Belarus can also be considered a party to the conflict, since Russian attacks are carried out from Belarusian territory. Deutscher Bundestag: Sachstand – Rechtsfragen der militärischen Unterstützung der Ukraine durch NATO-Staaten zwischen Neutralität und Konflikteilnahme, 16 March 2022, p. 9.

14 This is different for neutral states like Austria.

15 Note in this context that at the Russian domestic level, since the 2020 amendment to the Russian Constitution, the Constitution has been given precedence over decisions of international courts and treaty bodies. See for details Mälksoo, Lauri: International Law and the 2020 Amendments to the Russian Constitution. In: American Journal of International Law, Vol. 115, Issue 1, January 2021, pp. 78–93.

Hague Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land (1907 Hague Convention).

International humanitarian law contains, in particular, rules for dealing with specially protected persons such as the wounded, prisoners of war, and civilians. It also limits the manner of waging war (e.g. in terms of which weapons may be used); standardizes the principle of distinction (that civilians and civilian objects may not be the target of an attack); the principle of proportionality (that harm to the civilian population may not be excessive in relation to the expected military advantage); and the precautionary principle (that the parties to the conflict must take all feasible precautions to avoid harm to the civilian population and civilian objects). A concrete legal framework for the occupation of territory is standardized in the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949<sup>16</sup> and Articles 42–56 of the 1907 Hague Convention.<sup>17</sup> The provisions of IHL concerning the law of war are thus relatively clear.

They are violated on a massive scale, especially by Russia. The expert missions deployed by the OSCE under the Moscow Mechanism have identified systematic violations of IHL, primarily by the Russian side.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, the report published by the OSCE Commission in April 2022 made the following summary findings, among others, and speaks of:

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16 Note in this context that Russia denounced the relevant 1977 First Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts, on 23 October 2019. See ICRC: *Treaties, States parties, and Commentaries – Signatory States – Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)*, 8 June 1977. Since the denunciation in principle takes effect one year later, the provisions of the Additional Protocol are no longer applicable to the Ukraine conflict.

17 Yet Luhansk and Donetsk are clearly occupied territory; application to all of Ukraine after February 24, 2022, is more contentious. In any case, Russia exercises control over numerous towns and villages that make it the occupying power. In general, it seems reasonable to follow a functional concept of occupation that can be applied gradually: from the moment a negative act can be exercised, it is prohibited (see, for example, the ban on deportation of civilians).

18 See OSCE: *Report of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism’s mission of experts entitled “Report On Violations Of International Humanitarian And Human Rights Law, War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity Committed in Ukraine Since 24 February 2022”*, 13 April 2022; OSCE: *Report of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism’s mission of experts entitled “Report on Violations of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law, War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity Committed in Ukraine (1 April–25 June 2022)”*, 14 July 2022.

“[...] clear patterns of IHL violations by the Russian forces on many of the issues investigated. This concerns in particular their conduct of hostilities. It is not conceivable that so many civilians would have been killed and injured and so many civilian objects, including houses, hospitals, cultural property, schools, multi-story residential buildings, administrative buildings, penitentiary institutions, police stations, water stations and electricity systems would have been damaged or destroyed if Russia had respected its IHL obligations in terms of distinction, proportionality and precautions in conducting hostilities in Ukraine. The conduct of the siege of Mariupol is an extreme example. [...] Some violations and problems were also identified regarding practices of Ukraine. The Mission is in particular concerned about the treatment of prisoners of war, originally considered criminals, and treated in ways that are incompatible with the Geneva Convention III.”<sup>19</sup>

The report of the second OSCE expert mission came to very similar conclusions and confirmed the findings of the first mission regarding serious violations (among others) of IHL.<sup>20</sup> The numerous violations by the Russian Federation can only be addressed by few mechanisms for compliance with and enforcement of the law in the IHL regime; at most, an *International Humanitarian Fact Finding Commission* could be considered, which could be established as a *special fact-finding body* within the framework of Art. 90 of the 1st AP to the Geneva Conventions.<sup>21</sup> However, such a commission is limited to fact-finding, in addition to the practical difficulties of setting it up.<sup>22</sup> The enforceability of IHL is thus severely limited,<sup>23</sup> especially with regard to the interstate dimension. International criminal law, however, as will be shown (Part 5), allows for the prosecution of *individuals*

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19 Report of the First OSCE Expert Mission, 13 April 2022, p. 93.

20 See, for example, the Report of the Second OSCE Expert Mission, 14 July 2022, p. 114.

21 See the IHFFC.org website.

22 Russia withdrew its initial general consent on October 23, 2019. See the Report of the Second OSCE Expert Mission, 14 July 2022, p. 110: “The IHFFC is a permanent international body composed of 15 experts which may investigate allegations of grave breaches and serious violations of IHL committed in international armed conflicts. It may do so with respect to states which have accepted its jurisdiction through a general declaration or on an *ad hoc* basis. So far, over 70 states, including Ukraine, have issued a general declaration. The Russian Federation did so as well but it withdrew the declaration on October 23, 2019. The *ad hoc* acceptance of the IHFFC would however still be an option [...]”.

23 See, however, below in Section 5.

who commit the most serious violations of international humanitarian law, such as war crimes and crimes against humanity.

#### 4 International Human Rights

The framework for assessing human rights is provided (regionally) primarily by the Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). At the global level, the UN human rights treaties and customary international law in general are applicable. Numerous human rights standards are violated by the Russian war of aggression.

Against this background, the UN Human Rights Council established an independent international commission of inquiry to document human rights violations in Ukraine as soon as March 2022.<sup>24</sup> At the regional European level, Russia was expelled from the Council of Europe on March 16, 2022; the same day, Russia also notified its withdrawal.<sup>25</sup> Russia's exclusion also results in, among other things, the termination of its party status under the ECHR, which takes effect six months after withdrawal from the Council of Europe (Art. 58(2), (3) ECHR).<sup>26</sup> This means that human rights violations that occurred until September 16, 2022 and are attributable to Russia can still be invoked before the ECtHR. After September 16, 2022, relevant human rights obligations for Russia may still arise at least from global human rights treaties (especially the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ICCPR) or customary international law.<sup>27</sup>

With regard to Russia, another question is the extent to which it has human rights obligations on Ukrainian territory. This would be the circumstance in particular in the case of effective control over territories (especially in the People's Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk) or persons. However, the Grand Chamber of the ECtHR noted in *Georgia v Russia (II)* that no state can gain effective control over territory in the active phase of international armed conflicts. This is without prejudice to any obligations based on effective control over persons or certain procedural

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24 See UNHRC: Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine.

25 See Council of Europe: War in Ukraine: Follow up, 16 March 2022.

26 As a consequence of its exclusion from the Council of Europe on 16 September 2022, Russia will also withdraw as a contracting party from the revised European Social Charter.

27 Ukraine remains bound by all human rights requirements: it is a party to the ECHR and all relevant human rights treaties.

obligations.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, with respect to the right to life, the UN Human Rights Committee now takes a more expansive, purely functional view, i.e. the direct and reasonably foreseeable effects on the right to life.<sup>29</sup> Wars of aggression that result in the loss of life are, according to the Human Rights Committee, *per se* a violation of the right to life.<sup>30</sup> This broadens the scope of any Russian responsibility for human rights violations accordingly. However, the generally complementary applicability of human rights and IHL in armed conflicts requires an examination from an IHL perspective, especially in the case of violations of the right to life and the right to personal liberty.<sup>31</sup>

In the reports already mentioned, the expert missions deployed by the OSCE have identified corresponding violations of fundamental human rights, especially in the areas under Russian control:

“The Mission has also considered the impact of the current conflict on human rights. While it has not been able to verify all the reported incidents which might involve violations of IHRL, it has found credible evidence suggesting that such violations, concerning even the most fundamental human rights (right to life, prohibition of torture and other inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment), have been committed, mostly in the areas under the effective control of Russia.”<sup>32</sup>

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- 28 Milanovic, Marko: “Georgia v. Russia No. 2: The European Court’s Resurrection of Bankovic in the Contexts of Chaos”, EJIL: Talk! Blog of the European Journal of International Law, 25 January 2022.
- 29 See UN MRA, GC Comment No. 36, Right to Life, 3 September 2019, paragraph 63: “[...] all persons over whose enjoyment of the right to life it exercises power or effective control. This includes persons located outside any territory effectively controlled by the State, whose right to life is nonetheless impacted by its military or other activities in a direct and reasonably foreseeable manner.”
- 30 See *ibid.*, paragraph 70: “States parties engaged in acts of aggression as defined in international law, resulting in deprivation of life, violate *ipso facto* article 6 of the Covenant. At the same time, all States are reminded of their responsibility as members of the international community to protect lives and to oppose widespread or systematic attacks on the right to life, including acts of aggression, international terrorism, genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, while CCPR/C/GC/36/15 respecting all of their obligations under international law. States parties that fail to take all reasonable measures to settle their international disputes by peaceful means might fall short of complying with their positive obligation to ensure the right to life.”
- 31 For details, see Doswald-Beck, Louise/Vité, Sylvain: International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law – International Review of the Red Cross, No. 293, ICRC, 30 April 1993.
- 32 Report of the First OSCE Expert Mission, 13 April 2022, p. 93.

The second OSCE expert mission also comes to very similar conclusions.<sup>33</sup> Thus, numerous human rights obligations and standards appear to be violated.

As far as the enforcement of human rights obligations is concerned, the ECtHR is the key. As is well known, the ECtHR hands down binding judgments and, as mentioned above, can still deal with violations of international law by the Russian Federation that have been committed before September 16, 2022.

Indeed, Ukraine filed an inter-state complaint against Russia before the ECtHR on the very day of the Russian invasion, February 24, 2022.<sup>34</sup> In early March, the ECtHR adopted interim measures for the protection of civilians against Russia under *Rule 39* of its Rules of Procedure.<sup>35</sup> However, these have been and continue to be ignored by the Russian side. Nor can future implementation be expected: on June 11, 2022, the Russian Federation enacted a law that it would not implement “decisions of the ECtHR entering into force after March 15, 2022”.<sup>36</sup> In this respect, the prospects of success of enforcing the violation of human rights obligations against Russia are extremely limited (at least in the short and medium term).

## 5 International Criminal Law

Another dimension is provided by international criminal law. The primary institution at the international level for the enforcement of the criminal responsibility of individuals is the International Criminal Court (ICC), which was established on the basis of a multilateral treaty (ICC Statute, Rome Statute) that entered into force in 2002. Neither Russia nor Ukraine are states parties to the ICC Statute. However, in April 2014 and September 2015, Ukraine recognized the jurisdiction of the ICC as of November

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33 See, for example, Report of the Second OSCE Expert Mission, 14 July 2022, p. 114.

34 ECtHR, Appl. No. 11055/22, *Ukraine v. Russia* (X).

35 Specifically, the ECtHR called on the Russian government “[to] refrain from military attacks against civilians and civilian objects, including residential premises, emergency vehicles and other specially protected civilian objects such as schools and hospitals, and to ensure immediately the safety of the medical establishments, personnel and emergency vehicles within the territory under attack or siege by Russian troops.” Crawford, Julia: “Ukraine vs Russia: What the European Court of Human Rights can (and can’t) do”, Justiceinfo.net, 7 April 2022; Cf. press release, 1 March 2022: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-press#%20>.

36 See for details the Report of the Second OSCE Expert Mission, 14 July 2022, p. 12.



21, 2013, pursuant to Art. 12 (3) of the Rome Statute. Thus, the ICC has jurisdiction over violations of international criminal law on the territory of Ukraine.<sup>37</sup> However, this does not apply to the crime of aggression (i.e. the act of armed aggression *per se*), where both the attacking and the attacked state must have submitted to the jurisdiction of the ICC.<sup>38</sup> For the punishment of the latter, some call for the establishment of a special international tribunal.<sup>39</sup>

In terms of substantive law, this means that war crimes and crimes against humanity, and possibly also genocide,<sup>40</sup> are probable offenses. Specifically, in interstate armed conflicts, attacks on civilians and civilian objects, e.g. the deliberate bombing of residential buildings, constitute war crimes. Attacks on military objects, on the other hand, are generally permissible. This under the condition, however, that they do not involve disproportionate civilian collateral damage.<sup>41</sup> Certain violations of IHL (such as killing, torture, or rape) may also constitute crimes against humanity if they are committed “as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack” (Art. 7, ICC Statute). In the Ukraine war, corresponding war crimes as well as crimes against humanity, in particular by the Russian side, were established by the OSCE expert missions.<sup>42</sup>

As for the concrete enforcement of international criminal responsibility, on March 1 and 2, 2022, several states referred the situation in Ukraine to the ICC.<sup>43</sup> On March 2, the ICC’s chief prosecutor officially opened

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37 Other possibilities would be prosecution at the national level (mainly by Ukraine, but also by Lithuania, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Germany); see also the initiative for the establishment of a special international tribunal for Ukraine to punish the crime of aggression. For details, see the Report of the Second OSCE Expert Mission, 14 July 2022, pp. 112ff.

38 See Art. 15*bis* (5) ICC Statute.

39 See *ibid.*

40 Genocide is more difficult to argue in that, in addition to the objective elements of the crime, it also requires the subjective element (*mens rea*), the intent to exterminate a particular ethnic group (see Art. 6 ICC Statute).

41 However, at the substantive legal level, in the case of war crimes (Art. 8 ICC Statute), the challenge remains to distinguish the use of military force permissible under international law from punishable violations of the laws and customs of war.

42 See, for example, Report of the Second OSCE Expert Mission, 14 July 2022, p. 112.

43 As of August 25, 2022, four additional states had joined the joint *referral* or submitted an independent *referral* (Japan, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Chile). Thus, a total of 43 states have referred the situation in Ukraine to the ICC: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/ukraine>.

investigations into the events in Ukraine. These cover alleged war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide since November 21, 2013. The ICC's action opens the possibility that, at least in the longer term, the individuals primarily responsible for the most serious human rights violations will be held criminally accountable. Prosecutions by domestic courts, carried out in Ukraine but also in other states on the basis of the principle of universal jurisdiction over the most serious crimes, also contribute to this.

## 6 International Court of Justice (ICJ)

Another forum for establishing Russia's responsibility under international law is the ICJ, the main judicial body of the UN. Although all UN members (including Ukraine and Russia) are parties to the ICJ Statute, this does not automatically mean that the ICJ has jurisdiction over a dispute. Rather, the ICJ's jurisdiction must be recognized accordingly. In principle, this can be done in three ways: through a general declaration of submission (optional clause); by asserting jurisdiction within the framework of a specific treaty ("compromissory" clause); and *ad hoc*, for a specific dispute.<sup>44</sup>

For the present dispute, the ICJ lacks broad jurisdiction; neither Ukraine nor Russia has made a general declaration of submission. Therefore, realistically, jurisdiction can only be based on specific treaties that contain a compromissory clause. This is the case, for example, in the Genocide Convention, ratified by both Ukraine and Russia (see Art. IX of the Convention).

On February 26, 2022, Ukraine initiated proceedings against Russia based on Art. IX of the Genocide Convention.<sup>45</sup> It argues generally that Ukraine itself did not commit genocide in Luhansk and Donetsk and that the recognition of the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics and the "special military operation" are based on this false allegation – thus finding no basis in the Genocide Convention. In this regard, Russia challenges the ICJ's jurisdiction.<sup>46</sup>

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44 See Art. 36 ICJ Statute.

45 International Court of Justice: Allegations of Genocide under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. *Ukraine v. Russian Federation*, 26 February 2022.

46 See Document (with annexes) from the Russian Federation setting out its position regarding the alleged "lack of jurisdiction" of the Court in the case, 7 March 2022.

On March 16, 2022, the ICJ (upon application) found that it had *provisional* jurisdiction, indicated interim measures (*provisional measures*), and ordered that: Russia immediately cease all military operations in Ukraine launched since February 24, 2022; Russia ensure that no military, paramilitary, or other forces under their control continue military operations; and neither party take any actions that contribute to further escalation. The parties had until September 23, 2022 (Ukraine), or March 23, 2023 (Russia), to make their written submissions on the matter. Numerous states (e.g. Latvia, Lithuania, New Zealand, Germany, the United States, Sweden, France, Romania, Italy, Poland, Denmark, and Ireland) have since joined the proceedings as intervenors; the European Union (EU) has also provided “information”.<sup>47</sup>

The ICJ’s indication of provisional measures is apparently not being observed by Russia. However, the possible enforceability of the same is limited in several respects. It is true that Art. 94 UN Charter states that all members of the UN must comply with the decisions of the ICJ and that if one party in a dispute fails to perform the obligations incumbent upon it under a judgment, the other party may have recourse to the Security Council. The SC could then decide on the necessary measures to give effect to the decision. However, this option fails because of Russia’s veto power. Furthermore, only judgments, but not provisional measures in the sense of Art. 94(2) UN Charter can be enforced.<sup>48</sup> This being said, at least the violation of the order of provisional measures on the part of Russia could however be determined by the ICJ; as well as the amount of compensation. Still, also the enforcement of this determination is bound to fail because of the Russian veto. Thus, the options of the international community are limited here as well.

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<https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/182/182-20220307-OTH-01-00-EN.pdf>.

47 The intervention of the States concerned was made pursuant to Art. 63 of the ICJ Statute; the EU provided information to the Court on its own initiative on 18 August 2022, pursuant to Art. 34(2) of the ICJ Statute and Art. 69(2) of the Rules. Press Release 2022/19, 18 August 2022: <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/182/182-20220818-PRE-01-00-EN.pdf>; see also <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/182/182-20220316-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf>.

48 See generally Borjas, Diego Sanchez: “The ICJ Order in Ukraine vs Russia. Quo Vadis?”, *Völkerrechtsblog*, 28 March 2022. The only possibility would be to obtain “soft enforcement” of the SC under Chapter 6 UN Charter; since parties involved in disputes have to abstain according to Art. 27(3) UN Charter.

## 7 Conclusion

A classification of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in terms of international and human rights law paints a clear picture: the Russian attack is a blatant violation of international law. Fundamental rules of general international law, human rights, international humanitarian law, and international criminal law are being violated.

At the same time, the Russian war of aggression reveals the weaknesses of international law, which is decentralized and has limited institutions for enforcement in the event of violations. Power politics, especially when it comes from a state like Russia, which is a permanent member of the Security Council and has nuclear weapons, trumps. At least in the short term. From a long-term perspective, it is to be hoped that international institutions, multilateral cooperation, and the international legal framework in general will once again become policy-determining. Institutions such as the ICC make it possible, at least in the longer term, to hold accountable those most responsible for the most serious human rights violations committed in Russia's war of aggression. The clarification of the international legal framework, the establishment of Russia's international responsibility by the ICJ, for example, is also valuable in its own right. Other important initiatives by the international community include commissions of inquiry and fact-finding mechanisms. The OSCE Moscow Mechanism, mentioned above, whose reports published in April and July of 2022 and have already been referred to, is one such possibility. The Commission of Inquiry established by the UN Human Rights Council in March 2022 also contributes to this.<sup>49</sup> This will at least make it possible to put facts beyond dispute and to document human rights violations that have been committed, with multilateral cooperation and international law prevailing in the long term rather than the power politics of the strongest.

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# Chapter 11: The Cyber Dimension in Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine

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## Abstract

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022 is one of the world's first conventional conflicts between two states with advanced cyber capabilities. Although at first glance the cyber dimension of the war appears to be of small scale, Ukraine has been consistently affected by cyberattacks and the spread of disinformation. Nevertheless, the cyber situation has not developed as many experts expected. This chapter looks at the most significant developments to date, explains reasons for the steadfastness of Ukrainian cybersecurity, and identifies what to expect in cyberspace as the war continues.

## Keywords

Russia-Ukraine war, cyberattacks, disinformation, deepfakes, cyberdefense, BSI, ENISA

## 1 Introduction

Cyberattacks have been part of modern warfare for some time. In fact, the Russians view cyber-enabled operations as both “an arm of the Russian propaganda machine and a means of creating and disseminating disinformation, as well as a tool for disrupting an adversary's critical infrastructure or military capabilities”.<sup>1</sup>

With an invasion looming in early 2022, experts warned of Russia's distinctive cyber capabilities. These would have the potential to unleash a new wave of cyberattacks on Ukraine, with possible spillover outcomes affecting

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1 Willet, Marcus: The Cyber Dimension of the Russia-Ukraine War, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 6 October 2022.

the rest of the world. Since the beginning of the war, however, opposing assessments of the character and significance of the cyber dimension in Russia's war against Ukraine can be observed, ranging from "full-scale cyberwar" to "conspicuously absent".

## 2 *The Role of Cyber-Based Operations in Russia's War against Ukraine in 2022*

Ukraine has not only been affected by Russian cyber operations since February 24, 2022. Already since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, the Kremlin has interfered in local elections, attacked Ukraine's critical infrastructure, successfully compromised government websites, and spread disinformation, among other things.

For years, Ukraine has been something of a test bed for Russian cyberattacks. Cyberweapons, some of them very advanced, have sometimes been particularly effective and in many ways unprecedented. For example, in 2015, the *BlackEnergy Malware* crippled Kyiv's power grid, triggering a major blackout in the middle of winter.<sup>2</sup> These and other devastating incidents in subsequent years, such as the *NotPetya* worm<sup>3</sup> are part of Moscow's longstanding efforts to destabilize its neighbor, hindering Ukraine's ability to operate in cyberspace, and maintain a decisive edge in cyberspace.

Even before the large-scale military offensive, Russia intensified its digital attacks on Ukrainian targets. A Microsoft report published at the end of April 2022 confirms that Russia-linked actors were probably already preparing for this since March 2021.<sup>4</sup> For example, websites of government institutions have been regularly defaced since late 2021. Hackers directly sponsored by the Kremlin, or very much aligned with its interests, released destructive *malware* – particularly data wipers – on government networks, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. On January 14, 2022, an ominous warning was disseminated on official Ukrainian websites, "Be

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2 Zetter, Kim: "Inside the Cunning, Unprecedented Hack of Ukraine's Power Grid", WIRE, 3 March 2016.

3 *NotPetya*, derived from the *Petya malware* that first appeared in 2016, was a highly destructive extortion software (*ransomware*) that was first used against Ukraine and affected thousands of businesses worldwide in mid-2017. Many countries have since accused the Russian government of being behind these attacks.

4 Digital Security Unit: Special Report: Ukraine. An overview of Russia's cyberattack activity in Ukraine, Microsoft, 27 April 2022.



afraid and expect the worst".<sup>5</sup> Just a few hours before the invasion of Ukraine, Russia again attacked a number of key facilities in the country resulting in the computer systems of several government, military, and critical infrastructure sectors becoming severely dysfunctional. In many ways, this was similar to the attacks Russia carried out against Georgia in 2008 and during the invasion of Crimea in 2014.<sup>6</sup>

Since the beginning of the war in February 2022, the number of cyberattacks increased. The use of a full range of Russian cyberweapons could be observed: *Wiper Malware*, *Distributed Denial of Service* (DDoS; flooding a server with Internet traffic to prevent users from accessing the website in question), *phishing campaigns*, and, most notably, the disruption of satellite-based Internet services. The latter refers to a now infamous sabotage operation attributed to Russia<sup>7</sup> that partially took down the ground segment of *Viasat's* KA-SAT network, on which the Ukrainian military, intelligence, and police rely.<sup>8</sup>

As the war has progressed, the Kremlin has continued to ramp up its cyber operations, particularly those targeting attack critical infrastructure. A Russian cyberoperation against *Ukrtelecom* – a major national telecommunications operator – crippled communications services in Ukraine for several hours in late March.<sup>9</sup> In early April, *Industroyer2*, an enhanced variant of a malware that caused power outages in Kyiv in 2016, was identified and neutralized on the systems of one of the country's largest utilities.

In addition to cyberattacks, numerous sustained and large-scale disinformation campaigns and information operations have been observed. This has been supplemented by traditional propaganda with staged scenes in the Russian media and tight control of reporting in the press and on other media platforms. Using relatively new technologies, *deep-fakes* – manipulated videos and audio files – were also disseminated on the Internet, including fake clips of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as well as Russian

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5 Harding, Luke: "Ukraine hit by 'massive' cyber-attack on government websites", *The Guardian*, 14 January 2022.

6 Willet, *The Cyber Dimension of the Russia-Ukraine War*, 6 October 2022.

7 Council of the European Union: *Russian cyber operations against Ukraine: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union*, 10 May 2022.

8 Pearson, James/Satter, Raphael/Bing, Christopher/Schectman, Joel: "Exclusive: U.S. spy agency probes sabotage of satellite internet during Russian invasion, sources say", *Reuters*, 12 March 2022.

9 Vallance, Chris: "Ukraine war: Major internet provider suffers cyber-attack", *BBC*, 28 March 2022.

strongman Vladimir Putin.<sup>10</sup> The goal was to create chaos, destabilize Ukraine, and exhaust its moral forces in support of Russia's conventional operations.

Nevertheless, most experts expected far greater disruptions, even an unprecedented level of "shock and awe".<sup>11</sup> The fact that this did not occur at the time this chapter<sup>12</sup> was completed should not lead us to downplay the damage that has already been done. After all, the speed and cumulative effect of these attacks has had a very disruptive effect. Moreover, it can be assumed that many incidents either went undetected or unreported as part of covert operational activities. Nevertheless, we are not dealing with an incident of catastrophic proportions, a "cyber Pearl Harbor" that would bring entire portions of Ukraine's critical infrastructure or vital command and control systems to their knees. The scale of Russian cyberattacks since the war began is a far cry from what was predicted and has provided Moscow with little, if any, strategic benefit to its war aims.

### 3 The Cyber Resistance of Ukraine

Various theories have been put forward as to the causes of the rather limited impact of Russian cyber operations in the war against Ukraine.

Firstly, Ukraine's ability to effectively defend against or contain the tide of various cyberattacks is, among other things, the result of the country's direct experience gained during eight years of war against the Kremlin and its proxies. The constant threat from Kremlin-sponsored cyber actors has led Ukraine to prepare intensively for potential cyberattacks since 2014. Efforts in this respect include a new cybersecurity strategy, a cybersecurity law, an overhaul of its intelligence services, and strengthened incident response capabilities at the Computer Emergency Response Team of Ukraine (CERT-UA).

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10 Simonite, Tom: "A Zelensky Deepfake Was Quickly Defeated. The Next One Might Not Be", WIRED, 17 March 2022.

11 *Shock and Awe* is a military strategy that aims to instill "fear and terror" in an adversary at the outset of a conflict through the use of overwhelming force (in this case, in the form of cyberattacks), thereby breaking that adversary's will to resist. HarperCollins: Shock and Awe, 2022.

12 This contribution was submitted in November 2022 to the original German version of this anthology.

Secondly, the support Ukraine has received from NATO allies and industry partners has played an important role. As the Director of the National Security Agency and U.S. Cyber Command, General Paul Nakasone, himself admitted, a *Mission Force* “*hunt-forward*” team travelled to Ukraine in December 2021 to help build resilience against cyberattacks.<sup>13</sup> Large private sector technology companies were very proactive from the beginning of combat operations, offering their capabilities to defend Ukraine. This included migrating Ukrainian government data and services to distributed *cloud servers* and providing continuous threat intelligence. This close collaboration between the private and public sectors, and even the participation of nonprofit organizations as part of a “whole-of-society response”, has greatly assisted the Ukrainian government in strengthening its cyber resilience.

Thirdly, the mass mobilization of Ukrainian (and even international) volunteer hackers and patriotic programmers – many under the banner of the “IT Army” – is believed to have played a part in mounting a digital counteroffensive. With a talent pool of up to 300,000 professionals in the run-up to the war, Zelenskyy could indeed rely on many tech-savvy men and women to act as a second line of defense.<sup>14</sup>

Fourthly, Russia has failed to meaningfully integrate cyber operations with its conventional operations. Moscow has not yet deployed cyber operations in a manner that is clearly coordinated with military units and designed to facilitate the advance of ground or air forces. For example, Russian cyber units have not yet crippled power supplies or Internet connections in Ukraine on a large scale – such as immediately before an offensive. In an article in *Foreign Affairs*, NATO Assistant Secretary General for Intelligence and Security, David Cattler points to Russia’s “missteps and struggles” that have almost certainly resulted in Russia’s inability to date to meaningfully deploy its cyber program in support of its conventional forces.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, some experts suspect that Russia has tactically restrained its attacks to avoid exposing certain strategic capabilities. However, the limited

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13 Smalley, Suzanne: “Nakasone says Cyber Command did nine ‘hunt forward’ ops last year, including in Ukraine”, *CyberScoop*, 4 May 2022.

14 Mäder, Lukas: “Im Ukraine-Krieg kämpft eine ‘IT-Armee’ online gegen Russland. Die Freiwilligen attackieren sogar Apotheken und Universitäten”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 23 July 2022.

15 Cattler, David/Black, Daniel: “The Myth of the Missing Cyberwar”, *Foreign Affairs*, 6 April 2022.

attacks could also be related to Russia's caution about causing massive effects – even beyond Ukraine – that could trigger a Western response.<sup>16</sup> Spillover damage caused by Moscow, spreading far beyond the war zone, something reminiscent of *NotPetya*, could draw NATO into the fight. The Alliance has indeed stated that not only could a highly damaging cyberattack on an Alliance member trigger Article 5, but so could an accumulation of smaller attacks (assessed on a case-by-case basis).

#### 4 The Impact of Russian Cyberattacks on Europe and Germany

In addition to the direct impact on Ukraine, some expansion of Russian cyber activities to other countries could also be observed.<sup>17</sup>

An October 2022 report by *Moody's Investors Service* noted that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has contributed to a significant increase in cyberattacks in the EMEA<sup>18</sup> region.<sup>19</sup> However, Juhan Lepassaar, Director of the European Union Cyber Security Agency (ENISA), emphasized that there has been no “radical change in cyber threats” despite a “challenging” threat landscape.<sup>20</sup>

Germany has not been spared from the effects of the conflict in the cyber domain. On March 15, 2022, the German Federal Office for Information Security (BSI) warned users against operating any security software developed by Moscow-based software developer *Kaspersky Lab*. It said this posed an increased risk of being ordered by Russian authorities to hack into customers' networks.<sup>21</sup> A few days later, a cyberattack on the ground infrastructure of the *KA-SAT network* shut down thousands of wind turbines in

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16 De Liedekerke, Arthur/Laudrain, Arthur: “Russia's Cyber War: What's Next and What the European Union Should Do”, Council on Foreign Relations, 30 March 2022.

17 Sabbagh, Dan: “Russian hackers targeting opponents of Ukraine invasion, warns GCHQ chief”, *The Guardian*, 10 May 2022.

18 EMEA refers to the economic region “Europe”, “Middle East” and “Africa”.

19 Xiao, Menghan: “Cyberattacks accelerating in Europe, Moody's says”, *SC Media*, 17 October 2022.

20 Kabelka, Laura: “EU's cybersecurity agency chief warns to keep guard up”, *Euractiv*, 27 September 2022.

21 Nasr, Joseph: “Germany issues hacking warning for users of Russian anti-virus software Kaspersky”, *Reuters*, 15 March 2022.

the country.<sup>22</sup> Later, in early 2023, pro-Russia hacker group *Killnet* claimed responsibility for taking down websites of key German administrations, including large companies and airports, in retaliation for Berlin's decision to deliver tanks to Ukraine.<sup>23</sup>

Even though Germany has been relatively spared from Russian attacks compared to other European partners, according to the German government,<sup>24</sup> these events prompted the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Home Affairs (BMI) to present a new cybersecurity agenda in July 2022.<sup>25</sup>

## 5 First Lessons

It would be premature to draw definitive conclusions based on the war that is still ongoing at the time this chapter was completed. Nonetheless, initial important lessons can be drawn from the activities in cyberspace to date.

The war in Ukraine should cause experts to reevaluate the concept of cyberwar or the role of cyberspace in a conventional war. It is likely that expectations of “shock and awe” were unrealistic. Nevertheless, the situation currently unfolding in Ukraine can provide a sound example of the Internet's contribution to a conventional conflict. Above all, Ukraine's impressive cyber defenses could serve as a model for Germany and other European countries for their own cyber defenses. Technology companies in particular play a crucial role here, with high-end capabilities that can extract valuable insights from a vast amount of processed data. But the need for closer cooperation between public and private actors, as well as support from allies, should not be underestimated either. To this end, governments could, for example, consider setting up so-called “data embassies”<sup>26</sup> abroad.

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22 Burgess, Matt: “A Mysterious Satellite Hack Has Victims Far Beyond Ukraine”, WIRE, 23 March 2022.

23 Reuters: “Russian 'hacktivists' briefly knock German websites offline”, 25 January 2023.

24 Kabelka, Laura: “Germany still not affected by Russia-linked cyberattacks”, Euractiv, 6 May 2022.

25 Deutsche Welle: “Germany bolsters defenses against Russia cyber threat”, 12 July 2022; Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat: Cybersicherheitsagenda des Bundesministeriums des Innern und für Heimat. Ziele und Maßnahmen für die 20. Legislaturperiode, June 2022.

26 The establishment of data embassies is an innovative approach first explored by Estonians. The concept aims to ensure the digital continuity of nation states through state server resources outside their national borders.

Western observers should not assume, however, that the strategy Kyiv has used to so successfully fend off Russia's attacks in cyberspace can be easily applied to its own countries. Many aspects are specific to the Ukrainian context:

- Ukraine's capacity to respond to and mitigate a high number of complex cyberattacks from various state and state-sponsored actors is partly the result of the country's direct experience gained in eight years of war against the Kremlin and its proxies;
- the mass mobilization of Ukrainian volunteer hackers and patriotic programmers is a unique feature. Zelenskyy was able to draw on a whole-of-society response, with the private sector and nonprofit organizations joining the defense effort alongside the government. This is due in large part to Ukraine's status as a global "IT powerhouse", a vibrant digital civil society, and a tradition of activism. In many Western countries, however, the deployment of such an "IT army" might face significant hurdles – including legal and ethical reservations due to privacy and security risks for potential collateral victims of attacks by hacker collectives;
- "information operations" around the theater of war also play a crucial role. Ukraine's success can be attributed in part to its familiarity with Russian disinformation campaigns and its ability to respond to them accordingly. In this regard, the effective use of social media, in particular, is of great importance in disseminating counter-narratives. In addition, Ukrainians have the ability to communicate in the Russian language. On the eve of the invasion, for example, Zelenskyy himself addressed his message directly to the Russian people – in Russian.<sup>27</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

Although the impacts of the cyberwarfare we are seeing unfold have been limited to date, it would be a grave mistake to be overly optimistic. A cornered Russia, facing a series of defeats on the battlefield and with few other options on the table – the nuclear dimension excluded – is likely to increasingly resort to cyberspace. This will prove an ideal basis for

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27 For more details, see: De Liedekerke, Arthur/De Rivoire, Hector: "Ukraine's cyber resistance is impressive – but hard to replicate", EUobserver, 26 September 2022.

circumventing isolation, spying on, and disrupting Western defense plans, stealing technology and intellectual property, and amplifying global unrest.

After Western countries increased their support for Ukraine in recent months, a number of “punitive” actions by Russian cyber actors against specific countries have been observed – most notably in Finland,<sup>28</sup> Estonia,<sup>29</sup> and Montenegro.<sup>30</sup> This assessment is shared by *ENISA Threat Landscape 2022*, published in November, which assumes that Western or NATO allies (especially critical infrastructure facilities) are highly likely to be increasingly targeted as part of retaliatory actions.<sup>31</sup>

The more Western companies withdraw from Russia – a kind of strategic disengagement – the more incentive Russia has to use cyberweapons against companies and other states. Even if Moscow agrees to some kind of ceasefire, the increased use of cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns would be one of the few available options to inflict damage on Ukraine and the West in a kind of gray zone – then again below the threshold of direct confrontation.

In the long run, however, lost investments, limited access to key technologies, and fundamental constraints on the Russian economy will severely impact Russia's ability to wage war in cyberspace. The West's resolve and the support of other like-minded partners in maintaining the necessary sanctions will be critical to throttling the capabilities of Putin's cyber army.

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28 Teivainen, Aleks: “Finnish Parliament's website brought down by Russian hacker group”, *Helsinki Times*, 10 August 2022.

29 Sytas, Andrius: “Estonia says it repelled major cyber attack after removing Soviet monuments”, *Reuters*, 18 August 2022.

30 Euractiv: “Cyberattack hits Montenegro government, defense minister points at Russia,” 28 August 2022.

31 ENISA: *ENISA Threat Landscape 2022*, 3 November 2022.

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## Chapter 12: The Ukraine War as an Exogenous Shock for the Image of Russia and Alliance Solidarity in the German Population

*Timo Graf*

### Abstract

In response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, NATO and the Bundeswehr are returning to territorial alliance defense as their main mission. Does the German population support this turnaround in defense policy? Although a large majority is committed to NATO in principle, the results of previous population surveys also revealed a hesitancy to provide concrete military support to NATO's eastern partners. One reason for this was the missing perception of threat from Russia among the German population. However, the assessment of the threat situation changed abruptly and fundamentally with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine – with repercussions for the alliance solidarity of the German people. This change in attitude should be accompanied by public communication efforts of the Bundeswehr, because the widespread ignorance among the population about its missions for alliance defense remains problematic.

### Keywords

public opinion, threat perception, Russia, alliance defense, NATO

### *1 Introduction*

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine means a new dimension of escalation in the tensions between liberal Europe and anti-liberal, autocratic, and revanchist Russia under Vladimir Putin. After a little more than thirty

years of “End of History”,<sup>1</sup> the peace dividend in Europe has finally been exhausted. NATO and the Bundeswehr are reacting to this by returning to territorial alliance defense as their main mission.

A gradual revitalization of alliance defense within the framework of NATO can already be observed since 2014 – as a reaction to Russia’s illegal and violent annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and the abusive destabilization of eastern Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> NATO’s efforts since then have focused on protecting the alliance’s eastern flank and reassuring its eastern member states. Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022 thus accelerates the return to alliance defense as the primary mission of NATO and the Bundeswehr. NATO announced a doubling of its troop presence in Eastern Europe a month after the war began and named Russia as “the greatest threat to Allied security and security in the Euro-Atlantic area” in its June 2022 Strategic Concept.<sup>3</sup> At the Bundeswehr conference in September 2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz reasserted national and alliance defense as the Bundeswehr’s main mission:

“For a long time, our country – and that explicitly includes politics – avoided a real prioritization of the Bundeswehr’s tasks. Drilling wells, securing humanitarian aid [...]. The core mission of the Bundeswehr is the defense of freedom in Europe – or in somewhat less lyrical terms: national and alliance defense. [...] All other tasks have to be subordinated to this mission.”<sup>4</sup>

Although Germany is not a frontline state in the conflict with Russia, the size and capability of its armed forces and its geographic location in the center of Europe give it a special responsibility for alliance defense in general and for defending NATO’s eastern flank in particular. The principle applies: “Keeping an enemy in check, together with our partners, at the Alliance’s border is better than having to fight it alone at home – with all the sacrifices that this entails.”<sup>5</sup> In response to Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, the Bundeswehr stepped up its existing commitment in

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1 Fukuyama, Francis: *The End of History and the Last Man*. Penguin Books: London 1992.

2 BMVg: *Weißbuch 2016 zur Sicherheitspolitik und zur Zukunft der Bundeswehr*, Berlin 2016.

3 NATO: *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, Brussels 2022.

4 Scholz, Olaf: *Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz bei der Bundeswehrtagung*, Berlin, 16 September 2022.

5 BMVg: *Auftrag Landes- und Bündnisverteidigung*, Berlin 2020, p.13.

the Baltic region (*Enhanced Forward Presence* in Lithuania and *Baltic Air Policing*) and immediately joined the newly initiated NATO missions to secure the eastern flank of the alliance in Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.

In view of the challenge, swift and decisive political and military action is called for, but this means that there will be a certain time lag before society comes to grips with the turnaround of Germany's defense policy. And while the public debate may be delayed, it cannot be avoided. Prior to 2022, only a few citizens perceived Russia as a threat, which had an impact on the population's alliance solidarity: although the majority of the population is clearly committed to NATO and the principle of collective alliance defense, the willingness to provide concrete military support to the eastern allies has been lacking. Has Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine made the German population finally see Russia for what it is? Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, are citizens finally supporting Germany's military commitment to securing NATO's eastern flank?

The chapter answers these questions on the basis of representative population surveys, which are conducted by the Center for Military History and Social Sciences of the Bundeswehr (ZMSBw) on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Defense (BMVg; hereafter MoD).<sup>6</sup> As an introduction to the empirical analysis, the fundamental importance of public opinion for collective defense and the influence of threat perceptions on citizens' alliance solidarity are discussed. Subsequently, the perceived threat from Russia and the alliance solidarity of the German population are examined over time and the relationship between these two aspects of public opinion is discussed. The reported findings are of particular value because recent empirical studies on the alliance solidarity of the German people are scarce<sup>7</sup> – especially those that can reliably measure the impact of the war

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6 The surveys have been conducted once a year since 1996 as face-to-face and computer-assisted interviews (CAPI) in participants' homes. Respondents are selected randomly in a multiple stratified procedure. Participation is voluntary, anonymous, and without remuneration. The sample is representative of the German-speaking population aged 16 and older living in households. More than 2,000 people were interviewed in each survey year (net sample). The data is collected by an external and professional survey institute. The contract is awarded through a public tender procedure. The ZMSBw is responsible for drawing up the questionnaire and evaluating the data collected.

7 Empirical studies on the German population's loyalty to the Alliance before 2022: Biehl, Heiko/Rothbart, Chariklia/Steinbrecher, Markus: Cold War Revisited? Die deutsche Bevölkerung und die Renaissance der Bündnisverteidigung. In: Hartmann, Uwe/von Rosen, Claus (Eds.): Jahrbuch Innere Führung 2017: Die Wiederkehr der Verteidigung in Europa und die Zukunft der Bundeswehr. Miles-Verlag: Berlin 2017,

in Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> The chapter concludes with a reflection on the implications of the empirical findings for the strategic and public communication efforts of the Bundeswehr and the MoD.

## 2 On the Importance of Public Opinion for Alliance Defense

Unlike the “classic” missions abroad such as in Afghanistan (ISAF and *Resolute Support*), the Bundeswehr’s participation in NATO’s missions to secure the alliance’s eastern flank does not require a mandate from the German Bundestag and is based solely on a decision of the German government. So, what is the significance of public opinion in this context?

First, a critical public opinion on alliance defense could lead to a loss of trust among Germany’s NATO partners.<sup>9</sup> After all, each member country decides on its own what contribution it is willing to make to the alliance’s defense – even in the case of an attack according to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.<sup>10</sup> For more than 70 years, the solidarity and trust amongst its members have been the foundation of NATO – and thus of Germany’s and Europe’s security.

Second, a lack of public support for alliance defense could impair civil-military relations in Germany. Such a development would run counter

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pp. 137–153; Fagan, Moira/Poushter, Jacob: NATO seen favorably across member states. Pew Research Center: Washington, D.C. 2020; Graf, Timo: Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit: Wie steht es um die Bündnistreue in der Bevölkerung? In: Hartmann, Uwe/Janke, Reinhold/von Rosen, Claus (Eds.): Jahrbuch Innere Führung 2021/22. Ein neues Mindset Landes- und Bündnisverteidigung? Miles-Verlag: Berlin 2022, pp. 129–155; Steinbrecher, Markus/Biehl, Heiko/Rothbart, Chariklia: Wachsamkeit als Preis von Sicherheit und Freiheit? Einstellungen der deutschen Bevölkerung zur Bündnisverteidigung. In: Steinbrecher Markus/Biehl, Heiko/Bytzek, Evelyn/ Rosar, Ulrich (Eds.): Freiheit oder Sicherheit? Ein Spannungsverhältnis aus Sicht der Bürgerinnen und Bürger. Springer VS: Wiesbaden 2018, pp. 177–216; Stokes, Bruce: NATO’s Image Improves on Both Sides of Atlantic. Pew Research Center: Washington, D.C. 2017.

8 Zink, Wolfgang: Die Sicherheit aus Sicht der Bevölkerung: Ein Stimmungsbarometer, 2022.

9 Meyer zum Felde, Rainer: Deutsche Verteidigungspolitik: Versäumnisse und nicht gehaltene Versprechen. In: SIRIUS – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 4, Issue 3, pp. 315–332.

10 Giegerich, Bastian: Die NATO. Springer VS: Wiesbaden 2012; Hunter, Robert: NATO’s Article 5: The Condition for a Military and a Political Coalition. In: European Affairs, Vol. 2, Issue 4, 2001.

to the Bundeswehr's leadership and organizational philosophy of *Innere Führung* (inner leadership), which seeks to promote the societal integration of the Bundeswehr through, for instance, public approval for its missions.<sup>11</sup>

Third, defense policy has gained sociopolitical relevance as a result of the Ukraine war. It should be borne in mind that public opinion can influence the (perceived) room for maneuver of political decision-makers and thus defense policy decisions – at least in Western democracies such as Germany.<sup>12</sup> In concrete terms, public opinion can influence the shape of national involvement in a multinational military operation, i.e. not so much *whether* to participate, but *how*.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, a critical public opinion on alliance defense in general and on the Bundeswehr missions to secure NATO's eastern flank in particular could also have a negative impact on the motivation of the German soldiers deployed on those missions. Previous empirical research shows that a public opinion that is perceived by the soldiers as being critical can have both an immediate and a lasting negative effect on the motivation of the deployed soldiers.<sup>14</sup>

In light of these considerations, it is worth noting that Russia has been attempting to manipulate public opinion in Western countries in its favor

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11 Biehl et al. 2017, pp. 150–151.

12 Burstein, Paul: The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and an Agenda. In: Political Research Quarterly, Vol. 56, Issue 1, 2003, pp. 29–40; Page, Benjamin I./Shapiro, Robert Y.: Effects of Public Opinion on Policy. In: The American Political Science Review, Vol. 77, Issue 1, 1983, pp. 175–190.

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with disinformation campaigns for many years. According to an investigative report published by the European External Action Service (EEAS) in March 2021, Germany is the main target of Russian disinformation campaigns in Europe.<sup>15</sup> Public opinion in Germany has thus itself become a target of Russia's hybrid warfare against the West. From the EEAS's point of view, the reason for Russia's focus on Germany is not only Germany's economic and political importance within the EU, but also the (Russian) assumption that large parts of the German population are Russia-friendly. As the following analysis reveals, this assumption was not entirely unfounded.

### 3 On the Importance of Threat Perceptions

The central hypothesis of the present study is that the German population's NATO alliance solidarity is significantly influenced by the public image of Russia. This hypothesis is derived from decades of research on the influence of country perceptions on foreign, security, and defense policy preferences and issue orientations, which enjoyed a particular boom during the Cold War. With the "cognitive revolution" in the social sciences beginning in the 1950s and the "constructivist turn" in political science in the late 1970s, the importance of realist, materialist, and game theoretical paradigms and their underlying assumption of a universally valid and "objective" rationality to explain international relations, particularly between the United States and the Soviet Union, was questioned. The constructivist approach did not deny the rationality of actors in international relations, but rationality *per se* was no longer recognized as being "universal" or "objective", but understood as being dependent on cultural imprints ("strategic cultures")<sup>16</sup> and subjective (mis)perceptions.<sup>17</sup>

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15 European External Action Service: Vilifying Germany, Wooing Germany, 9 March 2021.

16 Snyder, Jack L.: The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Options. RAND: Santa Monica 1977; Hurwitz, Jon/Peffley, Mark: How are foreign policy attitudes structured? A hierarchical model. In: American Political Science Review, Vol. 81, Issue 4, 1987, pp. 1099–1120.

17 Boulding, Kenneth: National Images and International Systems. In: Journal of Conflict Resolution Vol. 3, Issue 2, 1959, pp. 120–131; Holsti, Ole R.: The Belief System and National Images. In: The Journal of Conflict Resolution, Vol. 6, Issue 3, 1962, pp. 244–252; Hurwitz, Jon/Peffley, Mark: American Images of the Soviet Union and National Security Issues. In: Rattinger, Hans/Munton, Don (Eds.): Debating



The authoritative theory for explaining international relations on the basis of subjective country perceptions is *International Image Theory*.<sup>18</sup> The core of this theory is the assumption that foreign, security, and defense policy preferences of political decision-makers as well as citizens are influenced by structured perceptions of other countries (so-called *Images*), which resemble a stereotype in the socio-psychological sense and serve as a cognitive heuristic in preference formation.<sup>19</sup> This cognitive heuristic is particularly important for the “general population” because the majority of citizens have, on average, only little knowledge about foreign, security, and defense policy. So, the argument goes that attitudes towards the latter are formed less on the basis of (a lack of) expert knowledge and more derived from subjective country perceptions. In this context, the subjective perception of another country as a threat to national security is considered to play a central role in defense policy preference formation.<sup>20</sup> Cooperative relations are preferred with a country perceived as non-hostile. In contrast, perceptions of hostility should lead to a preference for defensive measures.

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- 18 Alexander, Michele G./Brewer, Marilyn B./Herrmann, Richard K.: Images and Affect: A Functional Analysis of Out-group Stereotypes. In: Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 77, Issue 1, 1999, pp. 78–93; Cottam, Richard W.: Foreign Policy Motivation: A General Theory and a Case Study. University of Pittsburgh Press: Pittsburgh 1977; Herrmann, Richard K.: Perception and Behavior in Soviet Foreign Policy. University of Pittsburgh Press: Pittsburgh 1985; Herrmann, Richard K.: The Power of Perceptions in Foreign-Policy Decision Making: Do Views of the Soviet Union Determine the Policy Choices of American Leaders? In: American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 30, Issue 4, 1986, pp. 841–875; Herrmann, Richard K.: Image Theory and Strategic Interaction in International Relations. In: Huddy, Leonie/Sears, David O./Jervis, Robert (Eds.): Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2003, pp. 285–314.
- 19 Herrmann, Richard K./Fischerkeller, Michael P.: Beyond the Enemy Image and Spiral Model: Cognitive-Strategic Research after the Cold War. In: International Organization, Vol. 49, Issue 3, 1995, pp. 415–450; Herrmann, Richard K./Voss, James F./Schooler, Tonya Y.E./Ciarocchi, Joseph: Images in International Relations: An Experimental Test of Cognitive Schemata. In: International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 41, Issue 3, 1997, pp. 403–433.
- 20 Cottam 1977; Holsti, Ole R.: Cognitive Dynamics and Images of the Enemy. In: Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 21, Issue 1, 1967, pp. 16–39; Hurwitz, Jon/Peffley, Mark: Public Images of the Soviet Union: The Impact on Foreign Policy Attitudes. In: Journal of Politics Vol. 51, Issue 1, 1990, pp. 3–28; Silverstein, Brett: Enemy Images: The Psychology of U.S. Attitudes and Cognitions regarding the Soviet Union. In: American Psychologist, Vol. 44, Issue 6, 1989, pp. 903–913.

These relationships have been proven in numerous experimental and survey studies.<sup>21</sup>

The perception of Russia as a threat should influence the German population's attitude toward NATO and alliance defense, since NATO was initially founded to protect (Western) Europe from a threat by the Soviet Union. And it is precisely this defensive mission that NATO and the Bundeswehr have rediscovered for themselves as a result of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. An analysis of ZMSBw survey data from 2017 has already demonstrated a significant correlation between the respondents' general image of Russia and their attitude towards military support for NATO's eastern states: the more critical the image of Russia, the greater the alliance solidarity.<sup>22</sup> Those who perceive Russia as a threat should support the concrete efforts of NATO and the Bundeswehr to secure NATO's eastern flank more strongly than those citizens who do not see Russia as a threat.

#### *4 Russia as a Threat from the Perspective of the German Population*

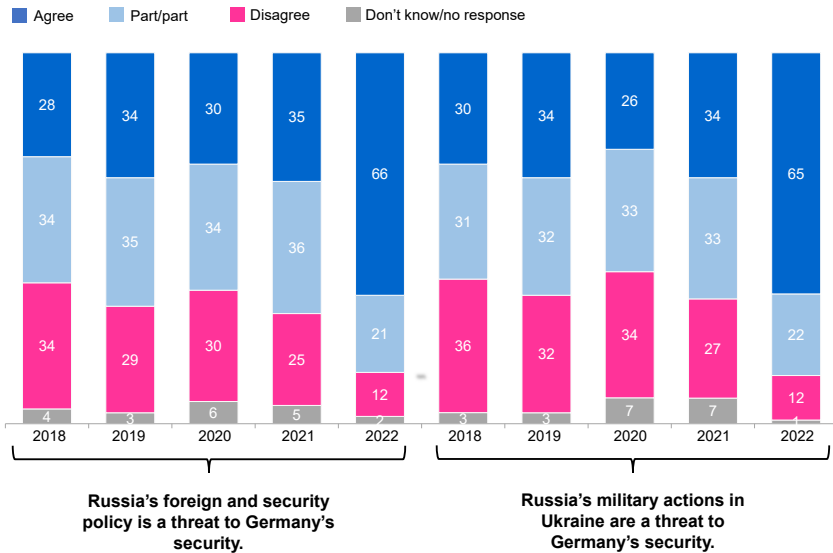
The results of the ZMSBw population surveys from 2018 to 2021 reveal a weak sense of threat from Russia: on average, only one-third of the respondents perceived Russia's foreign and security policy and its military actions in Ukraine as a threat to Germany's security; one-third had an ambivalent opinion, and one-fourth to one-third did not recognize any potential threat (see fig. 1).

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21 Alexander et al. 1999; Herrmann 1986, 2003; Herrmann, Richard K./Tetlock, Philip E./Visser, Penny S.: Mass Public Decisions on Going to War: A Cognitive-Interactionist Framework. In: *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 93, Issue 3, 1999, pp. 553–573; Schafer, Mark: Images and Policy Preferences. In: *Political Psychology*, Vol. 18, Issue 4, 1997, pp. 813–829.

22 Steinbrecher et al. 2018.

Figure 1: Perception of Russia as a Threat to Germany's Security



Notes: Figures are percentages. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. The response categories “agree fully” and “agree somewhat” as well as “disagree fully” and “disagree somewhat” have been combined respectively. Data source: ZMSBw population surveys 2018–2022.

Also, only a small proportion of citizens felt that their personal security was threatened by “war in Europe” or “tensions between the West and Russia” (see fig. 2). Overall, looking at the period before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it can be seen that the feeling of being threatened by Russia was rather weak among the German population and that only a minority feared a military conflict. These findings are consistent with the results of other representative population surveys for the period before 2022.<sup>23</sup>

With Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, however, the sense of threat from Russia has changed fundamentally. According to

23 Institut für Demoskopie Allensbachs: Sicherheitsreport 2021; Kucarczyk, Jacek/Lada-Konefal, Agnieszka: Mit einer Stimme: Deutsche und Polen über den russischen Angriff auf die Ukraine. Deutsch-polnisches Barometer 2022 Sonderausgabe. Deutsches Polen-Institut: Darmstadt 2022; Vice, Margaret: Public Worldview Unfavorable Toward Putin, Russia. Pew Research Center: Washington, D.C. 2017.

a March 2022 survey by the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research, three-quarters of Germans feel threatened by Russia.<sup>24</sup> A representative survey conducted in March 2022 for the “German-Polish Barometer 2022” shows that, on average, three-quarters of Germans perceive Russia as a political (73 percent agreement), economic (74 percent agreement), and military (74 percent agreement) threat.<sup>25</sup> In a May/June 2022 survey for the consulting firm *PriceWaterhouseCoopers*, 78 percent of respondents perceive EU member states and Germany to be threatened by violent acts, cyberattacks, and destabilization attempts from Russia.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, 66 percent feel that their personal security is threatened by Russian actions such as these.

The results of the ZMSBw population survey conducted in June/July 2022 also reflect the radical change in public threat perceptions. The rather ambivalent perception of relations with Russia in recent years has given way to the realization that Russia’s foreign and security policy (66 percent approval; +31 percentage points) and Russia’s military actions in Ukraine (65 percent approval; +31 percentage points) pose a threat to Germany’s security (see fig. 1). The sharp change in the public perception of Russia is also reflected in the reduced proportion of those who have an ambivalent attitude toward Russia. Compared with previous years, this proportion has fallen by more than 10 percentage points in each case. The proportion of respondents who did not want to give any answers has also decreased compared with the previous year. All in all, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has made the majority of Germans see Russia for what it is: a direct threat to Germany’s security.

Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine not only affects the strategic threat perception but also people’s *personal* sense of security. The share of those who feel personally threatened by war in Europe has tripled compared to 2021 – from 15 to 45 percent – and the share of those who feel threatened by tensions between the West and Russia has more than doubled (60 percent; +37 percentage points) (see fig. 2). Such massive changes have not been registered by the ZMSBw population survey since data recording began in 1996.

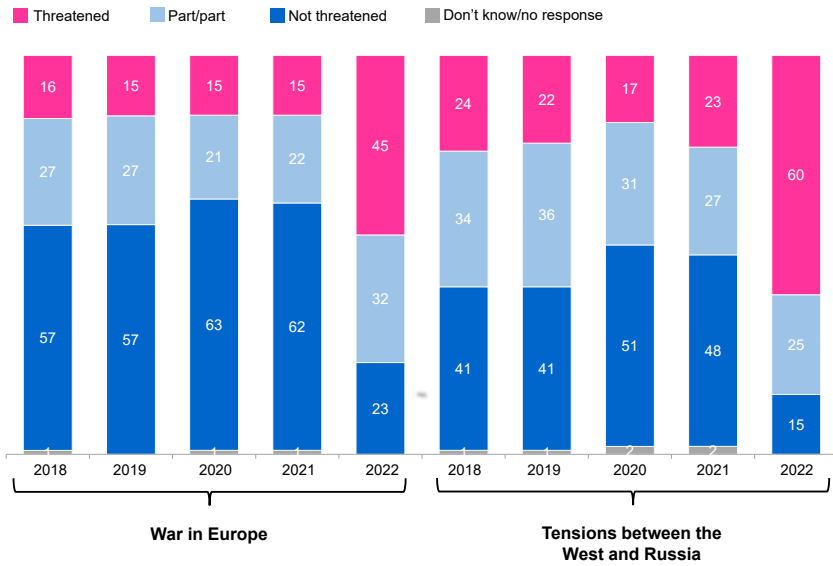
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24 Köcher, Renate: “Ein gefährliches Land“, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 April 2022.

25 Kucharczyk/Lada-Konefal 2022, p. 8.

26 Zink 2022.

Figure 2: Perceived Threats to Personal Security

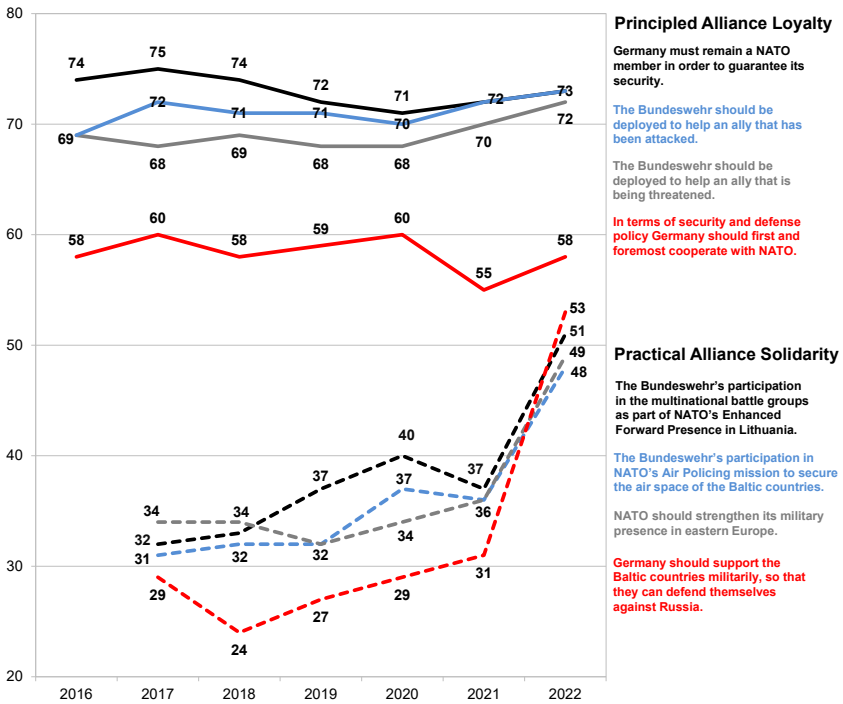


Notes: Figures are percentages. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. The response categories “strongly threatened” and “somewhat threatened” as well as “not really threatened” and “not at all threatened” have been combined respectively. Data source: ZMSBw population surveys 2018–2022.

### 5 Between Principle and Practice: The Alliance Solidarity of the Germans

For years, the ZMSBw population surveys have revealed a remarkable discrepancy between high approval of Germany’s membership in NATO and of the principle of collective defense on the one hand, and rather weak approval of military support for NATO’s eastern allies and of the Bundeswehr’s participation in NATO missions on the other hand (see fig. 3).

Figure 3: Public Support for Alliance Defense 2016–2022



Notes: Figures are percentages. Response categories “agree fully” and “agree somewhat” have been combined. Data source: ZMSBw population surveys 2016–2022.

Although public support for the Bundeswehr’s participation in the two NATO missions in the Baltics has already shown a slight increase since 2018, they remained only in the midfield of public approval compared with the Bundeswehr’s other foreign deployments for the period 2017–2021.<sup>27</sup> Also, the fundamental willingness to provide military support to the eastern allies increased slightly in the period 2018–2021, but remained significantly behind the principled loyalty to the alliance until recently (see fig. 3).

27 Graf, Timo/Biehl, Heiko: Einstellungen zu den Auslandseinsätzen der Bundeswehr. In: Graf, Timo/Steinbrecher, Markus/Biehl, Heiko/Scherzer, Joel: Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Ergebnisse und Analysen der Bevölkerungsbefragung 2021. Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr: Potsdam 2022, pp. 253–269.

The pronounced discrepancy between “principle” and “practice” in the Germans’ attitude toward alliance defense thus persisted until 2021.

As a result of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, public approval for an active defense of NATO’s eastern flank has risen sharply.<sup>28</sup> The strengthening of NATO’s military presence in Eastern Europe is currently met with significantly greater approval from the population than in the previous year (see fig. 3): 49 percent (+13 percentage points) are in favor of NATO increasing its presence in Eastern Europe, while 22 percent are opposed and 24 percent are undecided. In addition, an absolute majority (53 percent; +22 percentage points) now advocates that Germany should provide military support to the Baltic states so that they can defend themselves against Russia; 16 percent oppose this and 27 percent have an ambivalent attitude. Public approval of the Bundeswehr missions on NATO’s eastern flank has also risen sharply: the participation of the Bundeswehr in the *Enhanced Forward Presence* in Lithuania is supported by an absolute majority of respondents (51 percent; +14 percentage points) and in the *enhanced Air Policing* in the Baltic states by a relative majority (48 percent; +12 percentage points). In addition, the Bundeswehr’s more recent engagements in Poland (51 percent), Slovakia (46 percent), and Romania (43 percent) also receive high approval ratings.

### 6 The Influence of Threat Perceptions on Alliance Solidarity

The above analyses suggest that concrete alliance solidarity in the German population has changed massively as a result of the Ukraine war and the accompanying change in threat perception. Furthermore, the results of the 2022 ZMSBw population survey show just how much alliance solidarity depends on threat perceptions. Those who perceive Russia as a threat to Germany’s security support all practical efforts to defend NATO’s eastern flank much more strongly than those respondents who do not perceive Russia as a threat or have an ambivalent threat perception: stronger NATO presence in Eastern Europe 57 percent to 30 percent; military support for the Baltic states 62 percent to 28 percent; stronger German military engagement on the eastern flank 57 percent to 33 percent; Bundeswehr

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28 Graf, Timo: Zeitenwende im sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitischen Meinungsbild. Ergebnisse der ZMSBw-Bevölkerungsbefragung 2022. Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr: Potsdam 2022, p. 6.

participation in the *Enhanced Forward Presence* in Lithuania 59 percent to 28 percent; Bundeswehr participation in the *Baltic Air Policing* 56 percent to 27 percent.

However, a significant association between the feeling of being threatened by Russia and support for NATO’s efforts to secure the eastern flank existed already prior to 2022 (see tab. 1). The results reported in Table 1 show that even before the beginning of the war approval of all aspects of concrete alliance solidarity is the strongest in the group of those who perceive Russia as a threat to Germany’s security (Russia’s security and defense policy as well as Russia’s military action in Ukraine) – but this group constituted only a third of the population. The strong association between the perception of threat from Russia and the respondents’ practical alliance solidarity has also been demonstrated for Germany with other representative survey data.<sup>29</sup>

*Table 1: The Impact of the Perception of Threat on Alliance Solidarity before the War (2021)*

| <b>Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:</b> |   |  |   |   |
|---|---|--|---|---|
|   | <b>Agreement:<br/>a) Stronger<br/>NATO pres-<br/>ence in east-<br/>ern Europe</b> | <b>Agreement:<br/>b) German<br/>mil. support<br/>to Baltic<br/>countries</b> | <b>Agreement:<br/>c) Bun-<br/>deswehr<br/>mission EFP<br/>Lithuania</b> | <b>Agreement:<br/>d) Bun-<br/>deswehr<br/>mission<br/>Baltic Air<br/>Policing</b> |
| <b>Perception of Russia</b>   |   |  |   |   |
| Threat  | 54  | 46   | 46  | 45  |
| Part/part   | 32  | 28   | 35  | 35  |
| No threat   | 19  | 16   | 33  | 33  |

Notes: Figures are percentages. Reported are the combined responses “agree fully” and “agree somewhat.” Data source: ZMSBw population survey 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Stokes 2017.



Additional multivariate analyses based on data from the ZMSBw population surveys of 2020 and 2021 prove that public support in Germany for a concrete military engagement on NATO's eastern flank was significantly influenced by the feeling of being threatened by Russia: those who (did not) feel threatened by Russia were more likely (not) to support a concrete military engagement to secure NATO's eastern flank.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the overall lack of a sense of threat from Russia in the German population has been demonstrated to widen the previously observed gap between principled alliance loyalty and concrete alliance solidarity. Importantly, these effects of the threat perception are statistically significant even when the influences of other relevant explanatory factors are taken into account in the analysis, such as trust in the U.S. as a reliable NATO partner, the respondents' general attitude toward the Bundeswehr, a preference for a multilateral orientation of German foreign policy, a fundamental willingness to deploy armed forces as a means of Germany's foreign and security policy, and the level of knowledge about the Bundeswehr's participation in NATO missions in the Baltic states.

The perception of Russia as a threat to Germany's national security thus plays a very decisive role in shaping citizens' attitudes toward collective defense within the framework of NATO in general and their willingness to provide concrete military support to the eastern allies in particular. Until Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the largely absent perception of threat from Russia dampened public approval of Germany's military engagement to secure NATO's eastern flank. As a result, in recent years there has been a pronounced mismatch between strongly held allegiance to the alliance in principle and rather low approval for the practical reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank (see fig. 3). Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022 has the majority of Germans perceive Russia as a threat to national security, which increases public approval for the concrete defense of NATO's eastern flank. As a result, the previously observed gap between principled alliance loyalty and concrete alliance solidarity has narrowed considerably (cf. fig. 3).

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30 Graf, *Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit*, 2022; Graf, Timo: *Einstellungen zur Bündnisverteidigung*. In: Graf, Timo/Steinbrecher, Markus/Biehl, Heiko/Scherzer, Joel: *Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Ergebnisse und Analysen der Bevölkerungsbefragung 2021*. Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr: Potsdam 2022, pp. 79–100.

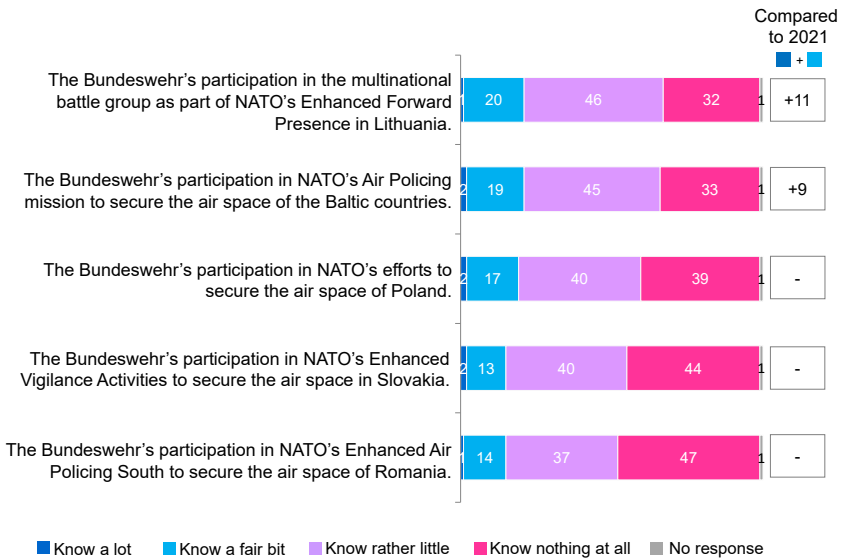
### 7 Low Level of Knowledge about NATO Missions Remains a Problem

There is currently a great deal of indignation about the war in Ukraine and a heightened attention to issues of alliance defense. However, whether it will be possible to transform the current mood into lasting public support for the Bundeswehr's participation in NATO's efforts to secure the eastern flank will probably depend not only on the level of perceived threat from Russia, but also crucially on the ability of the Bundeswehr and the MoD to effectively inform the general public about those defense efforts.

As the mass media report on the war in Ukraine, there is also an increase in the reporting on the NATO presence in Eastern Europe and the corresponding Bundeswehr missions, which contributes to greater public knowledge about these missions. Compared to 2021, the current level of information among the population on the participation of the Bundeswehr in NATO missions in the Baltic states (*Enhanced Forward Presence* Lithuania: +11 percentage points; *Baltic Air Policing*: +9 percentage points) has increased significantly (see fig. 4). However, the absolute level of knowledge among the population about the Bundeswehr missions on the eastern flank remains rather low despite the increase: only 15 (Slovakia and Romania) to 21 percent (*Enhanced Forward Presence* Lithuania and *Baltic Air Policing*) of respondents say they know very much or rather a lot about these missions; the vast majority (78 to 84 percent) say they know little or nothing at all.

Figure 4: Knowledge about the Bundeswehr Missions on NATO's Eastern Flank

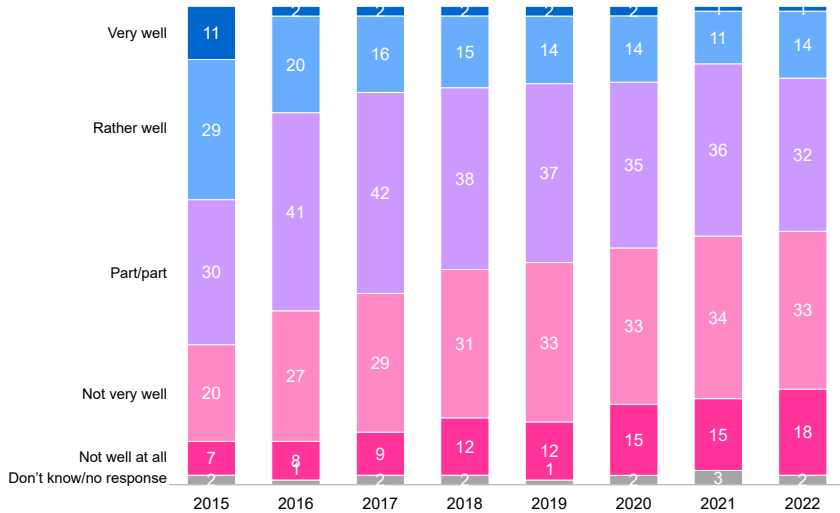
“How much do you know about the current Bundeswehr missions abroad?”



Notes: Figures are percentages. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Comparisons are not possible for the missions in Poland, Slovakia, and Romania as they were launched in 2022. Data source: ZMSBw population surveys 2021–2022.

In addition, the average level of information among citizens about the Bundeswehr's missions abroad (covering all types of missions) has been declining for years. Currently, half of the citizens feel poorly informed about the Bundeswehr's foreign deployments. In 2022 the negative trend continues: the proportion of those who feel very badly or rather badly informed has risen steadily from 27 percent in 2015 to 51 percent in 2022, while in the same period the proportion of those who feel well informed has fallen from 40 percent to 15 percent (see fig. 5).

Figure 5: *Level of Information about the Bundeswehr Missions*  
 “How well informed do you feel about the current Bundeswehr missions abroad?”



Notes: Figures are percentages. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Data source: ZMSBw population surveys 2015–2022.

The low level of knowledge among the population about the Bundeswehr missions to secure NATO’s eastern flank and the high proportion of respondents who feel generally ill-informed about the Bundeswehr’s foreign deployments are two extremely worrying findings because approval of Bundeswehr missions is strongly dependent on the level of knowledge about them. Respondents who say they have at least a basic level of knowledge about the Bundeswehr’s NATO missions to secure the eastern flank exhibit much higher approval ratings than those respondents who have little or no knowledge (see tab. 2). The differences in the approval ratings between more and less informed citizens are considerable and vary between 20 (Romania and Slovakia) and 26 percentage points (*Baltic Air Policing* and *Enhanced Forward Presence Lithuania*). In essence: respondents who claim to have some knowledge of the missions are also more likely to support them. Conversely, among the respondents with lower levels of knowledge, no Bundeswehr mission receives majority support. Thus, most of the reservations and opposition are concentrated among those segments of the

population that know less about the Bundeswehr’s involvement on NATO’s eastern flank.

Table 2: Attitudes towards the Bundeswehr Missions on NATO’s Eastern Flank Depending on the Level of Knowledge

| Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the participation of the Bundeswehr in the following missions: |                    |           |                       |                          |
|---|--------------------|-----------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
|   | Agree <sup>1</sup> | Part/part | Disagree <sup>2</sup> | Don't know/<br>no answer |
| <b>Lithuania (Enhanced Forward Presence) ***</b>  |                    |           |                       |                          |
| Knows something or a lot <sup>3</sup>   | 72                 | 19        | 9                     | (3)                      |
| Knows little or nothing at all  | 46                 | 26        | 24                    | 8                        |
| <b>Poland (Air Defense) ***</b>   |                    |           |                       |                          |
| Knows something or a lot  | 70                 | 17        | 13                    | (0)                      |
| Knows little or nothing at all  | 47                 | 25        | 24                    | 4                        |
| <b>Baltic countries (Baltic Air Policing) ***</b>   |                    |           |                       |                          |
| Knows something or a lot  | 68                 | (20)      | (12)                  | (0)                      |
| Knows little or nothing at all  | 42                 | 30        | 22                    | 5                        |
| <b>Slovakia (Enhanced Vigilance Activities) ***</b>   |                    |           |                       |                          |
| Knows something or a lot  | 63                 | 24        | 12                    | (1)                      |
| Knows little or nothing at all  | 43                 | 26        | 25                    | 6                        |
| <b>Romania (Enhanced Air Policing South) ***</b>  |                    |           |                       |                          |
| Knows something or a lot  | 61                 | 23        | 17                    | (0)                      |
| Knows little or nothing at all  | 41                 | 27        | 27                    | 6                        |

Notes: Figures are percentages. 1) Response categories “agree fully” and “agree somewhat” have been combined; 2) Response categories “disagree fully” and “disagree somewhat” have been combined; 3) Response categories “know a lot” and “know a fair bit” have been combined; 4) Response categories “know rather little” and “know nothing at all” have been combined. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Analysis: Chi<sup>2</sup>-square-test of independence; significance levels are denoted as follows: \*\*\* p < 0,001; \*\* p < 0,01; \* p < 0,05; n.s. = not significant. Figures in parentheses: n ≤ 50. N = 2.741. Data source: ZMSBw population survey 2022.

## 8 Conclusion

As a result of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the ambivalent image of Russia among the German population has given way to the realization that Russia poses a direct threat to Germany. This dramatic change in threat perception has boosted the willingness of the German people to support NATO's eastern member states militarily. Ultimately, this development has narrowed the gap between the German population's strongly pronounced allegiance to NATO in principle and its weakly pronounced solidarity with the alliance's eastern member states.

These findings highlight the importance of a shared threat assessment: if it is lacking, alliance solidarity can suffer. To put it differently: the willingness of the German population to provide military assistance to its eastern NATO allies depends to a large extent on their own sense of being threatened by Russia. The eastern allies, especially Poland and the Baltic states, have warned Germany for many years about the military threat posed by Russia. Instead of being listened to, they were confronted with an ambivalent attitude towards Russia in German politics, industry, and among the population. This ambivalent attitude has not been without consequences. Thus, the former director of the Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University (ISPK), Professor Dr. Joachim Krause, draws an extremely critical conclusion with regard to Germany's past contributions to securing NATO's eastern flank:

“[Germany's] alliance policy consisted primarily of distinguishing oneself by criticizing the U.S., but otherwise making only small contributions to alliance solidarity. The interests and concerns of our eastern allies were largely ignored. [...] Efforts within NATO to improve the defense capabilities of the Baltic states were only half-heartedly implemented by the German government.”<sup>31</sup>

Only now that the majority of Germans perceive Russia as a threat to national and personal security are they willing to support Germany's military contributions to securing NATO's eastern flank.

The current change in German attitudes towards collective defense is a logical consequence of the objectively changed threat situation. For this change in attitude to be sustainable, it must be accompanied by public

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31 Krause, Joachim: Ein Sicherheitsrat wäre das Ende der strategischen Blindheit. In: Die Bundeswehr, Vol. 11, 2022, pp. 14–16.

communication and information efforts of the Bundeswehr and the MoD. This is because public approval of the Bundeswehr missions on NATO's eastern flank depends not only on the feeling of threat but also to a large extent on the level of knowledge about these missions – which is extremely low on average. The consumption of daily news alone will not be able to remedy this deficit, especially if media reporting wanes as the war drags on. Also, in view of the large amount of “fake news” and disinformation on the NATO-Russia-Ukraine issue, it is necessary for the Bundeswehr and the MoD to provide citizens with as much information as possible so that they can develop a well-informed and resilient stance on the Bundeswehr's involvement in NATO's missions to secure the alliance's eastern flank.

There is no need to create enemy images unnecessarily, but the current situation calls for honesty in all matters of public communication. Russia is waging a war of aggression in the middle of Europe against a sovereign and democratic country that professes European values. Russian soldiers and mercenaries have killed thousands of civilians in Ukraine, deported hundreds of thousands to Russia, and displaced millions. Tens of thousands of Ukrainian citizens have died fighting for the survival of their families, the Ukrainian state, and Ukrainian culture. With its barbaric war of aggression and annihilation against Ukraine, Russia destroyed the European security order that had existed since the end of the Cold War, threatening the security, freedom, and prosperity of all of Europe. The Bundeswehr missions on NATO's eastern flank serve to defend Germany and its NATO allies against this threat. These points need to be communicated as clearly as possible because a critical public opinion on the Bundeswehr's participation in the missions to secure NATO's eastern flank could not only weaken the mutual trust among NATO's member states, but also impair the motivation of German soldiers on deployment, and strain civil-military relations in Germany for years to come. Such a development would weaken NATO's cohesion and ability to act and thus play into Russia's hands.

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### III. *Zeitenwende* for Germany's Security Policy



## Chapter 13: Implications of the Russian War of Aggression against Ukraine for German Foreign and Security Policy

Tobias Lindner<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

February 24, 2022, represents a deeper cut in German foreign and security policy than anything we have experienced in the last thirty years. The following chapter attempts to classify how the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine will affect German security policy, Germany's relations with Russia, and our relationship with Ukraine.

### Keywords

Zeitenwende, German foreign and security policy, Russia policy, Ukraine policy

### *1 What Does Zeitenwende Mean in Terms of Security Policy?*

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is a watershed moment for security and peace in Europe. Russia has thus brutally forced Ukraine into a struggle in which nothing less than Ukraine's survival as an independent nation is at stake. This is having an impact on Germany's foreign and security policy; the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has coined the term *Zeitenwende* for it, which is now used internationally. In the immediate response to the Russian war of aggression, this means that Germany and its allies will support Ukraine resolutely and sustainably in its self-defense.

*Zeitenwende*, however, goes much further and extends beyond the context of the current war: we will have to redefine our understanding of

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1 This chapter is a political contribution from the German Foreign Office, written by Minister of State Dr. Tobias Lindner.

security and translate it into new policies. Today, security must be defined more broadly than ever before. At its core, it includes protection against war and violence. But security also includes protecting our freedom and our democracy. As an open and globally networked society, we in Germany are increasingly the target of attacks on our values, for example through hybrid threats such as disinformation campaigns. Last but not least, security must be thought of in terms of preserving our natural resources, because the effects of the climate crisis on our security are already clearly noticeable.

Our security policy must systematically adapt to the breadth and novelty of the challenges. The term “security” no longer concerns only foreign, security, and development policy. The effects of the war of aggression on Ukraine and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, have shown that health policy, economic policy, and energy policy must be essential fields of our action. Supply chains in industry, for example, can become the Achilles heel of our economy and thus gain security policy significance. The attacks on the gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea, just like some cyberattacks before them, show the vulnerability of our infrastructure to assaults from outside. Separating internal and external security appears increasingly difficult. That is why we need an integrated approach in the future that analyzes threats in a coherent way and brings together instruments from many policy areas more effectively.

Such a new approach is necessary to address the challenges to our security. Russia’s neo-imperial policy aims to upend the European security order and directly threatens Germany’s security and that of its allies. The climate crisis is without doubt the greatest long-term challenge for future security policy. It is hitting poor regions of the world the hardest, fueling violent conflicts and driving people from their homes. The effects are also being felt in this country, where extreme weather events are causing increasing damage.

However, the solution of global problems is made more challenging by the increasing multipolarity and growing rivalry of international systems. Moscow and Beijing are increasingly aggressive in advocating their ideas of order, which rely on the logic of spheres of influence and contradict our ideal of a strong rules-based order established with the United Nations Charter.

In the spirit of an integrated approach, the German government has published a National Security Strategy in June 2023. In terms of defense policy, the Bundeswehr should thus focus even more consistently on its core task of defending Germany and its alliances and ensure reliable funding for its



personnel and equipment. The special fund for the Bundeswehr and the procurement reforms are key steps in this direction. Germany will continue to be called upon to get involved in managing conflicts in its neighborhood, because the war against Ukraine shows how much we depend on stability in our region. In our civilian and military crisis engagement, it is particularly important that we dovetail our instruments even better in order to live up to our claim to act preventively.

Security policy after the *Zeitenwende* must aim to align our international engagement more closely with the reality of international system competition and to expand partnerships with those states that are committed to preserving the rules-based international order. In particular, we want to strengthen our international climate partnerships.

The National Security Strategy has outlined how we in Germany will increase our social and economic resilience. We can only protect ourselves externally if we are also strong and able to defend ourselves internally. This includes reducing the one-sided dependencies of our economy and diversifying our supply of strategic goods. Disaster prevention and crisis management must be strengthened and adapted following our experience with the COVID-19 pandemic and extreme weather events – this requires even closer coordination between the federal and state governments. Our cyber architecture must also be able to cope with increasing attacks.

Those crafting security policy after the *Zeitenwende* must analyze and deal with these aspects. The German government is taking on this task, but for success it needs all relevant actors in government, business, and civil society.

## 2 What Does *Zeitenwende* Mean for Our Russia Policy?

With his decision to launch a war of aggression against Ukraine that violates international law and cannot be justified by anything, Vladimir Putin has deliberately burned all bridges between Russia and the European Union (EU) and between Russia and Germany. Our response has been clear and unequivocal: we have jointly imposed comprehensive, targeted sanctions in the EU, we have expelled, in coordination with our partners, numerous employees of Russian diplomatic missions who acted against our interests and endangered our internal security, and we have broken off or suspended virtually all cooperation in the political, economic, and cultural spheres. There cannot, and will not, be a return to the kind of cooperation we

have maintained over the past several, often difficult, years. Rather, we must prepare for a long confrontation with a Russia that is pursuing an anti-Western agenda.

This choice was made by Putin. We agree with our partners – in the EU, the G7, and far beyond – that we want to counter a neo-imperial Russia, which seems ready for almost any escalation, with a policy of clear principles. Our unity is our particular strength in this. Together, we have managed to win a strong number of supporters in the UN General Assembly for a resolution condemning the illegal annexations of Ukrainian territories in September 30, 2022. The fact that, in addition to Russia itself, only Syria, Belarus, North Korea, and Nicaragua voted against it shows how isolated Russia is on the world stage. The adopted resolution is also an important document because it clearly expresses the international community's legal conviction on the illegal annexations and thus also permanently defines the starting point for a peaceful solution under international law.

We had campaigned intensively for the resolution worldwide in the run-up, emphasizing that nothing less than the UN Charter with its most fundamental principles is at stake. We want to continue to address undecided states. We will continue to engage in dialogue around the world, making clear that all states have an interest in defending the UN Charter, which is being persistently and gravely violated by Russia. And we will have to continue to work together to find solutions to the global consequences of this war and to counter Russian disinformation.

The following applies to our Russia policy: we must also strategically adjust to a revisionist and confrontational Russia. Firstly, we must permanently oppose the Russian war of aggression and support Ukraine for as long as it is necessary. It must be made very clear: anyone who breaks rules on such a massive scale must feel their global isolation, and there must be no “*business as usual*” for them in any international forum. We will maintain sanctions pressure on Russia so that it becomes clear that aggressive revisionism and rule-breaking have consequences. Our sanctions against Russia are having an impact. They are curtailing not only Moscow's economic capabilities, but above all its military capabilities. For example, Russia is finding it increasingly difficult to obtain technology products. The impact of the sanctions will continue to grow as time goes by. Russia's economic base will be weakened for years to come – by a lack of international financing, technologies, *know-how*, and links to international markets.

Secondly, we are increasing our resilience to external attacks. We are investing in modern technology and equipment, better integrating our

European defense industries and strengthening the European pillar of NATO. We are also making our society more resilient to hybrid attacks at all levels. President Putin is targeting our social peace. To counter this, we need closely cooperating intelligence services and a powerful cyber defense – both in Germany and in coordination with our allies.

Russia is deliberately using energy as a geopolitical weapon. By limiting its supplies of natural gas, Moscow obviously pursuing a dual intention. Firstly, it wants to prevent sufficient filling of EU storage capacities and create deficiencies and high prices. Secondly, Russia is trying to divide the EU with a view to sanctions. Therefore, we are working to move away from Russian gas and fossil energy as a whole as quickly as possible. It is important that we have been able to significantly reduce our import dependency on Russian gas from 55 percent in 2021 and continue to do so. The goal is a joint European phase-out of Russian energy imports. For this, EU-wide crisis management and solidarity mechanisms are indispensable. We are in the process of signing bilateral solidarity agreements for severe gas shortage situations with our neighbors – we have already made a start with Denmark and Austria.

The EU level also plays an important role here. For example, we support the EU Commission's *REPowerEU* package to reduce gas consumption, which is also intended to ensure that climate protection targets are met and to address the effects of high prices. Every euro spent on solar parks, wind turbines, and green hydrogen electrolyzes is an investment not only in our national security but also in global security.

Thirdly, we need to invest more specifically in our partnerships with third countries. We should listen more closely to better understand their concerns and needs. To do this, we also need to think more strategically about our neighborhood policy in the east. It is good that Ukraine and Moldova have become EU accession candidates. We must also give the people in the Western Balkans a credible European perspective without raising false expectations. But Russia is also trying to expand its influence outside Europe. With its months-long blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports, Russia accepted that the food crisis in many countries would worsen, with consequences also for political stability and extremism. Even after the conclusion of the Istanbul Agreement in July 2022, Russia continues to spread false reports about alleged Western sanctions against food and repeatedly questions the extension of the agreement. Together with our partners in the EU and G7, we are working to expose Russia's disinformation even more clearly and audibly, while continuing our extensive engagement on food security,

including in African countries. Unlike Russia, we offer reliable partnerships and fair investments.

Fourth, however, we also want to provide greater support for Russian civil society. We want to promote channels through which people in Russia can obtain objective information. We support the Russian diaspora in creating networks, and promote independent NGOs. We grant targeted scholarships and work permits and support Russian-speaking journalists in reporting freely on Russia. The issuing of visas is an important tool in this regard. We do not want any semblance of normality and carefree tourism in times of a brutal war of aggression; that is why we in the EU have suspended the visa facilitation agreement with Russia. But we are also taking care to ensure that Russians who are critical of the government and politically persecuted persons continue to have the opportunity to travel to Germany, and that Russians fleeing military service can apply for visas in neighboring countries with as little red tape as possible.

### 3 *What Does Zeitenwende Mean for Our Ukraine Policy?*

Germany supports Ukraine politically, financially, with humanitarian aid, and also by supplying weapons. We have been doing this since the start of the Russian war of aggression on February 24, 2022, and will continue to do so – until Ukraine has won this war. The last few weeks have shown how essential our arms deliveries in particular – especially the delivery of heavy weapons – are for Ukrainian defense and the recapture of the areas of Ukraine occupied by Russian troops. We want to continue these arms deliveries. In this respect, it is important that the EU has made more than 3 billion euros available for military support to Ukraine until November 2022 through the *European Peace Facility*.<sup>2</sup> The air strikes by Russian forces on Ukrainian cities and civilian infrastructure have also made it depressingly clear once again how important it is to strengthen Ukraine's air defense capabilities. In early October 2022, Germany already handed over the first of a total of four planned IRIS-T air defense systems to Ukraine. The state-of-the-art IRIS-T systems will hopefully make it even easier to protect Ukrainian cities and civilians from barbaric Russian air attacks in the future.

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2 As of 18.11.2022: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/ip\\_22\\_6699](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/ip_22_6699).

The EU foreign ministers also agreed on a training mission for Ukraine's armed forces. As part of this mission, a total of 15,000 Ukrainian soldiers are to be trained in Germany and other EU member states. This mission is intended to make an important contribution to coordinating and supplementing the support measures already underway and to gearing new measures even more specifically to Ukrainian needs. Germany is aiming to make a substantial contribution and is also providing one of two headquarters.

Since the start of the Russian war of aggression, Germany has provided around 460 million euros<sup>3</sup> for humanitarian aid in Ukraine and its neighboring countries. This makes us the second-largest donor after the United States. The funds provided so far have been used to care for refugees and internally displaced persons, provide medical and psychosocial assistance, distribute food packages, and build water and sanitation facilities, among other things. In addition, we assisted Ukrainian households with heating and fuel to withstand the winter 2022–2023. The energy sector in Ukraine has been badly affected by targeted Russian destruction. There is therefore an urgent need for spare parts and also direct energy supplies. With the approach of a new heating season 2023–2024, the availability of coal and gas reserves becomes particularly critical.

We have also expanded Germany's involvement in humanitarian mine and ordnance clearance. Without humanitarian demining, the reconstruction of Ukraine after the end of the war will not be possible. Demining is also an indispensable prerequisite for stabilization, the return of refugees, and the use of arable land.

At the invitation of the German G7 Presidency and the EU Commission, an international conference held in Berlin on October 25, 2022, discussed the reconstruction of Ukraine. The conference was attended by renowned experts, international organizations, think tanks, academics and representatives of civil society, and the private sector. The reconstruction of Ukraine will entail an international effort, which already requires effective coordination among international partners, especially in the G7 and EU circles. The conference made an important contribution in this regard and provided expert recommendations for further action. Reconstruction offers the opportunity to be inter-linked with modernization of the state and economy, ecological transformation and reforms that are also important for the EU accession process.

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3 As of 18.11.2022.

On the recommendation of the EU Commission, the European Council granted Ukraine candidate status in June 2022, thus underlining that Ukraine is part of the European family. This step is of high value to the people of Ukraine and it reflects their emotional connection to Europe. What is now needed is a strong commitment to the implementation of reform steps as outlined by the European Council and the EU Commission. Germany will continue to actively support Ukraine on its path to integration with the European institutions.

#### *4 Conclusion*

The Russian president is waging war against Ukraine because Kyiv has turned to Europe and embraced the values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Thus, developments in Ukraine in recent years became an increasing threat to the preservation of Putin's authoritarian system. However, the Kremlin has not only conventionally attacked Ukraine with its war of aggression, but also threatened the entire European security order. It is not only Ukraine's freedom that is at stake, but the values of all of Europe. Ukraine is currently fighting for these values. Hereby it needs our full support – Ukraine can count on that.

# Chapter 14: Europe's Response to the Russian War of Aggression in Ukraine and Germany's Place in the European Security Architecture

*Angela Mehrer and Jana Puglierin*

## Abstract

In response to the war in Ukraine, European member states have reacted in unison, sanctioning Russia as well as adopting comprehensive military, humanitarian, and financial aid packages for Ukraine. In the process, new power dynamics have emerged within the EU. An inclusive and cooperative security order together with Moscow is no longer conceivable in the foreseeable future. Instead, it is important to establish security in Europe in the face of Russia. In the future, Europeans will have to adjust to the fact that the U.S. will increasingly focus on the Indo-Pacific region and that Europeans will have to take more responsibility for their own security. The expectations placed on Berlin to play a much greater role in the military protection of Europe have increased significantly. Germany must take a leading role here and help ensure security and stability in close cooperation with its NATO allies.

## Keywords

Ukraine, Russia, war of aggression, European security architecture, Germany, sanctions, assistance, security order

### *1 European Reactions to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine*

Russia's war against Ukraine triggered unusual unity in the European Union (EU). While EU member states have often struggled to speak with one voice on foreign policy issues in recent years, this time they reacted resolutely, unitedly, and quickly. Just three days after the war began, the EU had already imposed two comprehensive sanctions packages, closed its

airspace to Russian aircraft and agreed to a 1.2 billion euros aid package. It had declared that citizens of Ukraine could live in the EU for up to three years without applying for asylum. By funding weapons and equipment for Ukraine under the European Peace Facility, the EU also broke a decades-old taboo against sending weapons to crisis areas. Finally, by granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova at record speed, Brussels “pushed open the door to the second great enlargement to the East”.<sup>1</sup> Many things that seemed unthinkable just a short time before suddenly became possible. Looking at all these developments, the Russian invasion represents nothing less than “a turning point for our Union”,<sup>2</sup> as Commission President Ursula von der Leyen already stated on February 27, 2022. Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, spoke of the “belated birth of a geopolitical Europe”.<sup>3</sup>

Previous disagreements among EU member states, based in particular on different threat perceptions, were eclipsed by the war, and united action became the focus. Nevertheless, tensions also emerged behind the scenes the longer the war lasted, and new dynamics developed among EU member states. Since then, criticism has been directed primarily against Germany.

While the Russian war of aggression confirmed the perception of Russia as an existential threat, especially in Poland and the Baltic states, the Germans were faced with the ruins of their previous *Russlandpolitik* on February 24, 2022. Together with Paris, Berlin had tried until the end to revive the Minsk II format, to dissuade the Kremlin from its aggressive approach, and to integrate Russia into the existing European security order through dialogue. Berlin believed that reconciling interests with the Kremlin was challenging but ultimately possible, and that Russia could be integrated into the existing architecture as a *stakeholder*. The German mantra was “security in Europe is only possible with Russia”.<sup>4</sup> This, combined with Germany’s adherence to the *Nord Stream 2* pipeline until January 2022, as well as its initial blocking of a delivery of Estonian howitzers (originally from GDR

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1 Lippert, Barbara: Die EU und die zweite große Osterweiterung – Déjà-vus und Neuerungen. In: Bossong, Rafael et al.: Der mögliche EU-Beitritt der Ukraine und seine Konsequenzen, SWP 360 Grad, 2022.

2 Von der Leyen, Ursula: Statement on Further Measures in Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, European Commission, Press release, 27 February 2022.

3 Borrell, Josep: Putin’s War Has Given Birth to Geopolitical Europe, Project Syndicate, 3 March 2022.

4 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: “Scholz. Sicherheit in Europa nur mit Russland möglich”, 15 February 2022.



stockpiles) to Ukraine, earned Germany a reputation of being an unreliable partner with regard to Russia before the war began. In Warsaw, Tallinn, and Riga, as well as in Stockholm and Helsinki, in January 2022 many wondered what to expect from Berlin. *The New York Times* summed up this impression with the headline, “Where Is Germany in the Ukraine Standoff? It’s Allies Wonder”.<sup>5</sup>

After the war began, the German government managed to dispel this mistrust, at least in part. Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s government statement on the *Zeitenwende*, delivered to the Bundestag on February 27, 2022, received a lot of positive reaction and support in Europe and the U.S. The world, Scholz said, had become a different place overnight as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The European security order had been shattered. He also said that Europe’s freedom, democracy, and prosperity are in existential danger.<sup>6</sup> The resolutions that Scholz announced in his historic speech also met with broad approval in the Bundestag. They included arms deliveries to Ukraine, far-reaching sanctions against Russia, a strengthening of NATO’s eastern flank, a “special fund for the Bundeswehr” secured in the Basic Law, and an immediate reduction in energy dependence on Russia. In the months that followed, according to data from the *Ukraine Support Tracker* of the Institute for the World Economy (IfW), the Federal Republic became the fourth-largest donor of humanitarian, financial, and military aid to Ukraine, behind the U.S., EU institutions, and the United Kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, distrust of Germany grew again in the months that followed, especially among EU partners in Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe. Many there had the impression that Germany had not sufficiently followed through on its grand announcement of breaking the taboo to adequately supply weapons to Ukraine. The widespread criticism was that Germany delivered too hesitantly, too little, too late. In addition, there was frustration that Berlin had put on the brakes during the debates on Russia’s exclusion from the international payment system SWIFT and on a possible import ban on Russian oil and gas. Minna Ålander of the *Finnish*

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5 Bennhold, Katrin: “Where Is Germany in the Ukraine Standoff? It’s Allies Wonder”, *The New York Times*, 25 January 2022.

6 Bundesregierung: Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz am 27. Februar 2022. In: *Reden zur Zeitenwende*, 1st ed., September 2022.

7 See IfW Kiel: *Ukraine Support Tracker*, Commitments from January 24 to October 3, 2022.

*Institute of International Affairs* summed up in the German weekly *Die Zeit* on November 17, 2022: “The German response to Russia’s aggression was disappointing”.<sup>8</sup>

Because of this veritable loss of trust and miscalculation in Germany’s *Russlandpolitik* (despite years of warnings from home and abroad), Germany could not take the leading role this time in formulating the European response to the war in Ukraine that it had played, for example, in dealing with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic or the migration crisis in 2015. Unlike after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when Angela Merkel had rallied the north, south, east, and west of the EU behind a united position, Berlin could not act as an “honest broker” this time. France also largely dropped out as a leading nation in Europe. The EU countries on the eastern flank had not forgotten Macron’s 2019 initiative to start negotiations with Russia on a new European security order,<sup>9</sup> nor his statements on the “brain death” of NATO in the same year. In addition, the Franco-German tandem, which was actually very powerful, had fallen out of step after the German elections, and a multitude of disagreements strained cooperation between the two countries.<sup>10</sup>

Instead, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states in particular, together with Finland, took the helm and exerted a decisive influence on the EU’s crisis response. Precisely because they had been correct in their assessment of the Russian president’s motives, and also because of their geographical location as frontline states, these countries emerged as the EU’s new pacesetters in the crisis. Sylvie Kaufmann, a columnist for the French newspaper *Le Monde* and a researcher at the *Robert Bosch Academy* in Berlin, emphasized the novelty of this dynamic:

“This is not the old East-West divide, not the old Europe versus the new. The war in Ukraine has shaken existing coalitions. Viktor Orbán’s closeness to the Kremlin has paralyzed the Visegrád Group, consisting of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. Poland and the

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8 Ålander, Minna: “Deutschland und Nordeuropa. Ihr enttäuscht uns!”, *Die Zeit*, 16 November 2022.

9 See Gressel, Gustav/Liik, Kadri/Shapiro, Jeremy/Varma, Tara: Emmanuel Macron’s very big idea on Russia, *ECFR Commentary*, 25 September 2019.

10 Ross, Jacob/Kremer, Kenny: *Stunde der Wahrheit*, *DGAP Kommentar*, 26 October 2022.

Baltic states can now count on the support of Nordic countries like Finland and Sweden, putting Paris and Berlin on the defensive.”<sup>11</sup>

It remains to be seen whether this new dynamic will continue to solidify and also become apparent in other policy areas. In any case, despite all the tensions, it has so far been possible to avoid an open split in the EU – in the end, the insight that the unity of the EU is indispensable for the successful support of Ukraine prevailed. However, the ever-increasing number of Ukrainian refugees in the EU is increasingly calling this unity into question. There is a concern that the great willingness of Europeans to take in refugees could be overturned and that disputes – as in 2015 – could again arise over distribution within the EU.

## *2 EU Sanctions against Russia: Unity in Diversity in the Face of New Power Dynamics*

Immediately after the Russian invasion, a comprehensive sanctions package was adopted,<sup>12</sup> which EU Commission President von der Leyen described as “the largest sanctions package in the history of our Union”.<sup>13</sup> In the months that followed, the EU gradually expanded its sanctions regime. Below, the debate on travel bans and energy sanctions will be explored in greater depth to illustrate the different positions of the member states and the new power dynamics within the EU.

### *2.1 A “Visa Ban” for Russian Citizens*

In addition to the targeted freezing of Russian assets in the West, after February 24, 2022, entry bans were imposed primarily on members of the Russian Duma and National Security Council, as well as military personnel, high-ranking officials, businessmen, and oligarchs. In August 2022, the governments of Estonia and Finland called for comprehensive Schengen visa restrictions on Russian tourists and were supported by Lithuania,

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11 Kaufmann, Sylvie: “War in Ukraine has shaken the EU's power dynamics”, *Financial Times*, 30 August 2022.

12 European Council: EU sanctions against Russia: an overview, 2022.

13 European Commission: Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament plenary session on Russia's aggression against Ukraine, 2022.

Latvia, Poland, Denmark, and the Czech Republic. They argued that this was a moral duty in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it made it more difficult to circumvent EU trade restrictions, and it was also in the EU's security interests. This was met with stiff opposition, especially in Germany, France, and Greece, as well as by EU Foreign Affairs Representative Borrell, who argued that a "visa ban" would ultimately play into the Kremlin's hands, further isolate Russia from the EU, and make it harder for Russian dissidents to leave the country.<sup>14</sup> For the first time since the Russian war of aggression began, the EU was threatened with open division.

After tough discussions, the EU states finally agreed on a compromise.<sup>15</sup> The EU Commission provisionally lifted the visa facilitation for Russian nationals that had applied until then. In addition, the individual member states were given a great deal of freedom to take national measures within the framework of the Schengen Agreement. However, a general ban on entry was not decided. The compromise reached put an end to the disputes within the EU for the time being. However, the debate on the "visa ban" was an example of how the new force field from Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe was able to make its voice heard and, if necessary, set the European agenda even without the support of the established West-South flank.

## 2.2 A (Partial) Oil and Gas Embargo

An embargo on Russian oil and gas was particularly controversial in the EU from the beginning of the war. While Poland and the Baltic states, for example, immediately advocated a complete halt to Russian energy supplies, Germany, in particular, pointed to its enormous dependence in this area. Even though other countries shared Germany's concerns, the German government was for a long time particularly reluctant to act in Brussels.<sup>16</sup> This became apparent for the first time when it came to the issue of Russia's exclusion from the SWIFT payment system. At the end

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14 For a good overview of the arguments on both sides, see the *Constitution Blog Symposium*: [constitutionblog.com/category/debates/european-visa-for-russian-tourists-debates/](https://constitutionblog.com/category/debates/european-visa-for-russian-tourists-debates/).

15 European Council: Council decides full suspension of visa facilitation for Russia, 2022.

16 Becker, Markus/Sauga, Michael: "Mögliches Ölembargo gegen Russland. Wie Deutschland Europa überrascht", Spiegel online, 3 May 2022.

of February, pressure from Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in particular succeeded in excluding seven Russian banks from SWIFT. However, Russia's largest bank *Sberbank* and *Gazprombank* were initially left out of the measures, as they played a central role in processing payments for Russian energy deliveries to Europe. The EU's sixth sanctions package of June 2022 succeeded in extending the existing ban to *Sberbank*, among others, but not to *Gazprombank*.

In addition to the SWIFT partial exclusion, a ban on imports of coal and oil from Russia to the EU was adopted. Furthermore, the export of goods and technologies for the extraction and processing of Russian oil as well as new investments in the Russian energy sector were banned. However, many EU member states still could not completely renounce Russian oil. As a result, only about two-thirds of Russian oil shipments to the EU were *de facto* embargoed in June 2022. By 2023, no more oil is to be sourced by sea. Excluded from this rule are Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, which are allowed to continue importing Russian oil. Due to a bridging period of six months for crude oil and eight months for oil products, the sanctions would only take full effect from December 2022 and February 2023, respectively. Despite these exceptions, imports of Russian oil are to be reduced by 90 percent by the end of 2022.<sup>17</sup> However, the effectiveness of these sanctions has been called into question, as actors such as India and China have merely diverted the flow of oil, meaning Russia has suffered little from the partial embargo. As a solution to this problem and in response to Putin's sham referendums in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, EU states approved the eighth sanctions package in October 2022, providing the legal basis for a price cap on seaborne oil shipments to third countries agreed by the G7. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis continued to rate the new sanctions as too weak, but said they were "better than nothing, than no package at all".<sup>18</sup>

In the debate about an oil embargo, Berlin went from being an opponent to an inducer. Germany's reduction of its oil imports from Russia to 12 percent by May 2022 created the necessary political space for this shift.<sup>19</sup> Achieving independence from Russian gas, however, is much more problematic for Germany. After all, Germany had deepened its dependence on

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17 European Council: EU sanctions against Russia.

18 Tagesschau: "Nach russischen Eskalationen: EU einigt sich auf Russland-Sanktionen", 5 October 2022.

19 Becker/Sauga, Mögliches Ölembargo gegen Russland, 2022.

Russian gas with the *Nord Stream* pipelines. For years, the German government had been warned by its allies that its overdependence on Russia made Germany, and thus the entire EU, vulnerable to Russian blackmail attempts. In 2020, Germany imported 66.1 percent of its natural gas consumption from Russia<sup>20</sup> – with *Nord Stream 2* being launched, that figure would have risen even further. After the start of the Russian war of aggression, however, Germany was now doing everything it could to become independent of Russian energy sources as quickly as possible. In the first half of 2022, Germany was already producing 17.9 percent less electricity from natural gas than a year earlier, and the share of natural gas in electricity generation was even down to just 10 percent in the second quarter of 2022.<sup>21</sup> Overall, however, it is proving more difficult to find alternative suppliers for gas than for oil. Lithuania and the Netherlands began looking for other sources years ago, which is why they are considered major proponents of a gas embargo, unlike Germany, Italy, Austria, and Hungary – which are particularly dependent on Russian gas. Poland and the Czech Republic, which would be hit hardest economically by an embargo, are making every effort to find solutions to end supplies from Russia.<sup>22</sup> Until these are found, a joint EU gas embargo seems unlikely.

### 3 *The Future of Europe: A New Orientation of the European Security Order*

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has made it clear that an inclusive and cooperative security order together with Moscow cannot be realized in the foreseeable future. Instead, it is now a priority for Europeans to establish security from Russia.<sup>23</sup> The future security order will therefore again aim to contain and deter Russian aggression. Accordingly, NATO countries have already begun to substantially and sustainably increase their capabilities to deter and defend the Alliance area. They want to increase their defense budgets and strengthen the striking power of their armies. Sweden and Finland want to become members of NATO, and Denmark has opted to participate in the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy.

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20 Eurostat: Einfuhren von Erdgas. Deutschland 2020.

21 Statistisches Bundesamt: Pressemitteilung Nr. 374 vom 7. September 2022.

22 Askew, Joshua/Sandford, Alasdair: "Vergleich: Welche EU-Länder wollen russisches Gas und Öl abdrehen?", Euronews, 18 April 2022.

23 Major, Claudia/Mölling, Christian: "Zusammen mit Russland, das geht nicht mehr", Zeit online, 24 April 2022.

Contrary to what many had hoped, the importance of the military for the future organization of security in Europe will not diminish but increase. Even if it is still open when and under what conditions the war in Ukraine will end, there will be no way back to the *status quo ante* with Russia. The far-reaching sanctions against Russia, the pursuit of extensive energy independence from Moscow, and the military, humanitarian, and financial support provided to Ukraine are largely aimed at isolating Russia and giving Ukraine a greater status as a partner.

At best, the outlines of a new order in Europe can be glimpsed. There are many indications that the future of Europe will be characterized by much greater uncertainty, new conflicts, and global upheavals.<sup>24</sup> The ever-worsening global systemic conflict between China and the U.S. will also have an impact on European security. President Joe Biden is already the third U.S. president after Donald Trump and Barack Obama to locate U.S. strategic interests primarily in the Indo-Pacific region, which is why Europe's security is slipping further down the U.S. list of priorities. In the future, the Europeans will therefore have to become much more involved in national and alliance defense, but also in crisis management in their own periphery, in order to guarantee their security.

So far, Russia's war of aggression has led NATO and EU member states to stand together in a united manner, perhaps more than they have in a long time, even though it required forging compromises. Nevertheless, the Kremlin leadership identifies the West's cohesion as the center of gravity of the transatlantic alliance and Western support for Ukraine's resistance – dividing it, torpedoing the European project, and driving a wedge between the allies is Putin's stated goal. For the Europeans, it is crucial not to allow themselves to be divided despite all internal disagreements.

Germany faces a particular challenge in this regard. It must regain lost trust – especially in Central and Eastern Europe – and show its partners that it has learned from past mistakes and will not fall back into old reflexes. It should no longer go it alone, as it did with the *Nord Stream 2* project. Instead, Germany must embed its Russia policy within a European framework. Due to its economic size, Berlin also has an outstanding role to play in the reconstruction of Ukraine.

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24 Puglierin, Jana: Wohin führt der Epochenbruch? In: Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte, Vol. 40–41, 2022, pp. 8–12.

Now, at the latest, the Federal Republic must also say goodbye to security policy principles to which it has oriented itself for years. These include, above all, the idea of a European “peace dividend”, on the basis of which Germany still saw itself primarily as a “civilian power” despite its increasing participation in foreign missions. Decades of deficiency management have hollowed out the Bundeswehr. On the day the war in Ukraine began, the Army’s inspector, Lieutenant General Alfons Mais, stated that the Bundeswehr was “more or less bare”.<sup>25</sup> Against the backdrop of Russian revisionism, the top priority must be to make the Bundeswehr ready to defend itself again and to enable it to make a leading contribution to NATO’s deterrence and defense posture. In her keynote speech on the emerging national security strategy, then Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht also spoke of a military leadership role for Germany. This, she said, consisted of giving the European peace order “the strength that guarantees freedom and democracy, prosperity and stability”. Without a functioning and operational Bundeswehr, however, Germany is not credible as a guarantor of security. No partner will follow Germany’s claim to leadership. If Germany wants to become an anchor of stability for Europe’s security on which its European partners can rely, the Bundeswehr must be given the structural and material capability to do so, and the German government must provide the necessary financial resources on a permanent and reliable basis.

#### 4 Conclusion

In response to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the member states of the European Union managed to react in a predominantly united manner, imposing the largest sanctions package to date on Russia and adopting comprehensive military, humanitarian, and financial aid packages for Ukraine. In the process, a new power dynamic emerged within the EU: with the Baltic and northern states, Central and Eastern European countries such as the Czech Republic and Poland found new partners who acted more decisively and appeared more reliable than Germany or France. Russia’s immediate neighbors in particular have recognized that an inclusive and cooperative European security order with Moscow will not be possible in the foreseeable future. Instead, security in Europe must be established before Russia.

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25 Wüstner, André: “Mehr oder weniger blank”, Blogbeitrag auf der Internetseite des Deutschen Bundeswehrverbands, 25 February 2022.



Ultimately, Europeans will have to take more responsibility for their own security and adjust to the fact that the U.S. will no longer stretch its protective umbrella over Europe as a matter of course. There are signs that Washington is increasingly focusing on the Indo-Pacific region and that Europe is slipping down the list of priorities. European leadership must fill this gap. Expectations for Berlin to play a much more significant role in the military protection of Europe have increased significantly. In close cooperation with its NATO allies, Germany can assume these responsibilities and ensure security and stability on the European continent in the future. To do so, however, Berlin must first regain the trust it lost through a lack of will to make decisions.

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## Chapter 15: The Security Autonomy of Europe and the Hegemonic Shadow of NATO

*Markus Kaim and Ronja Kempin*

### Abstract

The Russian-Ukrainian war is not yet over at the time of writing, but it is already certain that it will create many losers – in the political, military, financial, and physical sense. However, there will also be some winners: NATO is one of them. The transatlantic alliance is currently experiencing a tremendous renaissance. This is because the war in Ukraine has refocused the political attention of European societies and Washington alike on the fundamental issues of European security in a way that has probably not been the case since the 1990s. Back then, the United States (U.S.) led NATO's eastward expansion and fought two wars in the Balkans.

### Keywords

Ukraine war, NATO, CSDP, Washington, security and defense cooperation EU-USA

### *1 The USA as a “European Power”*

The U.S. under President Joe Biden has unhesitatingly fulfilled its security obligations in and for Europe in the wake of the Russian attack on Ukraine, forcefully underscoring its role as a “European power”. Since February 2022, the Biden administration has supported Kyiv with massive arms shipments, sworn the West to economic sanctions of unprecedented scope, and expanded its troop presence in Europe.<sup>1</sup> One focus of U.S. troop increases has been NATO's eastern flank. Overall, the U.S. has increased the number of its troops in Europe from about 20,000 to more than 100,000 since

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1 See for details Arabia, Christina L./Bowen, Andrew S.: U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine, CRS In Focus, 15 June 2023.

February 24, 2022. In addition, the U.S. Congress has provided financial aid to Ukraine totaling 54 billion dollars through the end of October 2022. It is hard to imagine a time in the last thirty years when transatlantic relations have been more prominent in the minds of American political elites.

With its decisions in the context of the *Zeitenwende*, the German government also took a clear position alongside the Biden administration, which was not necessarily to be expected. While Angela Merkel's government followed the somewhat diffuse paradigm of "becoming more European in order to remain transatlantic" in security policy, Chancellor Olaf Scholz left no doubt that the crisis could only be dealt with in close shoulder-to-shoulder cooperation with Washington. His policy of delivering only those weapons systems to Ukraine that Washington was willing to supply exemplifies this point, even if some observers see it primarily as an excuse not to provide more weapons.<sup>2</sup> This unrestricted transatlantic "coloring" of German security policy is a direct result of the Russian war against Ukraine and the American reaction to it.

This trend is also matched by public opinion in Germany: Germans and Americans consistently rate bilateral relations as being very positive. From the German perspective, the rating is currently at its best since 2017: 82 percent of Germans see the transatlantic relationship in a "good" or "very good" state. As recently as 2020, only 18 percent shared this assessment. The U.S. also remains the most important partner for Germans (36 percent), ahead of France (32 percent). Particularly in the protection and defense of Europe, for example, within the framework of NATO, 81 percent of respondents see the U.S. as a partner. In 2021, the figure was still 73 percent.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 A Snapshot

Yet the Biden administration's commitment to Ukraine and European security is ultimately only a snapshot, which may be welcomed in Europe's capitals, but should not be used as the basis for one's own strategic planning. Russia and the war in Ukraine will remain an important issue for Washington in the coming months and perhaps even years. But even if the Biden administration's support for Ukraine does not diminish in the short

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2 Brössler, Daniel/Krüger, Paul-Anton/Szymanski, Mike: "Im Reinen mit sich und Joe Biden", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 September 2022.

3 Cf. the data in: Körber Foundation (Ed.): *The Berlin Pulse. Rethinking Security for Germany and Europe*, Berlin 2022.

term, Washington will not be able or willing to maintain the current level of diplomatic engagement, troop deployments, and resourcing for Europe in the long term.

This is because the U.S. political turn toward the Indo-Pacific region continues, and China's rise to power is already turning U.S. attention back to the Pacific. This prioritization was clearly communicated to the Europeans by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in May 2022:

“Even as President Putin’s war continues, we will remain focused on the most serious long-term challenge to the international order – and it comes from the People’s Republic of China. China is the only country that both intends to reshape the international order and increasingly has the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so. Beijing’s vision would take us away from the universal values that have made much of the world’s progress possible over the past 75 years.”<sup>4</sup>

The outbreak of a military conflict in Asia, in which China might attack Taiwan, would change U.S. priorities even further and faster.<sup>5</sup> Against this backdrop, the current U.S. administration, as well as its successor, will face the dilemma of meeting the political expectations of its allies in Europe and Asia alike while maintaining the troop presence needed to deter Russia and China. Thus, U.S. political overreach and military overextension loom large, with no chance of implementation for a variety of domestic political reasons.<sup>6</sup> Both Washington and European states must therefore consider how to recalibrate the transatlantic security relationship in light of the geopolitical shifts that have found their outward form with February 24, 2022.

### 3 *American Ambivalence*

U.S. policy toward a stronger security role for Europe has not been free of a certain ambivalence: every U.S. president has asked Europeans to spend

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4 Blinken, Antony J.: The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China, Speech delivered at George Washington University, Washington, D.C., 26 May 2022.

5 See Francis, Ellen: “China plans to seize Taiwan on ‘much faster timeline’, Blinken says”, Washington Post, 18 October 2022.

6 Cf. on these limitations the contributions in: Overhaus, Marco (Ed.): State of the Union: langfristige Trends in der US-amerikanischen Innen- und Außenpolitik und ihre Konsequenzen für Europa. In: SWP-Studie 6, June 2021, Berlin.

more money on defense, but the overarching goal of U.S. policy has not been to push Europe toward a more independent political role as well. In 2000, Lord George Robertson, then NATO Secretary General, drew attention to this ambivalence:

“The United States is suffering from a kind of schizophrenia. On the one hand, the Americans say, ‘You Europeans have to carry more of the load’. And then when the Europeans say, ‘OK, we’ll carry more of the load’, the Americans say, ‘Wait a minute, are you telling us to go home?’”<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, when French President Emmanuel Macron led the push for a stronger security role under the rubric of “strategic autonomy”, Washington feared a renewed attempt to decouple Europe from NATO.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the U.S. ultimately used its influence in Europe to block those efforts that could have led to a more security-independent Europe.<sup>9</sup>

The Biden administration, too, has so far struggled to develop a coherent strategy for balancing its conflicting commitments and harnessing Europe’s newfound focus on security issues for its own geopolitical relief. To be sure, the U.S. has once again proved indispensable in recent months with its hegemonic position in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. But it has not yet used the new momentum to actively address the structural problems that have plagued European defense for decades.<sup>10</sup> Yet the member states of the European Union (EU) seem to be in need of such an external impetus, as they have become (too) comfortable in their security policy immaturity. Especially in the area of military capability development, the EU states remain at odds.

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7 Quoted in Drozdziak, William: “U.S. Tepid on European Defense Plan. EU Leaders Dismiss Worry About NATO”, *Washington Post*, 7 March 2000.

8 Cf. the contributions in Lippert, Barbara/von Ondarza, Nicolai/Perthes, Volker (Eds.): *Strategische Autonomie Europas. Akteure, Handlungsfelder, Zielkonflikte*. In: SWP-Studie 2, February 2019, Berlin.

9 See Bergmann, Max: “Europe on Its Own. Why the United States Should Want a Better-Armed EU”, *Foreign Affairs*, 22 August 2022.

10 Cf. Martin, Garret/Sinkonen, Ville: Past as Prologue? The United States and European Strategic Autonomy in the Biden Era. In: *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 27, Special Issue 1, 2022, pp. 99–120.

## 4 New Dynamics

Nonetheless, it should be noted that Russia's war against Ukraine has triggered a new dynamic in the EU's security and defense policy. This can be seen in three points:

### 4.1 Strategic Compass

On the one hand, the member states adopted the *Strategic Compass*: its development was initiated in the second half of 2020 under the German EU Council Presidency and concluded on March 25, 2022, under the French Council Presidency with the approval of the European Council. With this document, the EU member states wanted to provide themselves with an ambitious and realistic roadmap for the development of capabilities and instruments in order to become more effective in security and defense policy.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to another fundamental revision of the Strategic Compass. Russia is now identified in the 64-page document as a central threat to European security. To counter it, complementarity between the EU and NATO must be more firmly anchored, defense spending in Europe must increase, and efforts to counter hybrid threats and cyberattacks must be significantly stepped up. The numerous projects are to be implemented by 2030, with many goals to be achieved as early as 2025. In the area of crisis management, these include the *Rapid Deployment Capacity* of up to 5,000 forces, which is to be built up and regularly practiced together so that the EU can act quickly and decisively when a crisis breaks out – “if possible with partners and if necessary alone”.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the EU's military command and control structures are to be strengthened and financial incentives created for member states to provide armed forces for civilian and military missions within the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP).

In addition to the EU's crisis management, which aims to relieve the U.S. as a security and defense policy actor in the EU's immediate neighborhood, the Strategic Compass attaches particular importance to the “capabilities” issue complex. Among the greatest weaknesses of European defense policy

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11 Council of the European Union: Ein Strategischer Kompass für Sicherheit und Verteidigung, 21 March 2022, p. 3.

is undoubtedly a lack of coordinated and increased investment in defense capabilities and innovative military technologies. In the Strategic Compass, the member states now commit themselves to working toward full interoperability of their armed forces, jointly closing critical capability gaps, and creating a resilient, competitive, and innovative European defense industrial and technological base.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4.2 European Peace Facility

Secondly, since the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine, the EU has been using the *European Peace Facility* (EPF) to support the Ukrainian armed forces. The EPF is an extra-budgetary instrument through which EU member states aim to improve the Union's capacity for conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and strengthening international security. In 2021, the EPF replaced the previous financial instruments in this area, the *Athena Mechanism* and the *African Peace Facility*. At the same time, its scope has been broadened: operational measures with military or defense implications can be financed through the Peace Facility. In order to strengthen third countries, regional or international organizations in terms of security and defense policy, EPF financial resources can be used to strengthen military and defense capacities and/or support military aspects of peace support operations. For the period 2021–2027, the EPF is endowed with a financial capital of 5.692 billion euros.<sup>13</sup>

More than half of this financial envelope has been used by EU member states in 2022 to provide military equipment and supplies to the Ukrainian armed forces. On October 17, 2022, the Council agreed to increase support measures for Ukraine to 3.1 billion euros. Four days after the Russian attacks on Ukraine began, EU member states had already released 500 million euros in support funds. This was followed by further benefits in

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12 Cf. on the EU's Strategic Compass i.a. Kaim, Markus/Kempin, Ronja: Kompass oder Windspiel? Eine Analyse des Entwurfs für den "Strategischen Kompass" der EU. In: SWP-Aktuell 2022/A 01, 5 January 2022; Council of the European Union: A Strategic Compass for Security and Defense; Puglierin, Jana: Der Strategische Kompass: Ein Fahrplan für die Europäische Union als sicherheitspolitische Akteurin, Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik, Arbeitspapier 7/2022.

13 Official Journal of the European Union: Beschluss (GASP) 2021/509 des Rates vom 22. März 2021 zur Einrichtung einer Europäischen Friedensfazilität und zur Aufhebung des Beschlusses (GASP) 2015/528, 24 March 2021, p. L102/14–L102/17.



March, April, May, and July 2022.<sup>14</sup> The lion's share of the EU money goes to heavy military equipment. A smaller amount is available for equipment and supplies such as personal protective equipment, first-aid kits, and fuel.

Increasingly, EPF funds are also enabling the maintenance and repair of previously donated weapons systems.<sup>15</sup>

But it is not only for the benefit of Ukraine that the EU is releasing funds for defense purposes to an unprecedented extent. Member states are also being given incentives to procure armaments jointly. In addition to the long-term financing instrument of the *European Defense Fund*, established in the EU budget for 2021–2027 to promote joint research and development of defense capabilities, the EU Commission also proposed in July 2022 to establish a short-term instrument *European Defense Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act* (EDIRPA) for the period 2022–2024. This mechanism, to be endowed with 500 million euros, will allow member states to jointly meet the most urgent defense needs they have faced as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine. If at least three member states join forces in the joint procurement of the most needed defense equipment, they can apply for funds from the temporary financing instrument.<sup>16</sup>

### 4.3 EUMAM Ukraine

Finally, as a result of the Russian war against Ukraine, Europeans have strengthened CSDP in general. Denmark, which had stayed away from CSDP since it was enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty,<sup>17</sup> decided to end its

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14 Council of the European Union: Timeline – European Peace Facility, 2022.

15 Ibid.

16 European Commission: Defence industry: EU to reinforce the European defence industry through common procurement with a €500 million instrument, Press release, 19 July 2022.

17 Denmark has a so-called “opt-out clause”. This was introduced as part of the 1992 Edinburgh Agreement, a text specifically designed to allow Denmark to ratify the 1991 Maastricht Treaty. The Danish population had narrowly rejected it by 50.7 percent. The agreement proposed tailored provisions that clarified Denmark's participation in four areas where EU integration was to be deepened: Citizenship, Justice and Home Affairs, Monetary Union and Defense. In defense, the country withdrew from all decisions. When defense issues were raised, Denmark's representative left the Council of Foreign Ministers. Cf. Grobe, Stefan/Liboreiro, Jorge: “Dänemarks überraschende Kehrtwende in der gemeinsamen Verteidigungspolitik der EU”, Euronews, 7 March 2022.

*opt-out* in early June 2022. In addition, on October 17, 2022, the 27 EU states decided to establish a mission to support the training of Ukrainian military personnel, the *EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine* (EUMAM Ukraine). The goal of this new CSDP mission is ambitious: on its own territory, the EU-27 plan to train some 15,000 members of the Ukrainian military as a first step, complementing the training that the United Kingdom has been providing since June with the help of several European armies, including Sweden, the Netherlands, and Denmark.<sup>18</sup> 12,000 Ukrainians are to receive basic military training through the EU, and 2,800 are to receive specialized training. EUMAM Ukraine's two headquarters will be in Poland and Germany. Berlin alone aims to train about 8,000 to 9,000 Ukrainian soldiers.

### *5 Ambivalence of the EU Member States*

However, despite all determination, the example of EUMAM Ukraine shows at the same time that the interests of the EU members are far apart even in times of war. Not only are the member states continuing their national training efforts, which have already begun. Rather, a dispute between Germany and Poland over the leadership of EUMAM Ukraine has meant that the mission could begin much later than planned.<sup>19</sup> Armaments cooperation in the EU is also treading water. While nearly all EU member states are increasing their military spending in the wake of the Russian war against Ukraine, they rarely meet their investment spending targets along the lines they agreed in the Strategic Compass. Even the money from the European Defense Fund, which member states can apply for if they want to make a joint procurement, is rarely used for large-scale military equipment.

In July 2022, an evaluation of *Permanent Structured Cooperation* (PESCO), which began in the winter of 2017, revealed that member states are not making full use of this framework. Although they politically emphasize the added value of PESCO, progress in implementing the initiative has fallen short of expectations: they are not spending their money together, they are not planning European-wide, and there is no dynamic from the

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18 Council of the European Union: Ukraine: EU sets up a military assistance mission to further support the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Press release, 17 October 2022.

19 Jacqué, Philippe: "L'UE établit officiellement sa mission de formation militaire pour l'Ukraine", *Le Monde*, 16 October 2022.

few projects that are working. Their defense planning efforts have not brought member states together in a way that allows them to plan for the future together; EU defense initiatives are not sufficiently or systematically considered in national planning and decision making. Of the 60 projects that member states have agreed to under PESCO since 2017, about half will be able to deliver concrete results. Nonetheless, the rest are still in their infancy or are proving dysfunctional. This includes 20 of the 26 projects identified as priorities.<sup>20</sup>

### 6 Conclusion: What Next?

The Biden administration, but even more so a possible Republican administration from January 2025, will sooner or later (have to) pursue a strategy to get the states of Europe to take greater control of their own security and to transform Europe from a dependent security recipient to an equal security provider.<sup>21</sup> Now that the notion of a fully autonomous security policy identity for the EU in distinction to the U.S. has lost its significance, both sides should pursue a dual strategy.

On the one hand, the European members of NATO should use the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to reach agreement on the creation of a European pillar within the NATO alliance. This idea is not new in essence, but it has never really been brought to life. Militarily, the decisions of the Madrid Summit in June 2022 already point the way to a stronger European role, but what the political added value of a European pillar of the alliance is in the changed geopolitical environment must now be strategically developed by Europeans. Guiding this process should be the recognition to further intensify NATO-EU relations by further spelling out the complementary aspect of the two organizations.

Secondly, the EU should continue along the path it has already taken toward a stronger security and defense policy role in close coordination with the U.S. The goal here would be to recalibrate the issue of European defense in response to the Russian invasion, thus ushering in a new era of transatlantic security cooperation. This endeavor could be reflected, for example, in an EU-US armaments partnership. Joint European arms

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20 Gros-Verheyde, Nicolas: "Cinq ans après, la PESCO à la peine. Un rapport pointe de grosses lacunes", Bruxelles2.eu, 8 September 2022.

21 See Wittig, Peter: "How to Trump-Proof the Transatlantic Alliance. First, Europe Must Realize That He Might Return", Foreign Affairs, 6 October 2022.

planning and procurement continues to fail because many EU states believe that they can express their deep ties with the U.S. most clearly by buying American defense products. Agreement between Washington and the EU Commission on a common agenda would be a clear signal from the USA to its European partners.

Russia's war against Ukraine has brought the U.S. back to Europe. At the same time, it has shown Washington that it needs united, capable, and well-armed European partners – not least in order to gain the necessary room for maneuver in the Indo-Pacific. For their part, EU member states have significantly increased their defense efforts in response to the war in Europe. Both sides should use these developments to conclude a new transatlantic security agenda behind which there is no turning back. The “window of opportunity” in this regard is still open until January 2025.

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# Chapter 16: China's Role and Strategic Choice in the Ukraine War

*Sarah Kirchberger*

## Abstract

For Chinese observers, Russia's war against Ukraine holds special significance in light of China's own revisionist agenda toward the island of Taiwan. Long before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Chinese military strategists drew parallels between Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea and possible Chinese attempts to gain control of Taiwan. However, the traditionally strong Chinese-Ukrainian relationship is an important and often overlooked factor modifying China's reaction to the war. Against the backdrop of the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership and the Ukrainian-Chinese military-technological partnership, China's public reactions to the war have been ambiguous. This paper outlines how Beijing assessed the Ukraine war until early November 2022 and discusses what lessons the Xi government is likely to draw for its own annexation plans for Taiwan.

## Keywords

Russian-Chinese partnership, Taiwan issue, Russian-Chinese relations, Ukrainian-Chinese relations

## *1 Introduction*

For Chinese observers, Russia's war against Ukraine holds special significance in light of China's own revisionist agenda toward the island of Taiwan. Long before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Chinese military strategists had drawn parallels between Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea and possible Chinese attempts to gain control over

Taiwan.<sup>1</sup> For example, the noted naval strategist Zhang Wenmu of Beihang University in Beijing argued in a December 2014 article that Vladimir Putin's bold move to stage a hybrid takeover of Crimea using "little green men" could be successfully copied by China. After all, if the West were caught wrong-footed again as during the occupation of Crimea in early 2014, China would be able to create facts faster than the United States and NATO could react. Referring to the Chinese notion of "core interests" (*hexin liyi*), for which a nation is willing to use "unlimited means" (*wuxian shouduan*), Zhang essentially argued that the U.S. and the collective West were too geographically distant and also unwilling to sacrifice substantial resources for a "non-core interest", such as Taiwan. China, on the other hand, would be able to use "unlimited means" to impose its preference on the world, just as Russia did in Crimea.<sup>2</sup>

This view ignores some important geostrategic differences between Taiwan and Crimea, such as a very different geography and thus a completely different tactical environment from the perspective of an invading power. It also overlooks the existence of a *de facto* U.S. security guarantee for Taiwan through the *Taiwan Relations Act* (TRA), which gives Taiwan a more favorable position than Ukraine in terms of its alliance status. Nor does an analysis such as Zhang's take into account the important factor of Taiwan's own self-defense capability. Thus, Zhang's analysis reveals a similar mindset to that of many leading Russian commentators, who continue to portray the war against Ukraine as a great power conflict between Russia and the U.S. or NATO, with no active role assigned to Ukraine itself, and thus viewing it only as a pawn.<sup>3</sup>

However, the unexpectedly successful defense of Ukraine against what most observers considered a far superior military power and, in particular, the extreme losses, humiliating defeats, and surprising tactical shortcomings on the Russian side have shown that a mindset that ignores an invaded country's ability to act and its motivation to defend itself can lead to

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- 1 See Saalman, Lora: Little Grey Men: China and the Ukraine Crisis. In: *Survival – Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 58, Issue 6, November 2016, pp. 135–156, p. 135; Goldstein, Lyle J.: "Get Ready: China Could Pull a 'Crimea' in Asia", *The National Interest*, 11 April 2015.
  - 2 Zhang, Wenmu: 乌克兰事件的世界意义及其对中国的警示 [The global significance of the Ukraine Incident and its warning to China]. In: *国际安全研究* [Journal of International Security Studies], Vol. 4, 28 December 2014.
  - 3 See, for example, TASS: "West uses Ukraine as pawn in geopolitical game against Moscow – Russia's UN envoy", 12 February 2019.



dangerous miscalculations – such as overestimating the military prospects for success and the potential geostrategic advantages of taking a “bold” step to annex the territory of a weaker neighbor.

This chapter outlines what is known so far about China's role before the Ukraine war and its reactions to it up to the time of writing.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it discusses what lessons the Xi government might draw from this for its own plans to annex Taiwan.

## *2 Before the Invasion: Ignored U.S. Warnings and a Sino-Russian Declaration of “Limitless” Friendship*

In the months leading up to the invasion, when Russia was already amassing more than 100,000 troops on the Ukrainian border and issuing clear threats (including an ultimatum to NATO in mid-December 2021), the U.S. government – following a video-linked conversation between President Joe Biden and State and Party Leader Xi Jinping – attempted to use intelligence to warn China of Russia's impending invasion plans and urged China to intervene with Russia against it, but without any success. The Chinese side stated that it did not believe in the U.S. intelligence conveyed to it through various channels beginning around mid-November 2021.<sup>5</sup> Worse, China appears to have passed that information directly on to Russia.<sup>6</sup> On February 4, 2022, less than three weeks before the invasion, Xi and Putin stood side by side at the Beijing Winter Olympics and issued a joint statement proclaiming a “limitless” friendship between the two countries. They also concluded a new long-term oil and gas trade agreement, as well as a deal that secures China virtually all of the grain Russia wants to export. This signaled to Russia China's willingness and ability to use its market power to help the Russian Federation resist the effects of economic sanctions that the West might impose in retaliation for a threatened invasion. Moreover, this indicated that China most likely gave Russia at least its tacit approval,

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4 This chapter was completed in November 2022 and since only very lightly amended for this translated version.

5 Wong, Edward: “U.S. Officials Repeatedly Urged China to Help Avert War in Ukraine”, *The New York Times*, 25 February 2022.

6 Gertz, Bill: “China shared U.S. intelligence on Ukraine crisis with Russia”, *The Washington Times*, 25 February 2022.

if not full moral support, for military action against Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> All of this ultimately enabled Putin to risk invading Ukraine despite U.S. warnings.

### *3 After the Beginning of the Invasion: Only Covert Chinese Support for Russia, but Why?*

Some observers have argued that China's lack of overt military support for its strategic partner Russia (despite Putin's repeated appeals to send weapons) shows that Russia-China relations are not truly strategic. However, this view overlooks the history of close strategic relations between China and Ukraine, particularly in the period before 2014. For example, Ukrainian military-technological support for China's military modernization since the mid-1990s has been even more important than Russia's – at least in some key areas (such as marine gas turbines, *phased-array* radar technology, but especially aircraft carrier hull technology, carrier-based fighter aircraft, and aircraft carrier pilot training), that are critical to building a world-class navy.<sup>8</sup> It can therefore be argued that without Ukraine's hardware deliveries and technology transfers, as well as the extensive consulting services provided by Ukrainian military technology experts over many years, not a single aircraft carrier in the PLA Navy would be operational today, as the hull of the Varyag (rechristened by China the Liaoning) that Ukraine sold to China in 1998 was the prototype also for China's second, indigenous carrier, the Shandong. Further, China's carrier-based fighter jet, the J-15, is based on a Su-33 that Ukraine had delivered to China in 2001, while other critical naval technologies, such as phased-array radar technology, was transferred from Ukraine to China in the lead-up of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Already during the years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine had transferred naval gas turbine technology to China that today powers all modern Chinese destroyers, including those charged with protecting the carriers.<sup>9</sup> While all these transfers predate the Russian

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7 See Ralby, Ian/Soud, David/Ralby, Rohini: "Why the U.S. Needs to Act Fast to Prevent Russia from Weaponizing Food Supply Chains", Politico, 27 February 2022.

8 Kirchberger, Sarah: Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor. In: Kirchberger, Sarah/Sinjen, Svenja/Wörmer, Nils (Eds.): *Russia-China Relations. Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?* Springer: Cham 2022, pp. 75–100, pp. 84–88.

9 See Dou, Eva/Wu, Pei Lin: "Ukraine helped build China's modern military, but when war came, Beijing chose Russia", The Washington Post, 9 March 2022; Larson, Caleb:

annexation of Crimea in 2014, upon which Ukraine began to turn towards the West, they have left a significant legacy in the Chinese armed forces.

Moreover, as Andrew Erickson has pointed out, the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and Ukraine, signed personally by Xi Jinping on December 5, 2013, contains extensive security guarantees (building on an earlier bilateral security guarantee that China gave Ukraine on December 4, 1994, following the signing of the Budapest Memorandum and the abandonment of its nuclear weapons).<sup>10</sup> The existence of such binding treaties, one of which was signed by Xi Jinping himself, makes it difficult for China to provide direct military assistance to a nuclear-armed aggressor against its non-nuclear-armed partner state, especially one that has provided China with extensive military-technological assistance in the past and without fail faithfully adhered to its own obligations towards China, including upholding the One-China Policy to a tee. Such an overt abandonment of a strategic partner at a time of existential threat could have damaging effects on many of China's other bilateral relationships with states around the world who have been far less useful to China than Ukraine, and would surely undermine the credibility of its legal commitments towards them. Beijing's rather covert economic, political, and moral support for Russia – in that China did not condemn the invasion, did not call it a war, blamed NATO's eastward expansion or the U.S. rather than Russia, and abstained in the United Nations General Assembly rather than siding with the majority of nations against Russia – all of this should be seen as the maximum of support that China can actually provide in this particular context without significantly damaging its own reputation and global interests.

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“Why China's J-15 Fighter Is a Copy of Russia's Su-33 (But It Has a Problem)”, *The National Interest*, 16 April 2020; Poita, Yurii: “Why Ukraine is Reassessing its Defense Cooperation with China”, *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE)*, 6 May 2021.

10 See Erickson, Andrew S.: “2013 PRC-Ukraine Treaty of Friendship & Cooperation/Joint Communiqué: Russian, Ukrainian & Chinese Documents, Context, Timeline”, 21 August 2022.

#### 4 *The War Becomes a Problem: Shielding from the Consequences of Putin's Strategic Miscalculation*

During the first few months of the war, Xi not only had to balance China's commitments to Russia and Ukraine, but also became increasingly aware of the danger of siding with a failed invasion. This carried the risk of appearing incompetent by having committed China to a partnership with an incompetent, even foolish, Russian leader. It also posed additional hazards to China's struggling economy, which was already contending with the effects of Xi's "zero-Covid" policy and faced problems in the real estate and financial markets. Western sanctions, when added to the existing restrictions, could have put the Chinese economy in a perilous position at a time when Xi was seeking to extend his mandate to rule for an unprecedented third term. This is likely why Beijing has carefully avoided to openly violate the Western sanctions regime; why, for example, telecommunications firm Huawei has reduced its exposure to the Russian market; and why China closed its airspace to those aircraft that Russian airlines had refused to return to their rightful owners at the end of their lease.<sup>11</sup> Mindful of Russia's vulnerability to sanctions, China has been taking even more active measures to safeguard its own economy against the threat of potential Western sanctions.

It is possible that Chinese support for Putin's war would have been far more overt and decisive if Putin had not miscalculated so badly and achieved a quick military success. Instead, from Xi's perspective, it became rational and necessary to distance himself from the consequences of a catastrophically bad decision, not least to appease the domestic critics of his "limitless" Sino-Russian cooperation policy. Yet it is unlikely that Xi would find it acceptable to see Russia defeated and humiliated, whether by Ukraine or the West. It is noteworthy that Xi expressed "concerns" about the war in Ukraine to Putin shortly after the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (SCO) summit in Samarkand in mid-September 2022, as Putin himself acknowledged.<sup>12</sup> This was interpreted by some in the West, probably somewhat prematurely, as criticism of Russia's brutality against Ukraine. More likely, however, it was criticism of Russia's lack of military

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11 Soon, Weilun: "A Chinese telecom giant has suspended Russian operations and furloughed employees as sanctions bite: reports", Business Insider, 13 April 2022; Webster, Joe: "China bans Russian flights", The China Project, 2 June 2022.

12 A notable difference in wording compared to India's Prime Minister Modi, who has directly but tactfully criticized the war.

success. Indeed, shortly after the end of the Samarkand summit, and after the Ukrainian military had made significant gains in eastern and southern Ukraine through a counteroffensive over the summer, Putin ordered a mobilization despite the significant risk of a backlash at home, staged referenda in the occupied territories and “annexed” despite not having actual control over all of them. In addition, he appointed a new Commander-in-Chief known for exceptional brutality in Syria, and had the military fly devastating airstrikes on civilian targets and energy infrastructure throughout Ukraine. Putin undertook all this apparently to quickly turn the tide of the war and force a partial victory, or at least something that could be sold as a success to the domestic public and Russia’s allies. Thus, one possible interpretation for the apparent “concerns” Xi expressed to Putin in Samarkand could be that Xi was pressuring Putin to quickly achieve a (partial) success in the war and then end it swiftly so as not to make Xi look bad while he worked on his nomination for a third term as China’s supreme leader. Chinese support is crucial for the Kremlin at a time when Russia is suffering economically, and when Putin has turned the country into an international pariah. The harsh military measures Putin took against Ukraine after the SCO meeting in Samarkand may thus have been an attempt to salvage what was left of Xi’s goodwill.

Although it is difficult to assess from the outside what the Chinese public knows and thinks about the details of the war in Ukraine, there are indications that the Xi government has not been completely successful, at least among intellectuals, in controlling the narrative in the public information sphere. An interesting example is the case of Chinese vlogger Wang Jixian, a resident of Odesa at the beginning of the war, who began posting videos documenting the attacks and the local reactions that directly contradicted the pro-Russian propaganda narrative spread by the Chinese government at home. This led to him becoming a target of censorship and harsh criticism within China. At the same time, it allowed him to present an alternative view of the war to Chinese viewers.<sup>13</sup> Chinese colleagues have suggested in private communications that the wisdom of Xi’s policy over the past decade of aligning himself with Putin is increasingly in question, and criticism of the Russian invasion has increased, despite intense pressure to toe the government line.

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13 Yeung, Jessie/Xiong, Yong: “A Chinese vlogger shared videos of war-torn Ukraine. He’s been labeled a national traitor”, CNN, 18 March 2022.

## 5 Effects of the Ukraine War on the Relations Between China and Russia

Xi probably expected Putin to win a quick victory in a short, sharp war. Ideally, this war would have ended quickly, with Ukraine surrendering without too much bloodshed and destruction, and the Zelenskyy government either deposed and arrested by Russia or driven into exile, while a Putin-friendly puppet government would have brought Ukraine firmly back into the Russian orbit. China could then have acted as a benefactor and offered generous reconstruction assistance to its strategic partner, Ukraine, while continuing to pursue its political, economic, as well as military-technological interests in Ukraine. In such a scenario, China would have blamed the outbreak of war solely on the U.S. and NATO. The West's then proven inability to sustain Ukraine militarily would have had the strategic value of demonstrating to the rest of the world that a "declining West" is incapable of shaping the geostrategic playing field even within Europe itself and should be considered inferior to a rising China and Russia. This would have furthered an important goal shared by Xi and Putin: bringing about an end to the U.S.-led rules-based international order.

Against the backdrop of such an expectation, Xi and his close advisers must have been shocked to discover, in the first weeks of fighting, how badly Putin had miscalculated militarily. The removal in mid-June 2022 of Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Yucheng, who had been Xi's most important adviser on Russia issues and a key advocate of the "limitless friendship", and had even been considered a potential successor as prime minister until his surprise transfer to a less prestigious post in the broadcasting system, was interpreted by observers as a clear sign of Xi's dissatisfaction with the Russia expertise within the state and party leadership.<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to expectations, Ukraine not only did not surrender, but was able to quickly mobilize broad international support in moral, economic, and even military-technological terms. This was despite the fact that NATO and the U.S. remained true to their previously announced intention not to intervene directly in the conflict. Although some observers view the West's reluctance to fight for Ukraine as a sign of weakness, in practice this has also had the effect of preserving military resources of NATO countries while forcing Russia to deplete its own arsenal and troop strength, thereby weakening it militarily *vis-à-vis* NATO. Moreover, the Western world

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14 Nakazawa, Katsuji: "Analysis: Russia hand's demotion signals shift in Xi's strategy", Nikkei Asia, 23 June 2022.

collectively imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russia, and even China was successfully deterred from openly violating those sanctions, while arms and ammunitions deliveries to Ukraine have steeply increased. Thus, far from being exposed as an outdated “paper tiger” by Putin’s war, NATO has, on the contrary, been strengthened with another round of enlargement with the accession of formerly non-aligned Finland and Sweden. With this round of accession, the direct NATO border with Russia more than doubles from about 936 km to about 2,275 km – a fact that alone represents a major strategic defeat for Putin.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from the already visible military and economic losses, Russia’s image as a major military power and reliable oil and gas supplier in the Western world has been destroyed, while its cultural appeal and other forms of *soft power* have shattered. Also, Russia’s remaining ability to coerce Western states via their dependence on Russian energy supplies will soon come to an end. This will inevitably lead to Russia becoming a much weaker player overall on the world stage and extremely dependent on China’s (and to some extent India’s) economic and political support. This lesson is particularly relevant for Xi’s government, as the rise of China as an equal or even superior country to the U.S., envisioned in the “Chinese Dream”, would be jeopardized by military adventurism if it resulted in a protracted, unsuccessful war. Xi’s advisers have therefore likely been busy investigating how Putin’s government could have misjudged its chances of military success so badly, and how similar intelligence failures can be avoided in the event of a war over Taiwan.

### 6 What Tactical Lessons Could China Learn from the War in Ukraine?

China’s military planners will most likely be interested in the following tactical aspects of the invasion of Ukraine in their classified analyses:

- *First*, the problems and failures that the Russian military has experienced in combat, whether related to equipment deficiencies, corruption, doctrinal shortcomings, organizational weaknesses, logistical failures, and also in terms of the overall motivation of the armed forces, in order to identify and address similar weaknesses in the PLA;

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15 Gramer, Robbie/Mackinnon, Amy/Lu, Christina: “NATO Countries Begin Ushering Finland and Sweden into the Fold”, *Foreign Policy*, 16 May 2022.

- *Second*, the successful asymmetric tactics employed by the Ukrainian defenders against the superior invading force to ensure that there would be no such surprises if Taiwan employed these or similar tactics;
- *Third*, the impact and mechanics of various international arms transfers to determine how to prevent a similar type of assistance to Taiwan;
- *Fourth*, China's own vulnerabilities to sanctions and blockades, in order to make China's economy more resilient to punitive measures;
- *Fifth*, the impact of Putin's nuclear blackmail on Ukraine and its supporters, and the reactions from the rest of the world, to learn from it.<sup>16</sup>

Since Russia has not yet carried out an actual nuclear strike despite multiple threats, and the West's reaction to such a hypothetical escalation step is therefore not entirely clear, it is difficult to say at the time of printing this article what lessons China will ultimately draw from the analysis of the potential of nuclear escalation threats in the Ukraine war. However, it is reasonable to assume that Western reluctance to defend Ukraine at the beginning of the war was based on fear of nuclear escalation, i.e., Western self-deterrence. This could motivate China to use similar tactics to prevent military assistance to Taiwan. The ballistic missile tests China conducted on August 4, 2022, following Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, in which missiles were fired across the island for the first time and landed very close to Taiwanese territorial waters, underscored the potential for such coercive threats. China's expansion of its nuclear arsenal in recent years and its attempts to build a full nuclear triad should also be seen in this context.<sup>17</sup> However, Putin's nuclear threats against Ukraine have increasingly turned out to be a bluff after initial effectiveness. Even the usually militarily restrained European Union countered the Kremlin's nuclear threats by declaring, via Josep Borrell, that Russia's army would be "annihilated" by the Western powers if a nuclear weapon were launched against Ukraine.<sup>18</sup> In this context, it should be noted that China's nuclear capabilities still lag far behind those of Russia.

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16 Yang, Jianli/Yu, Yan: "Conquering Taiwan – What Has Xi Jinping learned from Putin's Invasion of Ukraine?", Providence, 8 July 2022.

17 Kirchberger, Sarah: "Understanding Risk in the Great Competition with China", 2022 Index of U.S. Military Strength, Heritage Foundation, 20 October 2021.

18 Libeiro, Jorge: "Ukraine war: Russian army will be 'annihilated' if it launches a nuclear attack, warns Josep Borrell", Euronews, 14 October 2022.



## 7 Conclusions

At this stage, it is difficult to foresee whether China's own planning in terms of a possible timeframe for military action against Taiwan – whether it be a hybrid attack, a blockade, an attempted takeover of offshore islands, missile attacks from the mainland, or a full amphibious invasion – has tended to be pushed back, remained the same, or even been brought forward in time because of the lessons of the Ukraine war. In the hypothetical event of an early Russian victory in Ukraine, which might then have been followed up with further Russian aggression against, say, Moldova or some of the Baltic states, confusion would have reigned in the West and loss of political cohesion could have loomed. Such a situation of weakness might have been taken by Xi as an encouraging signal to launch an action against Taiwan immediately following the Russian aggression, in order to take advantage of the distraction and overwhelm the West's ability to respond. In this sense, Taiwan may have directly benefited from the bravery of Ukraine's defenders in preventing such a dangerous geostrategic scenario.

As of November 2022, the actual evolution of the war in Ukraine can hardly be seen as encouraging an invasion of Taiwan. Moreover, an amphibious military action requiring extensive preparations and large-scale, overt troop movements would be more difficult to camouflage and successfully execute in the changed security climate since February 2022. On the other hand, Xi's advanced age and determination to unify Taiwan with China may put pressure on his military planners to achieve some kind of success during his current third term – especially since the prospects for success after 2030 are likely going to decrease, given unfavorable demographic and economic trends within China.<sup>19</sup> There is thus a risk that deterrence could fail again in the coming years, this time in East Asia. Taiwan should therefore learn as much as it can from the Ukraine war and work quickly to build up its own self-defense capabilities to the point where the chances of success appear too low for China to consider attacking. This would also ensure that the U.S. and its allies would not assume that defending Taiwan would be a lost cause.<sup>20</sup> Further, the existential issue of national defense should no longer be treated as a pawn of partisan interests within Taiwan.

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19 See Kirchberger, *Understanding Risk in the Great Competition with China*, 2021.

20 Hornung, Jeffrey W.: "Ukraine's lessons for Taiwan", *War On The Rocks*, 17 March 2022; Erickson, Andrew S./Collins, Gabriel: "Eight new points on the porcupine: More Ukrainian lessons for Taiwan", *War On The Rocks*, 18 April 2022.

On their part, Western states should support U.S. military efforts to deter China with the predominantly economic means at their disposal, and signal their determination to support Taiwan. The mistakes of Russia policy in making European states and especially Germany dependent on Russian energy imports and therefore susceptible to blackmail should not be repeated with respect to China. The U.S. could consider permanently stationing a *tripwire force* on Taiwan and begin joint training and information sharing now, as this would be more difficult to do when a crisis is already underway. How to strengthen Taiwan preemptively without creating a deterrence trap, however, is an open question.<sup>21</sup> This is one of the most important lessons from the Ukraine war, both for China and the West.

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21 Culver, John K./Kirchberger, Sarah: "US-China lessons from Ukraine: Fueling more dangerous Taiwan tensions", Atlantic Council, 15 June 2023.

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## Chapter 17: *Zeitenwende* Without Strength? Strategic Mirror Axes of Vital German Security Interests: Eastern Flank and East Asia

Maximilian Terhalle

### Abstract

In 2023, the German government must succeed in balancing the National Security Strategy (NSS) adopted in the coalition agreement for the remainder of the legislative period on the one hand, the strategy needed on a daily basis to counter Russia's war of aggression on the other, and the simultaneous rebalancing *vis-à-vis* Xi Jinping's China. This chapter offers key guidance so that Germany's pending strategic mindset shift can be initiated. Derived from this, the chapter makes novel practical suggestions on how the mirror axes of transatlantic and thus German security, both East Asia and the eastern flank, can be strategically defused in such a way that, at their core, they cannot credibly challenge Germany's security and the alliance's deterrence capability in a global perspective. In this context, war is not regarded as a museum-like category.

### Keywords

strategic strength, strategic mindset, strategy, two-front war, deterrence

*“... yet, and this may only be a matter of temperament, there does tend to be a dark side to the strategic imagination that picks up intimations of disorder at times of stability, that senses the fragility of human institutions even while striving to reinforce them, that cannot stop thinking of war while promoting peace.”*

Lawrence Freedman

## 1 Introduction

Similar to his speech in Prague on August 30, 2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz had already said in the German Bundestag on February 27, 2022, that policy toward Russia “presupposes strength”.<sup>1</sup> Whether unconsciously or not, the head of government thus voiced the central criterion in the mutual assessment of international adversaries: the perception of their respective strength or weakness and thus their vulnerability. Central, because such perceptions significantly influence their decision-making.<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of 2021, it seems, the impression of Western weakness he had long articulated had become vehemently entrenched in Vladimir Putin’s perception.<sup>3</sup> After the intense British-French dispute in March over Australia’s realignment of its submarine selection to the United States, the withdrawal of Western troops from Afghanistan in September that was considered internationally embarrassing, the break in continuity with Angela Merkel’s departure, the election of a new coalition government and its formation in the fall, this perception culminated in Moscow’s already immediate war-preparatory maximum demands in December, in particular for the withdrawal of all American troops from Europe, before Putin then ordered the war of aggression on Ukraine on February 24, 2022.<sup>4</sup> That such perceptions of the weakness of others can go hand in hand with nationalistic hubris in the assessment of one’s own strength, as Putin then had to discover in the first weeks of the war, remains unaffected by this.<sup>5</sup>

Merkel had promoted the perception of German weakness over many years, perhaps unconsciously but at least consistently, by listening to Putin’s shrill speech in 2007 at the Munich Security Conference and nevertheless

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- 1 Government statement by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, 27 February 2022.
  - 2 Jervis, Robert: *Perception and Misperception*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1978.
  - 3 This perception of Western “decadence” is reflected in Putin’s ultranationalist drive to see Ukraine as an essential threat to his sociopolitical ideas and therefore to ethnically and politically cleanse the “brother nation” of its historical “aberrations”. Putin relies, among others, on the fascist Russian intellectual Ivan Ilyin, whom he has read in depth. See *The Economist*: “Briefing. Fascism in Russia”, 30 July 2022, pp. 15–18, esp. p. 17.
  - 4 A largely ignored signal in Putin’s increasingly concentrated war preparations was the failure to fill up Germany’s largest Gazprom storage facility in Rheden in 2021. Pennekamp, Jochen: “Der Mythos vom billigen russischen Gas”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12 August 2022.
  - 5 In reverse order, this is what happened to America in Iraq in 2003, shortly after “mission accomplished” was celebrated.

letting him continue to build the “private sector” *Nord Stream 2* pipeline after the Georgia war and despite the Crimea annexation and subsequent sanctions. Also, although it signed the military reassurance at the NATO summit in Wales in 2014, thereby committing itself to ensuring Germany’s defense capability in a politically reliable and materially sufficient manner, its lack of conviction that conventional deterrence is indispensable left the Bundeswehr largely “bare”, as a leading general conceded without mincing words eight years later on the evening of the start of the war. And last but not least, the uniquely radical course set in Europe in terms of energy policy by the Fukushima disaster in 2011 had already prepared the ground for the dependence on Russian gas, which was never officially considered so in Berlin. From all these examples it becomes understandable why Putin remained Germany’s “partner” in Merkel’s world view until her departure.<sup>6</sup>

On February 27, 2022, the chancellor, himself finance minister in Merkel’s cabinet and vice chancellor for many years until September 2021, had to end this approach. Putin, Scholz said, was seeking a “Russian empire”, which is why the German government “will not rest [until] peace is secured in Europe”.<sup>7</sup> Without explicitly saying so, the special assets of the Bundeswehr (100 billion euros) presented in this speech context were initially a signal of strength. All of a sudden, it seemed, the question that had been pending since 2014 about what it actually meant for Germany to assume “more responsibility” had been answered with the necessary clarification of “more of what” and “more for what”<sup>8</sup> – albeit not of its own accord, but by the pressure of events. In the euphoria of the Berlin awakening at the end of February 2022, it was remarkable that China, which has dominated America’s strategic perception for the past decade or so, did not seem to occupy a place in Scholz’s thinking. It was as if the strategic center of strategic equilibrium policy could be located exclusively in Europe, as it was during the Cold War. Therefore, there is no sign of the realization that the eastern flank and East Asia are mutually dependent as mirror axes of vital German security interests.<sup>9</sup>

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6 Speech of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Munich Security Conference, 16 February 2019.

7 Speech of the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, 27 February 2022.

8 Giegerich, Bastian/Terhalle, Maximilian: The Munich Consensus and the Purpose of German Power. In: *Survival. Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 58, Issue 2, 2016, pp. 155–166.

9 In the run-up to the chancellor’s trip to China on November 3/4, 2022, it broke out unusually publicly between the foreign minister and the chancellor that the German

The fact that a large country like the Federal Republic of Germany has afforded to forego its strategic orientation for so long has come at a high price. The “peace dividend” was, in other words, expensive. Whether the international *Zeitenwende* of the Russian invasion will bring about a German *Zeitenwende* in the sense of a strategic change of mentality is not a foregone conclusion. Such a change would be reflected in the realization that Germany’s embedding in the institutions of the West is not exhausted by passive membership, but that, on the contrary, this embedding gives rise to a strategic duty to defend this very order with a strong will. Only such a change in the world view would make it possible to comprehend and address *Zeitenwende*, which the chancellor has set for 2022 (but which many see as beginning in 2007, or at the latest in 2014).

However, the not entirely unjustified expectation that the external shock, especially in the largest government faction, would comprehensively challenge previous Russophile and pacifist-peace policy traditions of foreign policy action has not been confirmed. On the contrary, considerable differences remain discernible in the coalition government with regard to the Russian war of aggression.

In contrast to the FDP (e.g. Strack-Zimmermann, Faber) and the Greens (e.g. Baerbock, Habeck, Nouripour, Hofreiter), the traditional peace policy wing is dominant in the SPD’s strong left-wing faction (97 of 206 MPs). For the time being, the grouping around Rolf Mützenich has bowed to the international constraints of the war situation. Not pragmatically, but reluctantly, as the protracted delays in arms deliveries in the first six months already showed by NATO standards. Chancellor Scholz, who is feeling the inevitable international pressure on Germany from the front row, while the category of war remains completely new territory for him in terms of content and concept, navigates, it seems, somewhat precariously between

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government does not have a coordinated China policy. This culminated in advice given medially by Baerbock to the chancellor for his China visit. The nexus between East Asia and the eastern flank was admittedly not addressed in this sharp contradiction. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: “Vor Scholz-Reise: Baerbock pocht auf andere China-Politik”, 1 November 2022. On the failure so far to link the NSS and China strategy, see Terhalle, Maximilian: “Wie strategisch ist die China-Strategie?”, 49security, 23 November 2022; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: “China-Strategie betont Verteidigungslinien gegen Peking”, 14 November 2022, p. 15.



the currents of his party at times.<sup>10</sup> It remains to be seen whether the course of the war and, in particular, the geopolitical speech of its co-party chairman Lars Klingbeil in June 2022, which was closely coordinated with Scholz and in which he emphasized Germany not as a peace power but as a leading power, will make it much more difficult for the Social Democratic left to maintain its traditional stance in the long term than before.<sup>11</sup> In December 2022, it did not look like it.<sup>12</sup> Looking at the 2023 defense budget, the Bundeswehr continues to look “bare”.<sup>13</sup> The question, moreover, of whether, instead of maintaining convinced strategic resilience at home, the socioeconomic costs of war (inflation, recession, energy costs) will become the vehicle for the party left to invalidate Berlin’s placement in the anti-Russian front of NATO, the EU, the G7 and other states therefore makes the emergence of friction more likely, especially in the largest governing party. Putin’s calculation for the winter of 2022/23 would thus work out.<sup>14</sup>

Insofar as Chancellor Scholz meant an exact manual when he said there was no “textbook” for dealing with war, he was initially right. What he overlooked, however, was the body of knowledge offered by *Strategic Studies*<sup>15</sup> –

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- 10 Voices that do not belong to the party left include Michael Roth or Kristian Klinck. See Klinck, Kristian/Müller, Alexander/Nanni, Sara: “Mehr deutsche Waffen für die Ukraine – so geht’s”, *Der Spiegel*, 21 August 2022.
  - 11 See Wehner, Markus: “Leise Führung”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 July 2022, p. 3.
  - 12 The apparent lack of leadership is expressed in the refusal to deliver the *Leopard 2* main battle tanks for fear of leading the way internationally in this regard, see Schuller, Konrad: “USA für Lieferung deutscher Kampfpanzer. Sicherheitsberater sprach sich früh dafür aus, deutsche Leopard 2 an Kiew zu geben”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 December 2022, p. 1.
  - 13 See Carstens, Peter: “Die Armee ist noch immer blank”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 28 November 2022.
  - 14 See Wehner, Markus: “Wenn Kiews Eliteeinheit auf der Krim zuschlägt”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 September 2022, p. 4.
  - 15 See Luttwak, Edward: *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*. Harvard Belknap: Cambridge 2001 (revised ed.); Haslam, Jonathan: *No Virtue Like Necessity. Realist Thought in International Relations Since Machiavelli*. Yale University Press: New Haven 2002; Howard, Michael: *The Invention Of Peace And The Reinvention Of War*. Profile Books: New York 2002; Howard, Michael: *The Causes of Wars*. 2nd ed., Harvard University Press: Cambridge 1983; Freedman, Lawrence: *Strategy*. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2013; Gray, Colin: *The Future of Strategy*. Polity: Cambridge 2017; Heuser, Beatrice: *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2010; Powell, Jonathan: *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World*. Vintage: New York 2011; Kissinger, Henry: *Diplomacy*. Simon & Schuster: New York 1994; Kissinger,

a doctrine shaped in particular by security policy practitioners and grounded in international academia, but “largely unknown” in Germany, despite diverse intellectual-historical lines of connection.<sup>16</sup> It cannot indicate the political path to be taken in a textbook-like and well-ordered manner, but it can offer orientation in decision-making by means of a *continuing* compass.<sup>17</sup> Such a compass is now required – if there is a serious will to change the mentality – for top-level politics insofar as their ministries currently have to manage the balancing act between the National Security Strategy (NSS), which is designed for the remaining election period and was agreed in the coalition agreement, on the one hand, and the strategy against Russia’s war of aggression, which is needed on a daily basis, and the rebalancing *vis-à-vis* Xi Jinping’s China, on the other. Incidentally, Scholz mentioned his “clear internal compass” in the fall of 2022,<sup>18</sup> but did not explain it further. However, if one assumes the inevitably dynamic complexity of international events, it seems tantamount to squaring the geopolitical circle to draft a future concept by the NSS valid until the end of the legislative period that assumes both a Russian victory and a Russian defeat with regard to Europe’s security and at the same time probes the implications of a two-front war (USA *versus* China/Russia) that cannot be waged by America.<sup>19</sup>

For a Europe conceived as part of the Russian imperium, so described by Scholz, would reduce the object of protection of the NSS, the security of the alliance and national territory, and thus the undertaking of the strategy designed until 2025 *ad absurdum*. Consequently, it is not a *bias* to exclude such an assumption, but merely to point out that a Russian victory would render *a priori* obsolete the NSS to be elaborated. Therefore, this chapter does not include in its analysis variously expressed options for a

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Henry: Leadership. Allen Lane: New York 2022; von Bismarck, Otto: Gedanken und Erinnerungen. Verlag der Wissenschaften: Berlin 2014-1 (Vol. 1-3).

16 Busse, Nikolas: “Die erste Schlacht der neuen Zeit”, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 14 July 2022, p. 1.

17 Gaddis, John: On Grand Strategy. Penguin: New York 2018, p. 17.

18 Interview with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 7 September 2022, p. 3.

19 Counterfactual considerations, as Niall Ferguson has done, are helpful here as a mirror of possible, (undesirable) futures. See Ferguson, Niall (Ed.): Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals. Penguin: New York 1997. See therein, e.g., Burleigh, Michael: Nazi Europe: What if Nazi Germany had defeated the Soviet Union? (Chapter 6).

ceasefire and peace negotiations described as such.<sup>20</sup> Rather, the interaction between developments in the Ukrainian theater of war and the assumptions about the future of European security incorporated into the NSS explicitly highlights the need for strategically oriented political leadership. This is especially true in the event that a (major) war in East Asia would very likely present Europeans with the almost impossible difficulty of maintaining support for Ukraine without America capitulating to NATO's psychological weakening in Europe – and thus to Russia. In the meantime, it cannot be assumed from a strategic perspective that America views its security guarantee for Europe in isolation from Germany's economic policy toward Beijing.

This chapter approaches the issue of strength, the compass of German security policy, and thus the NSS as well as Russia and China strategies, in three steps. First, the chapter provides a concise, conceptual vocabulary without which the power politics of international affairs will continue to be reflexively or unwittingly rejected in the future and the preconditional change in mentality will not be achieved.<sup>21</sup> The second step addresses the importance of the factor of time in strategic planning. Based on these assumptions, this chapter, in contrast to the view of the *Zeitenwende* focused solely on Russia, thirdly reveals the strategic contours of world politics. China's weight in America's calculations is essential here. Finally, concrete strategies for German and European security are derived from this.

The basic understanding of the analysis is shaped by the definition of strategy by Gordon Craig and Felix Gilbert: "Strategy is not merely the art of preparing for the armed conflicts in which a nation may become involved and planning the use of its resources and the deployment of its forces in such a way as to bring about a successful issue. It is also, in a

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20 A strategically unfinished, always based on believed peace-oriented negotiations, which does not name Russian defeat as a war goal, can also be found in Wolfgang Ischinger's proposal, "to see the war end quickly ... on as favorable terms for Ukraine as possible." In "Germany's Ukraine Problem", *Foreign Affairs*, 10 August 2022. In a remarkably direct manner, former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's three-point plan presented the Kremlin's "willingness to negotiate" in *Stern* magazine as the right option for Berlin to act (reprinted in the August 4, 2022 issue, pp. 25–27). Johannes Varwick, professor of political science in Halle, among others, "read the original" of Schroeder's/Putin's positions. He summed up that in the "central point[s]" he could "see no scandal; on the contrary, these are probably the lines along which a solution would be conceivable." (*Twitter* entry, 4 August 2022).

21 Giegerich, Bastian/Terhalle, Maximilian: *The Responsibility to Defend: Re-thinking Germany's Strategic Culture*. Routledge: London 2021, pp. 16–18.

broader sense, the [...] rational determination of a nation's vital interests, the things that are essential to its security, its fundamental purposes in its relations with other nations, and its priorities with respect to goals.”<sup>22</sup>

## 2 Timeless Strategic Insights

For a long time, a harmonious *one-world thinking* prevailed in Berlin, from which war as a means of international politics had been defined *a priori*. Instead, politics operated exclusively as the solution of global problems affecting all states: *global governance* was international politics among partners. And because economic *win-win globalization* was accordingly the central driving force behind this cooperative world view, the natural law coincidence of “interdependence and enlightened self-interest”<sup>23</sup> was regarded as its optimistic maxim. Whoever deviates from it, “whoever does it after all, harms [...] himself”, Merkel said during her fourth term in office in 2019.<sup>24</sup>

The “world in which we woke up on February 24”<sup>25</sup> however, contrary to the credibly shaken core principles, is not an unknown one, not only to the foreign minister. It is a world that has always existed, before and during the “peace dividend”, as it were, as the indestructible, “dark side” of world politics, as Lawrence Freedman has called it.

The astonishment resonating in the chancellor's words, “and yet it [war] has happened again”<sup>26</sup> therefore relentlessly reveals the Germans' danger-

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22 Craig, Gordon/Gilbert, Felix: Reflections on Strategy in the Present and the Future. In: Paret, Peter/Craig, Gordon A./Gilbert, Felix (Eds.): *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*. Princeton University Press: Princeton 1986, p. 869.

23 On this mantra of (also) federal liberal international thinking, see Terhalle, Maximilian: Warum das Governance-Axiom gescheitert ist – eine notwendige Kritik. In: *Zeitschrift für Politik*, Vol. 62, Issue 3, 2015, p. 269.

24 Merkel, quoted at the 2019 Munich Security Conference. Edward H. Carr (*The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939*. Palgrave: Basingstoke 2001, pp. 42–61) had already subjected the theory of harmony of liberal-cosmopolitan thought to analysis in the years before World War II – with meaningful parallels to today.

25 Baerbock, Annalena: “In anderer Welt aufgewacht...”, *Deutschlandfunk*, 24 February 2022.

26 German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, televised speech, 8 May 2022. See the position of *Der Spiegel* (“Schmerzhaftes Aufklärung”, 23 April 2022, p. 15): Scholz “is deeply convinced of his own positions; after all, he has read, thought through, understood all the files and many books on the subject. But war and peace have not been topics

ous unfamiliarity with the invariably recurring, timeless features of strategic affairs. To have completely ignored them, to have “always too credulously [...] underestimated”<sup>27</sup> actors like Putin, as Chancellor Merkel’s long-time chief foreign policy advisor was able to concede unscathed shortly after the outbreak of war, reveals how deficient strategic thinking really is in Germany. For war was and is not a museum-like category of international politics.

With norms, treaties under international law and a liberal belief in cooperation, a progressive linearity had been lived internationally, but hard questions of power had been consigned to the 19th and 20th centuries with historical-political serenity until February 23 with Sunday speech. Liberal peace utopias such as that of outlawing war, symbolically connoted by the Briand-Kellogg Pact of 1928, have regularly failed because of the phenomenon of war. Not least for this reason, the recently deceased European doyen of military history, Michael Howard, convincingly described the recurrent failure of this unilateral reliance on the diplomatic-notarial “Invention of Peace”.<sup>28</sup> In 2000, he was honored for his work by the Ebert Foundation, which has close ties to the SPD.

Because in this chapter the author recognizes the core weakness of German foreign policy in *Zeitenwende* that has not been conceptually penetrated, four central parameters of this dark side of world politics are first presented here. In this sense, the analysis considers *Zeitenwende* independently of a – distant – end of the war against Ukraine; rather, it uses these parameters to denote timeless, strategic insights that will remain inescapable in the future thereafter.<sup>29</sup>

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of Scholz’s life so far. They are unfamiliar territory for someone whose passion has so far been the basic pension, the minimum wage, or housing, where problems could be solved with laws and official files. Scholz rarely needed the big word, the catchy message; after all, he had all the paragraphs in his head. But suddenly there is this lawless state of a war of aggression, the old laws and messages no longer apply.”

- 27 Schuler, Ralf: “Ex-Berater von Kanzlerin Angela Merkel, Christoph Heusgen ‘Wir haben Putins Brutalität immer unterschätzt’”, Bild, 22 February 2022. It is noteworthy that Heusgen, already out of office, still defended the former chancellor’s Russia policy with verve in November 2021 (Heusgen’s *Dinner Speech* at the Adenauer Foundation, at which the author was present).
- 28 Howard, Michael: *The Invention of Peace and The Reinvention of War*. Basic Books: New York City 2002.
- 29 More detailed on this: Terhalle, Maximilian: *Strategie als Beruf*. Tectum: Baden-Baden 2020, pp. 11–18.

## 2.1 Wars Cannot Be Banned, Only Defined Away

Contrary to what many Germans, who have long neglected NATO and have just as long felt liberated from any actual perception of existential threat, assume, there is no global authority that can credibly and effectively prevent violent attempts to abuse the territorial integrity of states. Outside protected NATO territory, anarchy applies, so to speak. Anarchy in the sense that a mostly larger state has, to this day and in the future, the *de facto* possibility of attacking another state militarily, of imposing its will on it through war, without there being any effective prohibition against it. This logic, which is structurally anchored in international politics, can be ignored, but an attitude refusing this structure cannot thereby escape strategic affairs. This is not *self-fulfilling* war rhetoric, but an approach that sees being vigilantly prepared for the possibility of war as the best guarantee against being overwhelmed. In such, vigilance must be anchored the will to resist: “War is not the best way of settling differences, but it is the only way of preventing them being settled for you.”<sup>30</sup>

The only historically proven possibility to contain the danger of this dynamic on a trial basis therefore lies in amassing credible armament of one’s own and, where this is not sufficient, gaining membership in a military alliance. Germany’s “bare” lack of its own effective armament, admitted on the eve of war, is currently made up for by membership in NATO. However, a poorly armed member weakens its alliance from within – and thus, also its external perception.

## 2.2 Strategists Do Not See “Policy Areas”, Only Instruments of State Power

This anarchic characteristic implies that the nature of world politics is antagonistic. Especially since larger states are usually in a constant struggle for more power or defense against the loss of existing power. In doing so, they always think and plan for the *worst case* of conflict discharge due to incompatible interests in a war, because one of these states wants to – and can.

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30 G.K. Chesterton, quoted in Coker, Christopher: Can War Be Eliminated? Polity: Cambridge 2014, p. 5; see also Freedman, Lawrence: Does Strategic Studies Have a Future? In: Baylis, John et al. (Eds.): Strategy in the Contemporary World. 6th ed., Oxford University Press: Oxford 2019, p. 418. Klingbeil’s speech above also hints at such thinking.

Unless and until a direct warlike confrontation arises, it is common for strategists to view all elements of state power instrumentally. Accordingly, they consistently view the spectrum of these elements as instruments,<sup>31</sup> with which the opponent can be weakened because one's own position must remain superior to that of the opponent. Economic strength, industrial power, and innovative strength thus not only serve the *win-win* of global prosperity; strategically, they are the foundation of military sustainability and must be used politically for this purpose. Economic-industrial power is therefore a fundamental strategic tool to make possible future adversaries dependent by offering market access, government bonds, or raw material supplies. Economic power alone, networked through interdependence, is ultimately no guarantee against aggression by other states. Economic-industrial power is thus the material backbone in the rivalry of states and is capable of (pre)deciding this; in war, it is the backbone of a state's perseverance.<sup>32</sup> It is similar with questions of technology. Of course, it serves the civilizational progress of societies. Strategically, however, it is also true here that states capable of cutting-edge research in *dual-use* technologies have decisive advantages in the constant – only varying in intensity – struggle with other powers.<sup>33</sup> Small states can also use such *know-how* to interest a protecting power. In addition to their original purpose, both instruments, economy and technology, thus always have the central function of raising a country's military striking power to the highest possible level, or at least to a level superior to that of a potential adversary, and, far more difficult, of maintaining it.

Contrary to what Germany has long thought and politically lived as a peace power, the international perception of a state as strong or weak, as mentioned at the beginning, depends at its core on its ability and will to use the aforementioned material instruments of power strategically. Democracies (without a missionary hubris) also have the normative advantage of being able to have a more attractive effect on others because of the defend-

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31 Thus Carr in conversation with Jonathan Haslam. See Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity*, 2002, p. 36.

32 America's sanctioned ban on exporting semiconductors to China is a recent example of such a rivalry in which one side (in this case, the U.S.) strategically leverages its technological superiority. Böge, Frederike: "Kampf gegen China", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16 October 2022.

33 The U.S. chip war against China should be seen in this light. See Miller, Chris: "Warum Computer-Chips über das Machtgleichgewicht zwischen Amerika und China entscheiden werden". In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 November 2022, p. 21.

ed ideal of freedom than those that deprive others of their freedom in order to implement their interests.

### 2.3 *Not International Law, Only Power-Political Will Preserves Internationally Its Own Concept of Order*

International orders are not effectively maintained and protected by international law and norms because the latter can always be disregarded and broken. Like all other prior orders, the present one is based on power, on the above-mentioned economic-military-technological power preponderance of the West. Only these hard power bases thus guarantee the framework of the order's liberal orientation. Just as the present order was not born out of international law but through existential struggle (World War II) or credible will to struggle (Cold War), its stability and future is based on the will of those who see their world best reflected in this order. In other words, orders always have the one particular normative character, not an arbitrary one.<sup>34</sup> Since this is Western-liberal, it would no longer be Western-liberal in the case of a strategic, Russian-Chinese supremacy at the international level.<sup>35</sup> Western norms and international law would be a thing of the past in this case.

Thinking in these categories includes robust resistance to developments that are detrimental to the order. External strength is thus based on internal resilience, i.e., the demonstrated will to be able to confidently confront violent challenges to one's own fundamental values.<sup>36</sup> And yet external, material strength can weaken and inner strength can be undermined by discord and self-doubt.

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34 Normative coexistence is by no means unattainable, or even desirable, as long as this excludes the manifest, military struggle against this very order.

35 No liberal NGO would be able to succeed in a Russian-Chinese order. Liberal critics of the West sometimes forget the basic power-political preconditions without which their criticism would not be possible. See Hurrell, Andrew: *Global Order*. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2007, pp. 112, 115–116.

36 The fear of internal unrest, popular uprisings even, communicated by cabinet members in June and July 2022 in the course of curbing Russian gas supplies demonstrates how initial self-doubt can undermine external credibility from within.



## 2.4 *Strategists Do Not Disregard the “Big Picture” that the Military Superpowers Draw of an Era*

The important equality of all states under international law does not exist in matters of international security because their material power weights are regularly unequal. Therefore, the concentration of the strategic approach is always on the policy of the military great powers of an era.

The reason for this is that their action or inaction can cause the greatest tensions, dislocations, or war, just as, conversely, they are central to substantial progress in cooperation on international affairs, i.e. substantive problems, in times of clear imbalances or in periods of accepted dominance.<sup>37</sup> The great powers therefore also dispute the future of the international order among themselves. This gives rise to the “*big picture*” determining international politics, which essentially determines the respective “*grand strategy*” of the great powers.

Allies can help themselves and their alliances to achieve greater power potential and broader acceptance. Smaller and medium-sized states cannot survive without a strategically well thought-out positioning with one of these great powers, which guarantees their own integrity in an emergency. The assumption among the latter states that they can offer mediation between the major powers in times of crisis not only overestimates their own stature, but also underscores the external perception that the reliability of the mediator is doubted in their own camp and that the adversary recognizes in this the fragility of an opposing alliance and inevitably exploits its weakness.

Lawrence Freedman’s opening quote aptly summarizes the strategic “temperament” behind these four assumptions as that “dark side to the strategic imagination that picks up intimations of disorder at times of stability, that senses the fragility of human institution [...], that cannot stop thinking of war while promoting peace.”

### 3 *Strategy, the Time Factor and Strategy Planning*

This strategic vocabulary, outlined here only very briefly, ideally permeates the process of designing, implementing, and readjusting the respective

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37 As stated above, the existence of the dark power, the military challenge of the existing remains unaffected.

strategy planning (*strategy-making*) and thus also the current German one. Three aspects with regard to the *time* factor are significant here.<sup>38</sup>

First of all, it should be noted that the attribute “strategic” is usually equated with “long-term”. Top politicians and administrators thus seek the aura of a far-sighted approach, understandably due to the 24/7 pace of *day-to-day* business. But what is the relationship between this short-termism, which does not have positive connotations but is effective, and the long-term? The long-term view and its associated goals cannot be abstract objectives materialized in a distant future. Rather, the steps to ensure these overarching goals (i.e. vital interests) are sustained and must be calibrated in the present today for the future. Only in this way can the long-term goal be achieved. Strategy is thus always simultaneously short- and long-term.

Second, the strategist, like other observers, faces the complexity of international events on a daily basis. Even in possession of the vocabulary outlined above, it may be obvious to accompany the *status quo* of the present attentively but reactively. In doing so, however, it involuntarily exposes itself to the constant danger of being surprised by developments and thus depriving itself of the existing time advantage of being able to shape them. Merkel’s reactive on-sight driving offers an example here. The classic difficulty here is that – if you do not want to succumb to political passivity – you always have to make decisions regarding an unclear future without knowing exactly what your counterpart’s decisions will be. In short, this is the “art of the possible”. It is not about what is possible in real terms at the present time (*status quo bias*), but what is possible to make in the future, to which the present becomes inevitable.<sup>39</sup> Thus, it is at least necessary not to be fatalistic and not to want to leave the scope of action and the initiative to the opponent. The frequently quoted Weberian mantra, which regards politics as the “strong slow drilling of hard boards”,<sup>40</sup> is not helpful in this respect. This is especially not the case because the sequence of political-historical time is by no means exclusively linear.<sup>41</sup> Rather, fractures, frictions, and countervailing tendencies continually produce opportunities for clever,

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38 For more detail, see Terhalle, *Strategie als Beruf*, 2020, pp. 20–22.

39 Since Bismarck’s saying, this has been simplified and misunderstood – and with it Bismarck himself. See Gall, *Lothar: Bismarck: Der weiße Revolutionär*. Frankfurt: 1980, pp. 23, 127–128, 729.

40 Weber, Max: *Politik als Beruf*. Duncker & Humblot: Berlin 1993, p. 67.

41 The distinction of time development into *chronos* (linear, chronological) and *kairos* (non-linear, jumpy, condensing, not necessarily progressive) was presented by the (ancient) Greeks.

sometimes energetic, but always forward-looking action that increases or at least secures one's own power.

Finally, strategy requires the formulation of a concept of the future of international politics. This concept of the future must describe that state of international affairs which determines the safeguarding of a country's vital interests ("*strategic vision*").<sup>42</sup> The strategies to be developed must then demonstrate how they look backwards from the future in order to plan in the present in such a way that they can make the overarching concept of the future adaptively achievable.

Such strategic action, i.e. action in which the existential security of a country and thus its strength are at stake, cannot be achieved without a name. Strategy requires a strategist. Ideally, the strategist must have internalized the above vocabulary. Ultimately, it is his/her personality that wisely penetrates the complexity of international events and seeks to confidently shape the always uncertain future through strategic leadership. The extent to which the leadership of the Federal Republic, convinced for so long of preserving the *status quo* that was taken for granted, produces such characters or allows them to grow out of the war situation, initially describes only a current development.<sup>43</sup>

In the following, strategies will now be outlined on how Berlin can strategically understand and shape the approaching future of international politics.

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42 Brzezinski, Zbigniew: *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power*. Basic Books: New York 2012; on the general difficulty of planning for the future, see Freedman, *Strategy*. 2013, pp. XVIII-XIX.

43 Such strategic intelligence also includes techniques of applying power, whether callousness, calculated threats and lies, or exploiting moments of surprise. See, among others, Kissinger, *Leadership*, 2022; Schwarz, Hans-Peter: *Von der Machtbesessenheit zur Machtvergessenheit*. DVA: Stuttgart 1985, p. 165. The ethical reproach weighs heavily here that democracies should not use the means of dictatorships. That is correct at first. And yet, in an anarchic international environment, techniques and means of (preventive) action must be considered that ensure one's own superiority, or at least one's own survival. In the event of war, this problem becomes inevitable – or dictated by the constraints of the situation.

#### *4 Zeitenwende Must Be Strategically Thought of Globally, not in Terms of Central Europe*

The Western order is challenged by a military enemy. Dictators, as Germans should know from their own historic experience, are never saturated unless they are stopped from advancing by military force. Berlin's war goal, which can only be achieved by means of Ukraine, should therefore be Putin's defeat. Only then can a peace order be negotiated from a position of strength.<sup>44</sup>

If Berlin were to follow NATO's Secretary General in saying that Russia could lose the war, Germany's strategic goal would be clearly described: Europe without Putin. And yet Moscow's nuclear arsenal would remain, even if Putin's failure brought about its fall. Therefore, Europe's security order will be born only of Western strength.

Where this strength lies was recently answered intuitively by EU members Finland and Sweden: in NATO, not the EU. The mutual assistance obligation in Art. 42 (7) of the EU Treaty is not convincing in terms of *Realpolitik*, although it does include nuclear protection. In essence, contrary to all debates on strategic autonomy, the issue is the quality of U.S. assistance, which the EU cannot afford. This is particularly true of the reference to the Franco-German engine, which has been put to the test in terms of security policy. Not only from an Eastern European perspective does the war represent the failure of this axis; it also excludes Great Britain, one of Europe's two nuclear powers, from the debate.

However, because NATO has proven itself to be the guarantor of European security before everyone's eyes, it is also the central place for discussing this security in terms of *Realpolitik*. Two factors in this debate compel Europe to act: Putin's successor will also have nuclear weapons, and China's world power aspirations are crystallizing in Taiwan.

War, Berlin should have learned, cannot be prohibited by norms. Opponents can be deterred on their own. Europe cannot do that at present. Nor – frighteningly – can America. Because, as former U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis put it unequivocally in 2017, the U.S. cannot wage a two-front war, and cannot credibly deter Russia and China at the same time. This is the Achilles heel of Europe's strategic security.

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44 This section is partly based on earlier contributions by the author. See Terhalle, Maximilian: "Für eine europäische Atommacht", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 31 May 2022, p. 8; Krause, Joachim/Terhalle, Maximilian et al: "Putins Politik nicht belohnen", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 14 July 2022, p. 8.

And this even if Russia and China have not yet strategically concerted to the extent that they could form a nuclear front against the U.S. This means that the question of Europe's deterrent capability, which Macron unprecedentedly raised in 2020 with Germany and which Berlin has not responded to, must be addressed anew. The first major war since 1945 does not give the Germans and the French the legitimacy of security leadership which they believe themselves to have.

If the U.S. nuclear umbrella is now absorbed by a not unlikely war with China, 3,750 U.S. warheads must be capable of obliterating all of China's major cities and military installations through a second-strike option, as well as providing deterrence against North Korea and for Australia, Japan, and South Korea. In this case, it is questionable whether the U.S. can, and will, continue to signal that it is willing to risk the nuclear destruction of Boston, for example, to protect Berlin. Therefore, it is imperative that Europe becomes a strategic nuclear power: within NATO, as a European nuclear pillar. A new Article 5a should formulate the nuclear umbrella for NATO-Europe, establishing the deterrence of a Russian first strike in the event that East Asia militarily appropriates America.

America is aware of its strategic limitations, but remains silent on the subject. The core interest of the naval nuclear powers Great Britain and France in enlarging their own arsenals is therefore nourished by the fact that both cannot want to allow a vacuum to arise from the emerging nuclear power imbalance in Europe. Berlin should support Paris and London financially on a *pro rata* basis. At the same time, however, it should itself equip the Dakar-class submarines produced in Kiel, which are supplied to Israel to enable its nuclear second-strike capability, with analogous nuclear equipment and have them patrol the Mediterranean. And to strengthen Warsaw, Berlin should transfer tactical nuclear weapons from Büchel. The coordination of deterrence against Russia by the European NATO core group consisting of these four countries should be carried out by existing *command-control* structures of the alliance, which should, however, be adapted.

As unlikely as it is after Putin's war of aggression that an eventual Trump 2 cabinet would unexpectedly revert to the 2017 *status quo* and leave NATO, crucially, Europe would have credible reassurance against Russia up its sleeve even as a rump NATO.

Concerns that Paris and London are historically unwilling to subordinate their arsenals to NATO structures as a European pillar overlook the fact

that no nuclear power is probing about the crown jewels of its security as long as Berlin alone fails to voice a weighty proposal on the subject.

### *5 No Zeitenwende Without Strategic Mindset: Three Flaws*

Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have repeatedly called the West (G7 and Australia) decadent. Whether it was the financial crisis, Barack Obama's red lines in Syria, the start of the Corona crisis, the AUKUS deal, or the Afghanistan withdrawal, they took all these examples as confirmation of their assumptions. In doing so, reading Raymond Aron's *In Defense of Decadent Europe* would certainly have helped them not to succumb to their own misperceptions.<sup>45</sup> The resilience that Aron describes, reflected in the West's unity since the start of the war in Ukraine, certainly had a not insignificant element of surprise in store for both authoritarian rulers. However, whether the moderating element contained in the surprise will still prevent Xi Jinping from militarily enforcing China's dominance in East Asia after his enthronement as Mao II, which took place at the end of October 2022, is not a foregone conclusion. For it could be that he becomes convinced that it is not Putin, but only he, who can put the decadent West in its place. Taiwan's military annexation of the mainland could be used to make the unmistakable and constantly announced example, possibly sooner than military planners assume.<sup>46</sup>

East Asia and NATO's eastern flank are the mirror axes of Germany's security. Regardless of who wins the 2024 U.S. election, Germany should plan with Poland, France, and the United Kingdom for Europe's nuclear deterrence in consultation with America in the event of a two-front war. Whether Washington would be willing to transfer parts of its deactivated arsenal to the Europeans because of the unpredictability of the time remaining is one of the many questions currently being explored there.<sup>47</sup>

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45 Aron, Raymond: *In Defense of Decadent Europe*. Routledge: London 1979, p. xviii.

46 See Beckley, Michael/Brands, Hal: *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York 2022; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: "Blinken: Peking könnte früher gegen Taipeh vorgehen", 19 October 2022, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/us-aussenminister-warnt-china-koennte-frueher-gegen-taiwan-vorgehen-18397375.html>; *The Economist*: "Preparing for a Fight. China's New Military Chiefs Stand Out For Their Loyalty to Xi Jinping and Careers Focused War With Taiwan", 5 November 2022, p. 53.

47 Author's conversation with Pentagon officials, summer 2022.

In light of these international dimensions, the German government has taken on a great deal in drafting the National Security Strategy, a China strategy and a Russia strategy – without yet adequately measuring the interactions between the factors. The point that Donald Trump’s inglorious departure in 2021 may have been ticked off far too quickly and that the China factor has not yet been penetrated in America’s strategic thinking are probably two of the most serious flaws in German foreign policy after the Russia disaster.

The third flaw, which has only been turned into a painful learning process in parts of the federal government, inevitably comes back to the perception and signaling of strength in international politics. At its core is the strategic *mindset* that has yet to take hold in crucial parts of the cabinet. This *mindset*, the basic assumptions of which were outlined in the second section, is what Quentin Skinner has called the “Machiavellian revolution”:<sup>48</sup> Machiavelli’s demonstration of a new vocabulary of power politics for the rulers of his time, who were forced by the *Realpolitik* failure of the old (Stoic) concepts to seek and find a new beginning. Today, the German government is in a similar situation. The chancellor’s eloquent announcement to “say goodbye to old certainties. This means rethinking, also strategically” basically points in the right direction.<sup>49</sup> That would mean, in particular, that Germany’s top war goal would have to be the defeat of Russia in Ukraine, so that Russia is as far away from NATO’s eastern flank as it was before February 24, 2022.

The German *Zeitenwende* will not work without substantial military armament, superior economic and technological power, and thus external strength. This message seems to have reached at least some parts of the “traffic light” leadership. Without a strategic *mindset* and thus *internal* strength, however, it will fail. A Germany that, out of ignorance or peace policy conviction, believes that the parameters of the strategic struggle of the militarily strongest powers of this era are not essential, harms the vital interests of the country.

To want to negotiate a ceasefire in Ukraine in the winter of 2022/23 in order to supposedly mitigate the socioeconomic costs of war (inflation, recession, energy prices) by eliciting Putin’s goodwill would reflect such

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48 Giegerich/Terhalle, *Responsibility to Defend*, 2021, p. 17.

49 Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz bei der Bundeswehrtagung am 16. September 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/rede-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-bei-der-bundeswehrtagung-am-16-september-2022-2127078>.

peace policy ignorance, as would the belief that the U.S. security guarantee, vital to Europe, is in its nature politically independent of Germany's economic strategy toward China.

Berlin's strategic obligation to NATO is not to allow this to happen. And, at the same time, not to demand deterrence through fine speeches, but to endow it in the defense budget with the power to make a credible impact.<sup>50</sup> The German government's strategy papers will be able to prove whether the *Zeitenwende* will simultaneously measure through the fundamental implications for Europe's security of the impossibility of an American two-front war against China and Russia.

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50 Significantly, the defense budget for 2023 does not reflect this. Power in the largest government faction, it seems, remains de facto with the peace policy wing around the SPD faction leader. See Carstens, Peter: "Die Armee ist noch immer blank", Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 28.11.2022, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/bundeswehr-wie-lambrecht-bei-der-ausruestung-der-armee-versagt-18488456.html>.



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# Chapter 18: Realignment of the German Security Architecture after 2022

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## Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine marks a turning point in European history. With his order to invade the neighboring country, Vladimir Putin has not only shaken the European security framework. He has also called into question the rule-based peace order that applies worldwide. Germany must respond to the changed security policy reality: if we want to continue to live in peace and freedom, we not only need a fully equipped Bundeswehr capable of military service. Germany must also assume more responsibility. Our history obliges us to do so.

## Keywords

war of aggression, *Zeitenwende*, security framework, peace order, Bundeswehr, special assets, National Security Council

## 1 Introduction

On February 24, 2022, the unthinkable happened: Vladimir Putin attacked Ukraine for the second time after 2014. From the outset, the attack was directed not only against military facilities, but also and especially against civilian ones. With this breach of civilization, Putin is also turning the rule-based peace order on its head, which was enshrined in the United Nations Charter in 1947 after the horrific experiences of World War II: "All Members shall refrain from [...] any threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State."<sup>1</sup> At the time, Russia had also agreed to this central principle for the preservation of global peace

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1 UNRIC: Charter of the United Nations, Art. 2(4).

and international security. Ignored by Putin, it annexed Crimea back in 2014. In retrospect, this was a “dress rehearsal” for what was to follow on February 24, 2022.

## 2 Challenges of German Security Policy

As early as 2007, Putin let it be known unequivocally in his speech at the Munich Security Conference that he was striving for a new world order in which Russia would once again assume the role of a world power.<sup>2</sup> In an article titled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”,<sup>3</sup> which he published in July 2021, six months before the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian president revealed his imperialist, great-power fantasies. The Kremlin ruler claimed not only that Ukraine had emerged on territory stolen from Russia, but also that Ukraine’s state sovereignty was ultimately dependent on Moscow’s acquiescence.<sup>4</sup> He thus questioned Ukraine’s territorial integrity in violation of international law.

President Putin considers the disintegration of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”,<sup>5</sup> because, in his view, Russia has thus lost importance. Therefore, the central goal of his foreign policy is to make the country a world power again and, on the way there, to force Ukraine back under Russian rule as a first step.<sup>6</sup> The Russian attack on Ukraine therefore not only directly challenges the security and

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2 Putin, Vladimir: Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, 10 February 2007.

3 Putin, Vladimir: On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians, 12 July 2021.

4 Dickinson, Peter: “Putin’s new Ukraine essay reveals imperial ambitions”, Atlantic Council, 15 July 2021.

5 NBC News: “Putin: Soviet collapse a ‘genuine tragedy’”, 25 April 2005; Lechner, Gerhard: “Putin will zur Sowjetunion zurück”, Wiener Zeitung, 14 February 2022.

6 Interestingly, Ukraine was under Russian rule for just under 200 years in its long history, from the end of the 18th century until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Before that (and for much longer overall), Ukraine was under Western influence. The country was perceived as an independent country in Europe already in the early modern period, even if it finally received its state independence only in 1991 (cf. Lechner, Putin will zur Sowjetunion zurück, 2022; Kappler, Andreas: *Ungleiche Brüder. Russen und Ukrainer vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*. C. H. Beck: Munich 2017).

principles of cooperation in Europe,<sup>7</sup> it is also the struggle of systems – autocracy *versus* democracy – in the world.

In the long term, this also has profound consequences for German security policy. The end of the East-West conflict after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 changed the threat perception of Germans, who from then on felt exclusively surrounded by friends. Over the decades, the focus shifted significantly from external to internal security. In recent years, the question of how we can protect our democracy with a free and open society from extremist and terrorist attacks has been at the center of political and social debate.

By contrast, few have given much thought to Germany's external security. This issue was not seriously discussed in political and social debates. Regardless of the crises that were building up around the world, people apparently saw no real reason to do so. This changed abruptly with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Three days later, Chancellor Olaf Scholz rightly spoke in the German Bundestag of *Zeitenwende* – a turning point in (German) history.<sup>8</sup> Putin's order to invade the neighboring country not only shook the European security framework. Since then, the entire globe has been thrown into unbalance in terms of security policy.

It is no coincidence that Russian foreign policy has become significantly more imperialistic in recent years. For the United States, China has become the biggest rival in the competition of political systems over the past decades. Its security policy focus has therefore been correspondingly directed toward the Indo-Pacific. Russia was already considered merely a "regional power" under the Obama administration.<sup>9</sup> Thus, while U.S. foreign policy attention was no longer primarily focused on the transatlantic alliance, and while French President Emanuel Macron, frustrated, described NATO as "brain dead",<sup>10</sup> Putin increasingly focused on his neighboring states Belarus and Ukraine.

After the end of the Cold War at the latest, it was no longer conceivable for all those responsible that tanks would once again be rolling through the heart of Europe. Cyberattacks and asymmetric threats as well as conflicts

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7 Die Bundesregierung: Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz am 27. Februar 2022; Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung: 45 Jahre Schlussakte von Helsinki, 2020.

8 Die Bundesregierung, Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz am 27. Februar 2022.

9 Die Welt: "Obama verspottet Russland als 'Regionalmacht'", 25 March 2014.

10 Tagesschau: "Macron nennt NATO 'hirntot'", 7 November 2019.

between state and non-state actors were the main threat scenarios in the Bundeswehr's White Paper.<sup>11</sup> It was not until Russia's annexation of Crimea – a violation of international law – that the issue of national and alliance defense returned to the center of German security policy. Today, we face a new reality. We need a fully equipped Bundeswehr that is fit for military service again, because after the fall of the Berlin Wall it was simply cut to the bone. For more than 25 years, whenever the federal government sought funds in the budget, it always turned to the defense account. The Bundeswehr was reduced to 182,000 men and women, and important investments in material and infrastructure were postponed indefinitely. Since 2014, the defense budget has been successively increased, but restoring full operational readiness is still a long way off.

The Bundeswehr's special fund of 100 billion euros is now a great opportunity to modernize the German troops so that it can also fulfill its international obligations within the framework of the EU and NATO. The Bundeswehr, which for years has been geared to maximum efficiency and economy, now lacks the capability to simultaneously perform its tasks worldwide when required. In view of the reality of security policy, this is no longer appropriate. The Bundeswehr must be equipped in such a way that it can perform its tasks not only consecutively but also simultaneously. If necessary, this must also be achievable within the shortest possible time. This does not necessarily require more personnel, though.

Military strength is not defined exclusively by the number of armed personnel. Rather, it comes down to excellent training and the weapon systems and infrastructure available. If combat swimmers are stranded for ten years because they lack a training pool, or pilots lose their licenses because helicopters don't take off and they therefore cannot fulfill the necessary flight hours, that is a huge problem. In the worst case, soldiers have to sign off on skills because they cannot practice for their missions. In the future, however, the Bundeswehr will only be able to acquire good people and keep them if the appropriate material is available. After all, operational readiness means attractiveness. For the sake of honesty, though, it should also be mentioned that the poor state of the Bundeswehr is not just a question of money and complicated procurement rules, but also one of organization and efficient leadership. The Bundeswehr has too many command positions and command staff. For greater operational readiness, however, it needs significantly more troops.

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11 Bundesministerium der Verteidigung: Weißbuch 2016.



We need a strong and effective Bundeswehr to be able to respond to the changed security situation and live up to our responsibility in the world. Germany is involved in various alliances. Our partners must be able to rely on us one hundred percent. They also expect Germany to take the lead. In the global financial crisis that began in 2007 and subsequently developed into the worst economic crisis of the post-war period, we took on this role as a matter of course. But when it comes to security in Europe and the world, we are reluctant to take the lead. There are members of the federal government who have problems accepting this responsibility.

Seventy-eight years after the end of World War II, Germany is a stable democracy and an economically strong country. Precisely because of our historical responsibility, we should be committed to freedom in peace worldwide. Our international partners also expect us to do so. Leading the way does not, of course, mean not involving our allies. On the contrary. Bilateral partnerships can also be launched and lead to a greater unity.

For this reason, too, Germany should press ahead with the establishment of a permanent National Security Council modeled on the *U.S. National Security Council*. This body advises the U.S. president on matters of foreign, security, and defense policy. Away from day-to-day politics, it analyzes interdepartmental international developments that either already have an impact on their own country or could do so in the future. Such an interdepartmental early warning system would also be relevant for Germany's future security architecture. Most events that happen around the world also affect us in Europe as a consequence. In a global world, we are indirectly affected by many developments, even if they happen on the other side of the planet.

### 3 Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine concerns us directly. Anyone who tramples on the rule-based order, and does so in the heart of Europe, must expect resistance from the free Western world. The outcome of this war will determine whether the *law of the strongest* or the *strength of the rule of law* will prevail in the future. We want to live in peace, preserve our democracy and freedom, increase our prosperity, maintain the welfare state, and protect human rights, as our Basic Law, the best constitution in the world, tells us.

The goal of our security policy strategy must therefore be unambiguous. Anyone who attacks our free legal order must expect fierce resistance.

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