

I. Background and Causes

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

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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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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.² 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,³ 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,⁴ 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.

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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

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 Solovyov, 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.”⁸

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.⁹

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

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 2000.¹²

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

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.”¹³ 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”.¹⁴ 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

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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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-

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.¹⁷

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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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