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# Russia, Ukraine and NATO:

## Reflections on the Determination to Not Avoid the Road to War

Azmi Bishara

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## 1. The Predicament

With Vladimir Putin's accession to the presidency of the Russian Federation on 26 March 2000 – after a brief spell as acting President that began six months earlier – an energetic battle began to save Russia from becoming what he called a second-tier or even third-tier country. In his famous “Millennium Message” speech given in late 1999, the new President told his listeners that it was “too early to bury Russia as a great power.”<sup>1</sup> These statements were not intended for the exhausted Russian population but for a global audience. Putin was setting out his vision clearly for the whole world to see.

The 2008 Russian intervention in Georgia was the first step towards making the “Russian idea” that Putin had articulated in his speech – Russia as a resurgent great power – a reality. The overt purpose of the intervention was to defend South Ossetia and Abkhazia,<sup>2</sup> two regions that had sought to secede and establish independent republics with Russian support. In 2014, Putin annexed Crimea and openly supported separatists in eastern Ukraine. In both cases, Moscow warned the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and even the European Union (EU) in Brussels against continuing to expand their influence in republics it considers to be within its areas of vital interest, especially in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. This was followed by a Russian military intervention in Syria in September 2015 to save a tyrannical regime from collapse, establishing a semi-permanent military presence on the Mediterranean coast, linking the new base in Tartus with Sevastopol and the Crimean headquarters of the Russian fleet.

None of these operations were met with a decisive Western response, despite a US administration extremely critical of Putin's policies. Predicting a possible escalation, Putin decided to anticipate developments by requesting clear security pledges and guarantees from the United States. After failing to secure these diplomatically, he began to try making threats, massing troops on the Ukrainian border and then granting formal recognition to the separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk on 21 February 2022. Putin then launched a full-scale invasion, an aggression which began with air and missile coverage of the separatists' movement on the ground to occupy the entire Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, before the Russian army stormed other parts of the country. It is not yet known how this military campaign will end.

In 2021, Russia adopted a new national security strategy representing “a shift in Russia's strategic priorities.” In its former strategy, adopted in 2015, a lengthy paragraph had been devoted to the problem of the relationship with NATO and Moscow's rejection of NATO's excessive military activity and expansion towards its borders. But it also highlighted Russian interest in dialogue with the EU

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1 Fiona Hill & Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), pp. 36 - 37.

2 Contrary to common belief, this was not the first time since the dissolution of the Soviet Union that Russia had intervened militarily in a former Soviet republic. In July 1992, former President Boris Yeltsin sent artillery to see off an attempt by the Moldovan army to suppress a pro-Russian separatist rebellion in Transnistria.

and “coordinating integration processes” in the former Soviet republics. The 2021 strategy reiterated the same reservations about NATO but withdrew any interest in dialogue with Brussels.<sup>3</sup>

Given this shift in strategic priorities, in December 2021 Russia made geo-strategic security demands, in a draft treaty that was handed over to a US diplomat in Moscow. The Russian government sought assurances that NATO would stop its eastern expansion, not build any new infrastructure (weapons systems and military bases) in former Soviet territory, terminate military equipment sales to Ukraine, and end the deployment of medium-range missiles in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

The draft treaty, explained in the context of Putin’s doctrinal paradigm, was a thinly veiled warning to the USA that there would be darker days ahead if it did not respond to a negotiated and acceptable settlement that would alleviate Russia’s strategic security concerns. The USA rejected these demands. On 22 February, the day after Putin’s speech recognizing the independence of the separatists, US President Joe Biden characterised them as “extreme”. But many would disagree; these demands were, first, negotiable, and second, perfectly reasonable to expect from any state that considered itself a superpower, rejecting the activity of military alliances of which it was not a member on its borders. Third, these demands remained less extreme than the option of war. There was also an opportunity to negotiate the implementation of the UN-endorsed Minsk agreements.

Foreign policy positions are not scientific. They are not governed by acceptability, and many things seem rational when adopted by one camp and irrational when adopted by a rival party. Structuralist, institutionalist and functionalist analyses of the decision-making process alone are no longer sufficient to explain what is happening (indeed, they have repeatedly failed to predict past events and even to explain them after they have happened). There is no need to shy away from the role played by leaders themselves and the ways in which their readings of events are shaped by their ideas, experiences and worldviews – the significance of what one school of thought originating in the 1970s calls “belief systems” and “operational codes” in decision-making.<sup>5</sup> For example, we cannot understand the Syrian intervention in Lebanon under Hafez and then Bashar al-Assad (1976-2005), or Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait and the resultant ongoing catastrophe in Iraq, without taking this factor into account. Needless to say, this analysis is not sufficient alone, but it can complement structural and functional analysis and other theories such as political realism in international relations.

The Russian intervention in Syria, a country thousands of miles from its borders, and devoid of any threat to Russia, was far more “extreme” (in the sense used by Biden), but it was met with a tepid or very “moderate” US response. Former President Barack Obama had hoped that Russian involvement

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Buchanan, “Russia’s 2021 National Security Strategy: Cool Change Forecasted for the Polar Regions,” *Commentary*, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), 14/7/2021, accessed on 21/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3oYT0pq>. See: Russian Federation President V. Putin, *The Russian Federation’s National Security Strategy*, Edict no. 683 of 31 December 2015, accessed on 1/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/35BqMu4>; President V. Putin of the Russian Federation, *Strategy of National Security of the Russian Federation*, Decree no. 400 of 2 July 2021, accessed on 1/3/2022, at: <https://adobe.ly/35DwLOU>.

<sup>4</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “What Putin Really Wants in Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, 28/12/2021, accessed on 17/2/2022, at: <https://fam.ag/3H14m2l>.

<sup>5</sup> There are many theoretical and applied studies of this kind. The ACRPS has translated one of the most prominent reference books on the subject, David P. Houghton’s *Political Psychology: Situations, Individuals, and Cases*, Yasmine Haddad trans. (Doha / Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015).

in Syria would meet a similar fate as the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. But when the Russian intervention “succeeded” in Syria, it was suddenly very “rational”, even a “masterstroke” in the eyes of so-called commentators, or observers, and some “scholars” of international relations (Western and non-Western alike) who admire “successful leaders” even if their route to glory runs over the corpses of victims and through the ruins of countries.

Biden was obliged to stand up to Russia and its demands, not only because of the need to contain the power politics of the Russian president and stem the flow of Russian activity in East and West – including open support for right-wing populists and extensive cyber warfare, which has often targeted the Democrats in US elections – but because of domestic pressures and US polarization. Any concessions to Russia would meet with opposition in Congress, where Biden holds only a slim majority. Conversely, neither the Democrats nor the Republicans, who are engaged in constant one-upmanship on the issue, nor the general public, supports US military involvement in Eastern Europe. Therefore, Biden escalated against Russia diplomatically, without actively engaging in any hostilities.

The narrow room for manoeuvre between firm policies on the one hand, and non-intervention on the other, allowed for a continuous escalation of words that was manifested firmly in statements rather than action, and the threat of unprecedented sanctions on Russia if it invaded. Biden has previously defined any Russian military activity inside Ukrainian territory as an invasion. But he backtracked on this definition when the so-called Russian “peacekeeping forces” entered the breakaway republics of eastern Ukraine. He imposed only limited sanctions, keeping some in reserve as a deterrent to stop the Russian president from continuing his approach to war. Had all the sanctions been imposed at once, Putin would have had nothing to lose. Eventually, Europe and the US imposed an unprecedented package of sanctions.

But Putin’s calculations appear to be at odds with Biden’s. He believes that losing Ukraine to NATO is more harmful in the long run to national security than sanctions that will hurt the Russian economy, which he expects will gradually be relaxed and eventually be lifted. In addition, great damage will be caused to the energy market from the loss of natural gas and oil exported by Russia and it is difficult for many countries to do without with Russian and Ukrainian wheat, especially in light of high bread prices following damage to commodity supply chains as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This unrelenting US position can also be attributed to the fact that Biden’s election campaign repeatedly accused former president Donald Trump of courting authoritarian regimes, Putin’s in particular, and of weakening alliances with democratic countries and trying to dismantle NATO. Biden inherited deteriorating ties with allies perplexed by the Trump administration’s behaviour and a sense of distrust between Europe and the United States. Russian threats provided an opportunity to reunite NATO and give it an important injection of political adrenaline, an opportunity Biden was not going to miss. Even countries that sympathise with some of Russia’s demands, do not share the USA’s interests there, are keen on peace and stability in Eastern Europe, and see no need for Ukraine to join NATO – Germany, for example – aligned themselves with the United States. The firm European reaction against Russian aggression also expressed accumulated indignation against Russia’s extortions and power politics.



While Russia has steadily expanded the scope of its demands, Moscow cannot ignore the gradually escalating sanctions and their impact on the Russian economy. It is clear that Putin is looking for ways to secure his goals without a complete occupation of Ukraine. At first glance, Russia appears to have an advantage over the USA in four ways: First, it has seized the initiative, acting offensively, while NATO is left to respond reactively. Second, it has geographical proximity to Ukraine. Third, there is an absence of any real democratic party opposition which might confront his policies domestically. In stark contrast, Western countries have to take into account an active opposition and dynamic interactive public opinion. One of the “masterstrokes” of any dictatorship is its suppression of pluralism and domestic public opinion and its “savvy” exploitation of democratic pluralism in other countries. Fourth, and most importantly, Russia is well prepared for armed involvement in Ukraine, while NATO has explicitly declared that it does not want to interfere, and that it is only committed to defending its members. While NATO refuses to make concessions to Russia or recognise its security concerns and has placed major preconditions on talks, it is also unwilling to defend Ukraine. Consequently, Ukraine will pay the price.

Contrary to US enthusiasm in 2008, Washington currently has no intention of welcoming Ukraine into NATO. At the beginning of December 2021, US State Department employees told their Ukrainian colleagues that it was not likely that Ukraine would become a NATO member within the next decade.<sup>6</sup> This explains President Zelenskyy’s indignant comments at the Security Council meeting in Munich on 19 February 2022, where he rejected the idea of sanctions after the invasion and demanded practical steps towards Ukrainian membership, accusing the USA of being all bark and no bite. But he is the same president who came to power after an electoral campaign emphasizing the need for peace and dialogue with Moscow – the same president who escalated in response to, perhaps even mirroring, nationalist trends in public opinion. It is still common in Ukraine’s ill-established democracy for presidents to backpedal once in office. And this democracy appears to have abandoned its initially wise careful policies of state-nation building (not nation-state),<sup>7</sup> having been hijacked by an ascendant nationalist current that defines the Ukrainian nation by hostility to Russia, works on the “Ukrainianization” of anything not Ukrainian, promotes ethnic identity conflicts within the nation. There are countless Arab examples of these attempts to define the local national identity in opposition to (and not only distinction from) a neighbouring Arab country.

## 2. Contradictory Perceptions of Security

Some American professors of international relations have understood Russia’s dismissive attitude toward centralization of military-political alliances on its borders along the same take as Boston

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<sup>6</sup> Trenin.

<sup>7</sup> Alfred Stepan, Juan Linz & Yogendra Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations: India and Other Multinational Democracies*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011). See chapter 6 titled: Ukraine: State-Nation Policies in a Unitary State.

University professor Joshua Shiffrin, who said: “Imagine China formed an alliance with Canada. Strong states don’t want to see other powers forming an alliance along their borders.”<sup>8</sup> Several times, John Mearsheimer has passed responsibility to NATO for the resulting escalation with Russia by the insistence upon ignoring Russian warnings since 2008.<sup>9</sup> However, Mearsheimer himself was among the few in the United States at the time who opposed the nuclear disarmament of Ukraine in 1993,<sup>10</sup> the American condition for genuine recognition and economic support of Ukraine, on the basis that this demilitarization deprives it of the ability to defend itself against Russia. It appears that his approach of political realism led him to two contradictory views, though each of which is consistent with its respective circumstance. Perhaps defending Ukraine’s retention of nuclear weapons was sensible at the time within the wholly realist logic of international relations that ignores several other concerns (themselves realist as well, yet which the lens of the realist approach in international relations is not wide enough to consider) related to society and the system of governance in Ukraine, which was unqualified to command a nuclear arsenal amid the chaos of the early 1990s. Now, after having lost this capacity, Ukraine must not be drawn into a conflict with Russia, especially because NATO will not save it.

In his now famous July 2021 article on the Kremlin website, Putin remained insistent that there is no substitute for the Minsk agreements, as no one has withdrawn their signature nor suggested a review of the 17 February 2015 United Nations Security Council resolution.<sup>11</sup> However, he threw out the agreement that, in his view, had not been duly executed when he recognised the sovereignty of the two separatist republics on 21 February 2022. It remains to be seen whether he will follow that with direct military intervention. Yet, by Russia’s logic, which has become familiar from Syria and elsewhere, intervention becomes justified when sovereign states recognised by Moscow call for it.

The Minsk II agreement,<sup>12</sup> less than 900 words long and which appears to *The Economist* to have been written hastily<sup>13</sup> to achieve consensus at any cost, specified that separatist provinces must receive special status, though it did not clarify what that status is. It did not define the provinces’ borders, as the conduction of elections requires, without designating the enfranchised. Perhaps the European states that sponsored the Minsk II agreement could have applied pressure on the Ukrainian government to accept self-administration for the separatist regions in the Donbas oblast, with its

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8 Dan Sabbagh, “Ukraine crisis: How Putin feeds off anger over NATO’s eastward expansion,” *The Guardian*, 27/12/2021, accessed on 17/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3JF7EtR>

9 See his article: John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014), pp. 77-84, 85-89, accessed on 26/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/33TOnYa>; see also: Benjamin Wallace-Wells, “The New Doves on Ukraine: Could the U.S. prevent a war by giving up on NATO expansion?” *The New Yorker*, 11/2/2022, accessed on 26/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Ho4dGu>

10 Paul D’Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 51.

11 Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” The Kremlin, 12/7/2021, accessed on 21/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3v2t2oK>

12 The result of negotiation between Russia, Ukraine, and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe to cease hostilities in Ukraine in 2014. In Minsk, Putin and former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko reached an agreement signed by all three parties to the negotiation as well as representatives of Donetsk and Luhansk without official recognition. Both French president François Hollande and German chancellor Angela Merkel sponsored it, and thirteen steps were established to end to war including an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of all heavy armaments to construct a “security zone.” Nevertheless, the fighting continued along the line of contact.

13 “Minsky moment,” *The Economist*, 12/2/2022, p. 10.



citizen residents retaining equal rights in Ukraine, and submitting its fate to fair elections in which émigrés would participate, were, for instance, Russia to accept independence for Kosovo. Both Kosovo and Donbas held referendums that returned overwhelming majorities supporting independence. Both declared independence. The US recognized Kosovo, although Russia and Serbia have not, while Donbas was dismissed by the US and Western states and its people labelled as separatists and Russia-backed guerrillas. According to researchers Thomas Graham and Rajan Menon, everyone knows, as does Russia, that Kosovo will remain independent. Why, then, do they not consent to the right of the Russian majority in these regions to determine their fate?<sup>14</sup>

It is the West's same logic of supporting separationist movements in the Balkans that Moscow has opposed, although it is not that Putin is unwavering in opposition to secession as much as he is concerned with reciprocity. One of Putin's most important principles in international relations is reciprocity between great powers, irrespective of the character of the regimes involved. For him, international relations are not a matter of principles, despite his ongoing emphasis on sovereignty as a principle while violating the sovereignty of a United Nations member state. As for pure international relations, there were no principles in Germany's behaviour that encouraged Croatia to seek independence, followed by a series of secessionist wars, nor in former American president Bill Clinton's behaviour in the Balkans when Russia was at its weakest, nor in the invasion of Iraq, and there are no principles in Putin's political realism. Thus, it is also notable that those who view events based on their evaluation of, and attitude toward, the current system of governance in each state adopt entirely different positions from those who see through the lens of political realism in international relations.

It is no coincidence that Putin invoked Western support for the collapse of Yugoslavia in justifying the annexation of Crimea.<sup>15</sup> NATO's 1999 shelling of Serbia represented an influential variable in the transition from the Yeltsin phase into the Putin phase, as it appeared that the West harboured "uncharitable" intentions toward Russia as Russia. When he decided to attack Ukraine, he was undeterred by Russia's adoption of the 1999 Organization for Security and Co-operation charter in Istanbul that he came to deride, article 8-II of which guarantees the right of sovereign states to choose the security arrangements they deem necessary for their protection, including their alliances.<sup>16</sup>

Putin's true concerns emerge not from the two republics that have been declared in the Donbas oblast in eastern Ukraine, but rather from the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO. Thus, the step of their recognition was merely part of and not the main objective in this conflict, for which he has already expressed his willingness to undergo sanctions. His ultimate goal is rather to reach new security arrangements in which Russia's status as the great power with an area of vital interest is recognised. The recognition of the separatists does not constitute even the first step toward these new

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Graham and Rajan Menon, "How to Get What We Want from Putin," *Politico*, 10/1/2022, accessed on 17/2/2022, at: <https://politi.co/3s3AKNu>

<sup>15</sup> D'Anieri, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> "Istanbul Document 1999," Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), November 1999, accessed on 26/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3snabDd>

arrangements; most importantly it is a guarantee that Ukraine will remain outside of NATO, either through a US pledge or Russia's self-reliance in disallowing that if such a pledge does not materialise.

During his presidency, Putin has witnessed four waves of eastward NATO expansion (out of five since the collapse of the Soviet Union) as well as US withdrawal from treaties regulating the possession and stationing of ballistic missiles, intermediate-range nuclear weapons, and unarmed air power used for surveillance under Trump.<sup>17</sup> Washington withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019 due to frequent Russian breaches, as was said at the time, but this was not the only reason; rather, it was also because it sought to station missiles in Asia in response to China rapidly doing the same.<sup>18</sup> No matter the reason, Russia was nonetheless displeased by the abrogation of the treaty. The United States will undoubtedly see the necessity of addressing the matter of Russian breaches of any forthcoming agreement, yet it will also be forced to review the extent to which it needs to station intermediate-range missiles in Romania or elsewhere. At least in the short term, it appears that the Russian aggression against Ukraine had limited the possibility of undertaking such a review.

Trump benefitted from Russian meddling in the US elections via the social media misinformation campaigns and cybercrime, in which Russia is proficient, and strengthened Putin's position on the international stage by trying to win his favour. In addition, he was unafraid of Putin's sympathy for antiliberal power politics or support for the same right-wing populist movements in Europe that nurse the same conservative hostility to liberalism. Meanwhile, Trump heightened tensions in Europe and took steps that sparked apprehension in Russia and Europe, distrust of the United States' commitment to the treaties and agreements and justified increased Russian militarisation. He moved to withdraw his forces from Europe and echoed his intention to decrease the United States' commitment to European security. This was highly contradictory behaviour.

Biden, however, is consistent in his reproach of Russia, announcing his intention to challenge Putin, whom he branded a "killer," and abrogating the decision to withdraw American forces from Europe. Putin realised the Biden administration's disdain for him. The psychological factor embodied in the frustration caused by unacceptability, non-recognition, and the disappointment and anger resulting from this feeling, among those with a strong sense of esteem for self and country, must not be overlooked here. He further realised that the administration would work to weaken and limit his attempts to exploit pluralism and the freedom he considers democratic states' point of weakness, with the goal of feeding social polarisation. An American strategic bomber flew around the Black Sea region 13 miles from the Russian border in November 2021, greatly angering Putin according to Carnegie Moscow Centre director Dmitri Trenin. With the Ukrainian president's announcement of his desire to join NATO and Russian suspicion that a training centre operated by Britain in Ukraine was

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<sup>17</sup> On 1 February 2019, the Trump administration announced the suspension of its commitments to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty concluded in 1987 with Russia, which prohibits both parties from placing short- or intermediate-range missiles launched from land bases in Europe with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km, limiting their capability to dispatch preemptive nuclear strikes. In June 2020, Trump announced his intention to reduce the number of American troops in Germany by withdrawing 12,000 soldiers out of an original 34,500. However, Biden decided to freeze the withdrawal of these forces after assuming the presidency in early 2021. See: "Washintun Tu'lin Rasmiyyan Ta'laq Iltizmiha bi-Mu'ahadat al-Quwa an-Nawawiyya al-Mutawassita," BBC Arabic, 1/2/2019, accessed 20/2/2022 at: <https://bbc.in/3LOCqSO>.

<sup>18</sup> Graham and Menon.



in fact a military base, tension mounted and military experts and trainers, in addition to weapons and munitions, were sent to Ukraine. Putin was resolute that Russia cannot tolerate the presence of American missiles in Ukraine capable of reaching Moscow in five to seven minutes.<sup>19</sup> The tension began in the second half of 2021, meaning that there was sufficient time for diplomacy, negotiations, and reaching compromises.

Western think tanks have already taken up at length Russian national security strategies that, by a decision of Putin's, have had the force of law since January 2000. The writing was on the wall, and there is nothing surprising about Russia's behaviour toward NATO and Ukraine. The official Russian national security strategy of 2021 corresponded with the 2015 strategy in stressing Russia's international power, mutual interest-based partnerships with other states, and noncompliance with alliances, military or otherwise. Yet in 2021, it reiterated this emphasis on partnerships with China and India and left out the matter of the partnerships with the United States and the European Union that it encouraged in 2015. The 2021 strategy also reproaches the United States for abandoning its international obligations related to nuclear arms control and missiles and calls for effort to be made to limit dependence on the American dollar in economic activities.<sup>20</sup> This last point emphasised by the Russian positions was organically connected to the rejection of US unipolarity in the post-Cold War world.

The 2015 strategy designated an entire paragraph to relations with NATO, rejecting the presence of this alliance's military equipment and preparations along the Russian border, and expressed Moscow's desire to work on developing relations with NATO. Although the 2021 strategy again condemned the presence of NATO ordnance near the border, it expresses neither an urge to enter dialogue with it nor, contrary to the previous strategy, a need for Russian plans for relations with the European Union. There is clear disillusion with the flagging of relations since the 2015 strategy.<sup>21</sup>

In both strategies, Russia stresses its commitment to the United Nations as an institution and to the Security Council, unsurprising given its veto power as no resolution may be passed without its assent. Russia has used this right, a hindrance to international law, several times to thwart international resolutions on Syria, content to justify its intervention legally by the so-called *de jure* government's authorisation and morally by invoking the "War on Terror."

Putin and his media networks reiterate that his objective is not to occupy Ukraine and annex it to Russia, but to change the post-Cold War system in Europe: the one which removed Russia from participating in Europe-related decision making. If he succeeds in keeping Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova out of NATO and intermediate-range missiles out of eastern Europe, he believes that in doing so he will remedy part of the damages Russia has incurred since the Cold War. According to Trenin, Ukraine has become "the last bastion"<sup>22</sup> against the expansion of NATO, and he began to equate the alliance's expansion to the spread of democracy.

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<sup>19</sup> Trenin.

<sup>20</sup> Buchanan.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Trenin.

Russia found temporary allies in challenging this process such as China, which does not always agree with Putin's methods because it still avoids straining relations with the West as well as armed conflicts (at least for now), given that its strength relies on its economy that is still based on global free trade at its core, and states like Iran, Venezuela, and right-wing populist circles in the West who have to recalculate their positions after the Russian invasion. This is not to mention undemocratic leftist circles in the West and the East. They are unmoved by all that relates to human rights and freedoms and suffer from political isolation, as they equate imperialism exclusively to the United States alone and deem everything it does imperialist and everything against it as counter-imperialist. Moreover, there are some communists who have yet to be emancipated from Russia's connection to the Soviet Union despite that Russia now leads the right-wing camp (as it were) worldwide and is back to playing the role of "the bastion of reactionism in Europe," as Marx once called it. Yet the undemocratic left at this stage is essentially all talk, which may be annoying but is marginal and uninfluential.

Trenin argues that Putin has been risk-averse in all that relates to the use of force and proves that with the latter's intervention in Chechnya, Crimea, and Syria. Clearly, the significance of realism or rationalism (which may be correctly regarded as the antithesis of risk-taking or adventurism in this case), to the directors of political analysis centres, is synonymous with pragmatism: the end justifies the means, which, with an alteration to the Machiavellian expression, becomes: the end justifies the means, but only when it has truly been realised. Those who fail to achieve their political objectives after the use of bombing, invasion, and destruction of cities from above are considered adventurers, not realists. In this case, their ends do not justify their means. Adventurers are those who fail to achieve their goals and are held accountable for their criminal "means."

Before Putin recognised the two secessionist republics in Donbas, he held a public session of the National Security Council that was broadcast on television channels, in which he asked its members to express their opinions on this step. In fact, the decision had already been made, as also appeared in his investigative behaviour toward some of the speakers, as if interrogating them about their views. Why did he put on this performance? It is well-known of Putin and other leaders of his calibre that he attaches importance to theatricality in ceremonies, rituals, and spectacles, clear from his swim below the ice to his Russian judo matches, his great show of personally extinguishing the Moscow forest fires, and other displays.

But this wasn't just a ceremony; the National Security Council "performance" stems from three reasons in my opinion. First, to show the world that he is not an excitable adventurer who invades on a whim. He is not comparable to Saddam Hussein who occupied Kuwait; he is a rational man who takes counsel and weighs up his options before moving forward in steps of this kind. Second, to demonstrate that the elite of the system of governance are united in their stance on Ukraine. Third, so that it would appear to the Russian people that there is dialogue within the Russian leadership on issues such as this, and that responsibility is collective, not individual.



The personal factor in the case of the sole decision-maker in authoritarian states is not the only factor in political behaviour, and at times it is not even the most important, though it is always significant and, under certain conditions, could supersede other factors in regimes where the leader performs a pivotal role. Putin is a leader who believes in power politics and that force, when used correctly, can change political situations, and create realities on the ground that cannot be ignored.

### 3. Putin's Complex and His Doctrine

Putin's doctrine in this context is geostrategic, unrelated to choices by the leaders of states in Russia's vital area or their ideological inclinations. He would never invade Ukraine just because its current leaders have strange whims. Putin intervened in Ukraine for geostrategic purposes, related to his understanding of Russia's security as a superpower with an area of vital interest and spheres of influence, and which do not accept military alliances along its borders. It seeks to impose its prestige and respect for its interests as a great power upon those who do not desire its friendship. Elections and partisan plurality do not concern Putin greatly in the former Soviet republics which he is intent on not joining NATO, as these are, to him, trifles that can be accepted as long as the regime's elites are designated and not easily changed; that their attitudes toward Russia are fixed and clear; and that the transfer of power is formal, if permitted in the first place. He is not concerned with the inclinations of the former Soviet republics that did not join NATO, so long as they recognise Russia as "the eldest sister." Rather, he is concerned with settling the issue of its lack of alliance with the West and non-adoption of liberal values (we will return to his hostility toward liberal values and indifference for human rights later). When these matters are settled, I do not believe it will concern him who wins in the elections, who loses, or their views.

In his address before the 2007 Munich Security Conference, in which it appears he surprised Western public opinion, Putin expressed his view on the new world order and security in Europe, emphasising the consequences of the development of a unipolarity in the wake of the Cold War. Notwithstanding that one state's leadership of the world, especially matters of security, is a dangerous, "undemocratic," it, and unacceptable matter, the notion also failed in practise. Attempts to impose it on the world have led to more wars and casualties than the bipolar system, in addition to the fact that nobody would approve of one state imposing economic, cultural, political, and even educational policies upon other nations.<sup>23</sup>

When answering questions, Putin referred to the intervention in Iraq. In my opinion, the courage he expressed in his speech against NATO's eastward expansion in Europe came not just from going beyond the 1990s stage internally and achieving independence in Russia by overcoming the economic and political oligarchs (or subordinating them to him and eliminating their political influence), fighting crime, and recovering the state's role in building the economy and the army,

<sup>23</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," The Kremlin, 10/2/2007, accessed on 22/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/36xXQUh>

benefitting from the great rise in oil prices that followed the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. Rather, it came also from impressions of the war on Iraq, the United States' involvement therein, and the catastrophic results of the war which emerged between 2006 and 2007. Regarding military intervention in other countries and whether the international system could have stood by watching the crimes that authoritarian regimes commit against their peoples, Putin stressed that the transition from authoritarianism to democracy must be peaceful "as happened in Russia," in his words. Military intervention, on the other hand, is only possible with the consent of the United Nations, especially, of course, the Security Council<sup>24</sup> where Russia maintains veto power. He is doing exactly the opposite in Ukraine, where he declares his willingness to change the rulers of Ukraine by direct military intervention if they insist to reject his dictates.

The problem in an ex-Soviet country begins, in Putin's view with the victory of a political movement or candidate in the elections who embraces the issue of forming an alliance with the West by joining NATO or the European Union, or adopts liberal values and begins defending human rights, citizens' rights, freedoms, and so on, which Putin deems Western values. This is besides the fact that he did not miss the opportunity to publicly diagnose the liberal regimes as being in crisis.<sup>25</sup>

It is the Putin narrative on the colour revolutions forged by the West that they were part of the imposition of global values whose internal parameters he has not seen. He had only seen the story of "open society" exported by Western countries. As a seasoned intelligence officer, for whom everything is the object of suspicion, Putin viewed the historical events related to these revolutions as conspiracies.

For this reason, Putin was clear in the Millennium Manifesto: yes to deep reforms, but without radical liberal aims (he considers liberal democracy a radical aim) or classical communism. Anti-radicalism is customary for Putin, but it relates to hostility to social change in the wake of what he calls the coloured revolutions, as well as to the unlikelihood of a repetition of the NATO intervention in Serbia under the pretext of saving an ethnic group in Russia which, in the 1990s, was facing a great ethnic and political chaos, whose tragic stage was established by the Chechnyan matter.

For Putin, human rights are limited to a person's right to safety and stability. He does not explicitly say this, but he justifies suppressing other rights with the preservation of this one. He regards liberalism as a system to be essentially a Western culture, the global aspects of which can be accepted such as the principle of freedom (this is theoretical acceptance that means nothing without freedoms or civil liberties), but not those aspects which conflict with traditional Russian values. In this context, he creates a sort of clash of civilisations between the values of conservative Russia and the liberal West, not because he believes (or does not believe) in this kind of clash, but because he has a structural interest in constructing a civilisational separation wall embodied by subjective immunity, national pride, and the vow that "Russian traditions," currently being restructured, are an inseparable part of Russian national security. This is the concept of Russian thought in the Millennium Manifesto.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, his extended interview in 2019 with *Financial Times*: Lionel Barber and Henry Foy, "Vladimir Putin: The Full Interview," *Financial Times*, 27/6/2019, accessed on 22/2/2022, at: <https://on.ft.com/2niiH7k>; Full Script: "Interview with The Financial Times" The Kremlin, accessed on 22/2/2022, at: <http://bit.ly/2lfbVKe>



This wall is necessary to prevent the “importation” of values that threaten the authoritarian regime he has sculpted using, in establishing himself as a populist, the concepts of identity and authenticity: Russian at times; cross-border Slavic when it suits him; and, recently, Eurasian when discussing ties with the republics of Central Asia, the Anatolian Plateau, and elsewhere.

They are the three essential, dominant trends in the Russian ruling institution and the circles of intellectuals and thinkers surrounding it, after the decline of the liberal trend’s influence upon the ruling elite’s circles at the end of the Boris Yeltsin phase and its shift into the opposition during the Putin phase which witnesses the interaction of these three trends. The first tends to stress Russia’s representation of Russian identity (and Russian history since the era of the Tsars and the Orthodox Church), including the identity of Russian minorities outside Russia, and maintaining Russia’s grandeur: as some of them say, grandeur is Russia’s fate. Another trend stresses the Slavic ethnicity by characterising the Slavic countries as Russia’s vital area, to say nothing of the cultural similarity. This tone has elevated during the Russo-American conflict when Russia opposed the United States’ shelling of Serbia.

There is an intellectual political trend lacking popular roots that emphasises a Eurasian domain whose centre is Russia. These trends intersect in their prioritisation of Russian national security, the role of the great power, and distinction from the West. Political thought in the field of international relations with Russia is very interested in Aleksandr Dugin, whom some regard as “Putin’s Brain.”<sup>26</sup> However, this is simply an exaggeration; Putin has selectively included Eurasianism in his doctrinal layout only in 2014. He integrated it as a supplement, not a determinant, because he realises precisely that it is a ruptures, elusive field, but there is no harm in his using it, of course to a lesser degree than his use of the Russian origins of the three peoples (Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine), the Orthodox Church’s being a repository of Russian values, or his drawing of inspiration from conservative Russian thinkers in exile under the anti-liberal Soviet Union.

With appreciation for researchers’ pursuit of the intellectual influences upon Putin, such as Aleksandr Dugin on the Eurasia matter or his predecessor Ivan Ilyin, influenced by German philosophy and Carl Schmitt,<sup>27</sup> whom it happens that Dugin has translated, I do not believe that Putin, through the approach of analysing the political doctrine of decision-makers which, as I have previously indicated, belongs to any of these schools of thought. I do observe his general inclination toward conservative Russian thought and the Russian nationalist trend within the conception of the “Russian idea” he elaborated in his July 2021 article — all of which he has, in fact, invoked according to when it serves his point.

There is no doubt that, in his confirmation of the state’s power (and even of states against liberalism in general), he offers a living model of the theories of Carl Schmitt and others, whether he has read them (despite pro-Putin propaganda spreading that he is an avid reader); it is likely that he has not

<sup>26</sup> Anton Barbashin & Hannah Thoburn, “Putin’s Brain: Alexander Dugin and the Philosophy Behind Putin’s Invasion of Crimea,” *Foreign Affairs*, 31/3/2014, accessed on 1/3/2022, at: <https://fam.ag/35oObiu>.

<sup>27</sup> David G. Lewis, *Russia’s New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). See in particular the chapter on Carl Schmitt and the Russian conservative trend, pp. 24 - 48.

done so. When working to boost morale against the liberal West, he turns at times to the pretext of Russian values disagreeing with liberalism, and at others to a Eurasian alliance across societies and cultures united in their repulsion to liberalism and the west, as he broadly envisions it.

I do not believe that dictators read Carl Schmit or Robert Michels or Vilfredo Pareto, nor that politicians in general read Niccolò Machiavelli. There is an exaggeration of the extent to which intellectuals influence the thought of politicians, especially non-partisan ones who do not belong to an ideological party. Even party activists often read intellectuals who explain the ideas of theorists and thinkers, and it is these intellectuals who produce the cultural environment and political mood that shapes those activists. Putin was a loyal Soviet intelligence officer from the Communist Party, who rose very quickly to power in the 1990s. As a KGB officer, he undoubtedly witnessed the disintegration of the East German state without a single shot being fired. He experienced the traumatic collapse of the Soviet Union and the social chaos that followed it, the overnight disappearance of services provided to a society that was completely dependent on the state, the lack of security and the horrific spread of crime, the disintegration of the family and the spread of prostitution so prolific that it became an export. Many plagues that were quietly endemic to society under the communist regime came out into the open once the state weakened.

That shock taught Putin to stress the power and role of the state and to view liberalism as an enemy of the state. He searched for ways to advance the cohesion of state and society, finding the most effective replacement for communist ideology to be Russian nationalism and the orthodox church. He began to imagine Tsarist Russia as a centralised national state. Perhaps he searched for ideological justification for these ideas and found writings that did so, writings that helped him organize his ideas and formulate a political discourse. This is how Putin's ideas took shape, in my opinion, not the other way around. He may have found Russian nationalism to be more deeply rooted, more authentic, and more dependent on the role of the state than other currents. He later developed his position to accuse the communists of responsibility for the national issue that Russia is currently facing in Ukraine and elsewhere. Liberalism, on the other hand, is, for him, the enemy of a strong state, and is suitable for the West only because of its historical roots and its compatibility with the prevailing culture there. But he has several times expressed his understanding of, and even solidarity with, right-wing populist anti-liberal movements in Western countries.<sup>28</sup>

The key to understanding Putin lies in his emphasis on state-building and willingness to invoke anything that might serve that end; his belief in the supremacy of the state at home and power politics abroad. He has spoken a great deal about restoring the "spirit" of Russia, including its culture, traditions, and imperial grandeur – in one sense, the same Russia that Marxists, especially Vladimir Lenin, considered the bastion of reactionism in Europe. It is no coincidence that the national security strategies of 2015 and 2021 stress Russian identity and traditions, and the need to preserve them in the face of Westernization and moral decay. The incorporation of culture and identity within the national security strategy is a clear expression of the securitization of these areas in the context of

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28 The interview itself is seen in: Barber and Foy.





an attempt to pit Russia against the West in everything that concerns culture and values, taking a conservative approach to preserving a fixed core of Russian identity and Russian culture.<sup>29</sup>

The authors of a hawkish report for the Center for Strategic and International Studies have written that the West's tolerance of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the organization of an insurgency in eastern Ukraine encouraged Russian leaders to continue this policy and that Russia's annexation of large parts of Ukraine will increase its human, industrial and natural resources to the extent that it may pose a global threat, an outcome that must be prevented.<sup>30</sup> For Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia must not be allowed to join NATO or any other military alliance or economic union except those controlled by Russia. The essence of the dispute, according to the authors, is whether the former ethnic republics of the Soviet Union are able to exist as independent and sovereign states, or whether they must submit to their masters in Moscow. They ignore the Russian view, stemming from the lack of Western, especially US, recognition of Russia's security concerns and role.

The writers base their argument on Putin's well-known 2021 article, which they claim is now mandatory reading for Russian soldiers.<sup>31</sup> They claim that he considered Ukraine to be part of Russia and maintained that Kyiv should return to the "Russian fold."<sup>32</sup> In fact, he mentioned Little Russia, Belarus and Greater Russia in the context of the Russian ethno-historical past, maintaining that Ukraine was historically considered Little Russia, based on their common language, culture, and religion. But Putin also admitted that the world is changing and recognized existing states and peoples' right to self-determination and statehood, while questioning how it can be achieved. He rejected the existence of an anti-Russian Ukraine, not an independent Ukraine *per se*.

Putin officially characterises authentic Slavic unity as one people in three countries. But in his article, he commits several historical inaccuracies – not because he considered the Russians, the Ukrainians, and the Belarusians to be the descendants of the people of Ancient Rus in an origin myth, but because he projected terms like "state" and "nationalism" on that history (which goes back a thousand years).<sup>33</sup> The USSR was founded in 1922 and its constitution proclaimed in 1924. Putin personally accuses Lenin of having planted a "historical time bomb" by laying, at least in theory, a legal basis for secession, in addition to their experiments with carving out parts of Russia and giving them to other republics, and not taking into account national commonalities in the establishment of republics. The Bolsheviks were not nationalists, and they were not interested in such matters, but rather sought to conduct experiments in the dissolution and fusion of nationalities. He considers this one of their most important mistakes, perhaps even a crime.

29 Buchanan.

30 Philip G. Wasielewski & Seth G. Jones, "Russia's Possible Invasion of Ukraine," *CSIS Briefs*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, January 2022, p. 2, accessed on 17/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3s4GiHN>

31 Wasielewski and Jones, p. 2; See: Dmitry Medvedev, "Why Contacts with the Current Ukrainian Leadership are Meaningless," [Russian], *Kommersant*, 11/10/2021, accessed on 21/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/316QRzD>.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 1; See: Vladimir Putin, "Annual News Conference," The Kremlin, 23/12/2021, accessed on 21/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3h226gJ>; Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians."

33 Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians."

Putin considers Ukraine, within its current borders, to be a product of the Soviet era. He reiterated this in his speech on 21 February 2022, in which he announced the recognition of the two separatist republics. According to his article, a brief look at the map of seventeenth century Russia is enough to show that the territory of present-day Ukraine was part of it. But the Bolsheviks, according to Putin, treated Russia as a laboratory for social experiments, dreamed of eliminating national differences by maximizing the growth of the proletariat in Ukraine, and were overly generous in drawing borders and offering up Russia's lands – especially Nikita Khrushchev who donated the Russian Crimea to Ukraine. But in that period, the republics of the Soviet Union were not seen as states, but as part of the single Soviet state, led by the Communist Party. These countries found themselves “taken away [...] from their historical motherland” in 1991. “What can be said to this? Things change: countries and communities are no exception,” Putin wrote. “Of course, some part of a people in the process of its development, influenced by a number of reasons and historical circumstances, can become aware of itself as a separate nation at a certain moment. How should we treat that? There is only one answer: with respect! You want to establish a state of your own: you are welcome! But what are the terms?”<sup>34</sup>

Putin goes on to argue that the new rulers of Ukraine are seeking to write a history of Ukraine that is not only separate from Russia but also hostile to it, a history that deals with their common existence, whether in Tsarist Russia or in the USSR, as Russian occupation. It does not matter, in his opinion, how people define themselves as long as they are part of the same nationality (which is for him an ethnic nationality), if they are Russians, Ukrainians, or Belarusians. This is not important. But in Ukraine, there is a forced change of nationality, as Ukrainians and Russians are told to deny their roots and believe that Russia is their enemy.

In fact, the Russian nationalist reconstitution of the state and the rewriting of history as a history of nationalities is no less coercive than what it claims is taking place in Ukraine. It is clear that this nationalism is based on ethnic identity and not state affiliation. This is a common pattern in Eastern European countries, including Ukraine. All Eastern European states are at best ethnic democracies, and, in other cases, ethnocracies, since the state expresses the right to self-determination for a particular ethnic group, which produces not only *numerical* ethnic minorities but also *political* ones.

According to Putin, if the current rulers of Ukraine want to learn from the Western experience, they should look at Austria and Germany on the one hand, and Canada and the United States on the other: “Close in ethnic composition, culture, in fact sharing one language, they remain sovereign states with their own interests, with their own foreign policy. But this does not prevent them from the closest integration or allied relations. They have very conditional, transparent borders. And when crossing them the citizens feel at home. They create families, study, work, do business.”<sup>35</sup> Putin insists that the Ukrainian leadership must also learn from their own experience, invoking the historical

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34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.



consequences of Ukrainian submission to Germany, in a warning about the dangers of falling into the trap of dependency on foreigners. He does not accept that Ukraine sees Russia as just as much of a foreign country as Germany. His real complex is that he is both an imperialist (seeking an empire) and a Russian nationalist at the same time. There is a structural and cultural contradiction between nationalism and empire, as the latter does not accept the imposition of a specific nationality for its culture. such impositions usually marked the end of empire.

The fact remains that Putin thinks in terms of the purely classical realist school of power politics and balance of power, but his pragmatism allows him to go beyond that when meeting some of his strategic security requirements. Putin did not become an enemy of the West overnight. Rather, the West forced him to walk this bumpy road, after he had emphasized the importance of international cooperation (including with NATO), economic reform and creating an environment attractive to investments in both the Millennium Message and the “2000 Russian National Security Concept.” While it is true that he expressed very conservative views regarding the assertion of the “traditional Russian values” that should frame Russia’s representation of what Putin calls “universal values,” this assertion was primarily governed by the strategic issue of rebuilding the state and not anti-Western principles. Former US President George W. Bush even described him as “straightforward and trustworthy.”<sup>36</sup> There is no reason to doubt Putin’s belief in liberal economic reform, but he safeguarded this in light of the experience of the 1990s, maintaining the necessity of the state’s role in preserving national social cohesion. The more authoritarian his policies became, and the more he clung to rule and rejected democratic transfer of power, the more he emphasized the role of the state at home, including in the economy, and power politics abroad.

## 4. On NATO Expansion

Russia’s original precondition for German reunification was that the new country would not be part of NATO. The 1990 reunification treaty – the ‘Two Plus Four’ Agreement, signed by the FDR (West Germany) and the GDR (East Germany) as well as the four post-war occupying powers, France, the USSR, the UK and the USA – confirmed that only non-NATO German forces would be able to deploy to eastern Germany. It made no reference to German membership.<sup>37</sup>

Although it seems like an odd question today, it was once common to ask why NATO was not dissolved after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact. Why did it keep going in the absence of its counterpart? European and American leaders feared that its dissolution would mean an effective US withdrawal from Europe and a return to the pre-WW2 status quo, allowing a reunified Germany to resume its position as a central power, acquire nuclear weapons and threaten European security.

<sup>36</sup> Marcel H. van Herpen, *Putinism: The Slow Rise of a Radical Right Regime in Russia* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 1; Caroline Wyatt, “Bush and Putin: Best of friends,” *BBC*, 16/6/2001, accessed on 21/2/2022, at: <https://bbc.in/3vsYnRE>

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Masters, “Why NATO Has Become a Flash Point with Russia in Ukraine,” *Backgrounder*, Council on Foreign Relations, 20/1/2022, accessed on 17/2/2022, at: <https://on.cfr.org/3h23Ne5>

Some suggested that it should pivot to become an enforcer of international law and UN rulings – in Yugoslavia, for example. And that was what it ended up doing there, albeit very selectively. But it is impossible to believe that NATO's new purpose is to enforce compliance with international law taking into consideration the famous double standards syndrome. Non-member powers have seen its expansion as a threat to their influence.

In 2004, seven new members joined NATO. This was the largest expansion since the Cold War, with the additions including the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Four years later, at the Bucharest Conference of April 2008, NATO announced that it was planning to accept Ukraine and Georgia as members at some future point. This was a red line for Russia. Under Trump, however, NATO stagnated, and in many cases its members' bilateral relations took precedence over their obligations under the NATO charter – to the point that French President Emmanuel Macron described NATO as “brain dead”.

Russia was unable to counter US moves in the Balkans in the 1990s, and came to see that period as a great humiliation. When Georgia launched an assault on the separatist government in South Ossetia in 2008, it responded by intervening directly. This intervention was possible not only because of Russia's regime stabilizing itself and beginning to rebuild its military power. It was also facilitated by the depth of the US disaster in Iraq.

In 2017, Montenegro joined NATO. In 2020, it was followed by North Macedonia.<sup>38</sup> Obviously, neither Montenegro nor North Macedonia was as militarily prepared for membership as Ukraine. But Ukrainian (and Georgian) accession was delayed – not because of Ukraine's failure to meet the military requirements, but because NATO was concerned about the Russian response (although it did not admit this openly). Nonetheless, in 2020, Ukraine became one of six “enhanced opportunity partners” of the alliance, a privileged status that it shares with Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan and Sweden.

Weeks before the Bucharest Conference, Putin warned Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William J. Burns that no Russian leader would stand idly by as Ukraine joined NATO. But the NATO leadership went ahead with their plans, not only announcing that Ukraine would join the alliance but also inviting Albania and Croatia to become members, which they duly did in 2009.

Putin considered the invitation to Georgia and Ukraine a threat to Russia's security. The former NATO official Jamie Shea told Dan Sabbagh that Putin explicitly told Angela Merkel and Bush that for him, “Ukraine [was] not a real country”.<sup>39</sup> And despite US support for Ukrainian and Georgian membership, Germany and France prevented them from joining at Bucharest so as not to provoke Russia.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Sabbagh.

<sup>40</sup> D'Anieri, p. 23.



In a 2007 speech in Munich, Putin described NATO's eastward expansion as a "provocation" to Russia. He maintained that quite apart from the fact that in May 1990 the then Secretary General Manfred Wörner had promised Russia that this would not happen, he did not understand why NATO should expand in this direction. He echoed the American discourse that the real global threat was now terrorism, and that NATO and non-NATO countries alike should stand together against this threat.<sup>41</sup> Putin argued that NATO was a military defence organization and not an international institution and that its eastward expansion was not a neutral development but must be directed against someone. He blamed the West for dealing with Russia unilaterally as though it were an enemy.<sup>42</sup> "The West doesn't want to be our friend or our ally – but why does it want to be our enemy?"<sup>43</sup>

Putin has regularly tried to shift focus onto the war on terror as the main global threat facing humanity in an attempt to make an alliance in this war – and not similarity of political systems – the foundation of cooperation between Russia and the USA. During its 2015 intervention in Syria, Russia repeatedly claimed that its motivation was to fight terrorism (and not rescuing the Assad regime, playing the role of great power or securing its geostrategic interests) and that the West should accept this framing.

Putin's vision of international politics has no time for the West treating Russia as a Third World power by imposing sanctions (as happened after his annexation of Crimea). Sanctions are not imposed on great powers – the USA, after all, was not sanctioned for its war on Vietnam, Iraq or its invasion of Panama. He can accept nothing less than being treated as an equal. I believe that the refusal to do so that is implicit in sanctions will only encourage him to play this role unilaterally and by force, whether or not it is recognized by others. And while China's great economy means that it has no need for military force to take its place among the great powers, Russia has nothing but its military power.

During the 2022 crisis, Washington and the rest of the organization have refused to retract the promises made at the Bucharest Conference in 2008 and rule out Ukraine or Georgia joining NATO. They have also refused to confirm that no other country will join in future. At the same time, all NATO members maintain that neither Ukraine nor Georgia will be ready for membership any time soon, a pretext for delaying (while not rejecting) their accession indefinitely. Some commentators have suggested that an indefinite delay is a compromise that Russia will be willing to accept.<sup>44</sup> But this does not seem to be true. Russia no longer trusts delay. It seeks new agreements or treaties to regulate European security. There is a clear crisis of trust.

## 5. Winding Historical Roads

In a 1994 article in *Foreign Affairs*, the former US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski argued that a strong Ukraine had to be at the centre of post-Cold War policy in the region, writing

<sup>41</sup> Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy."

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> "Russian President Putin Statement on Ukraine," C-SPAN, 21/2/2022, accessed on 22/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3H2Q01y>; "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," The Kremlin, 26/2/2022, accessed on 22/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/35cwJxM>

<sup>44</sup> Graham and Menon.

that it “cannot be stressed enough that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire”.<sup>45</sup> Putin agrees with Brzezinski, albeit from an opposite perspective. As far as he is concerned, Russia’s greatness will always be limited without Belarus and Ukraine. During the 2000s, as Russia rebuilt itself, Ukraine was left behind – not because it had lost its nuclear weapons, but because of instability, its struggle to control the oligarchs who dominated the political system, and the difficult choice between the economic benefits of relations with Russia and a desire to escape its hegemony by allying itself with the West (including NATO and the EU, whose conditions for membership it genuinely does not meet).

Historically, the conflict over Ukraine, whose existence within its current borders Putin attributes to the USSR, began in the post-Soviet period. Ironically enough, in a speech given to the Ukrainian parliament in 1991, George Bush attempted to convince the Ukrainians not to secede from the USSR, warning them that the USA would not support those who sought to replace one dictatorship with another more local alternative.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, on 24 August – following the failed coup against Gorbachev in Moscow, which threw the limitations of Soviet reform into stark relief – Ukraine declared its independence. Those who feared the return of the old regime felt it would be better for Ukraine to follow its own path, or at the very least used this as a pretext. Although Yeltsin recognised its independence, the Communist and nationalist-controlled Duma did not.

After the initial period of rule by former Soviet functionaries, Russia attempted to maintain its influence over Ukraine, particularly after its favoured candidate Viktor Yanukovich was defeated in 2004 by supporters of the Orange Revolution. Coming only a year after the Rose Revolution – in which Russia’s favoured candidate in Georgia was likewise beaten by pro-revolutionary candidates – it was soon followed by a similar defeat for pro-Russian forces in Kyrgyzstan. In 2010, however, Yanukovich took advantage of the deteriorating economic situation and the failure of the Orange Revolution politicians to combat corruption to execute a political comeback.

Having reinvented himself as a supporter of European integration, Yanukovich won a narrow victory against his former minister Yulia Tymoshenko. He then had her arrested and imprisoned for seven years on corruption charges. Western condemnation of his actions then drove him back towards Russia. During the same period, Russia was pressuring Ukraine to join its newly established Eurasian Economic Union. On 21 November 2013, Yanukovich withdrew from talks concerning a possible partnership agreement with the EU. This was the trigger for the Euromaidan protests (2013-2014), which ultimately led to his ouster.

In response, Russia not only annexed Crimea but granted hundreds of thousands of passports to Russians in the east of the country, and helped arm a separatist force of an estimated 40,000 soldiers in the Donbas region, which it intervened directly to support.<sup>47</sup> The emphasis on the separatists was

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<sup>45</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, “The Premature Partnership,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 1994), accessed on 20/2/2022, at: <https://fam.ag/3LMEqej>

<sup>46</sup> D’Anieri, p. 31.

<sup>47</sup> “Minsky moment”, p. 10

no passing pretext – ethnic Russians became a central part of Russian security doctrine. The war in the east continued until February 2015.

As was expected, the 2014 Russian intervention in Ukraine enjoyed broad popular support in Russia: there was near unanimity on the Ukrainian issue. Putin's popularity, which he had attempted to pin to Russia's great power role, rose to 80%.<sup>48</sup> Even Alexei Navalny, the opposition figure most critical of Putin, expressed his support for the annexation of Crimea; although he accepted that the annexation was a breach of international law, he maintained that "Crimea now belongs to Russia" and said that he would not return the peninsula if he became president, pointing instead to the "immigration issue" as the more important question.<sup>49</sup> He has also said that he sees no difference between Russians and Ukrainians. Another prominent liberal, Boris Nemtsov, has advocated annexing Sevastopol as "taking something back" rather than "taking something new".<sup>50</sup>

In 2019, Zelenskyy defeated the liberal businessman and incumbent president Petro Poroshenko, in an election focusing heavily on corruption and the need for peace with Russia. The election of Zelenskyy, a TV personality, formed part of a broader wave of populist politics driven by resentment and mistrust of elites and politicians, which represents one of the greatest threats to young democracies today (as we can see in Hungary, Tunisia and other countries).

Ukrainian elections have almost always been a contest between pro-Western and pro-Russian candidates, or at least have resulted in a struggle over this international orientation after the elections. These are questions that cannot be settled in elections because they are not simply a matter of political program but of deep sociopolitical cleavages. For a democracy to be stable, fundamental issues like this, issues which touch on the core identity or trajectory of the country, must either be a matter of consensus with only marginal opposition or must be taken out of the party-political sphere altogether (like the idea of democracy itself). In countries like France, the UK or Germany, for example, neither the democratic nature of the political system nor the general alignment within the Western camp are up for debate. They are a matter of consensus. The same applies to neutrality in Switzerland, Sweden and Finland,<sup>51</sup> despite the fact that they are democracies.

It thus seems that the only option that is likely to provide long-term stability for Ukraine is neutrality rather than membership of one or another military alliance, in exchange for Russian

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48 Jonathan Masters, "Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads of Europe and Russia," Backgrounder, Council on Foreign Relations, 2/12/2021, accessed on 17/2/2022, at: <https://on.cfr.org/3s1tXnF>

49 Anna Dolgov, "Navalny Wouldn't Return Crimea, Considers Immigration Bigger Issue Than Ukraine," *The Moscow Times*, 16/10/2014, accessed on 22/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3H2Weys>; "Alexei Navalny: Russia's jailed vociferous Putin critic," BBC, 8/10/2021, accessed on 22/2/2022, at: <https://bbc.in/3p6Umi2>. Navalny's liberalism and that of his peers (the leader of the opposition in Myanmar for example) is often misunderstood. In many cases, liberalism is applied only within the borders of ethnic identity, with the inevitable double standards that result. The Western media tends initially to judge such figures by their pro-Western leanings and only later to discover the limits of their positions. Their causes are just, but their nationalist leanings often produce unjust positions, which damages their credibility.

50 D'Anieri, p. 10; Dolgov; Marlene Laruelle, "Alexei Navalny and Challenges in Reconciling 'Nationalism' and 'Liberalism,'" *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 4 (2014), pp. 276-297.

51 According to statements given by Biden on 21 February, the latter two countries have hinted that they are interested in joining NATO in response to the Russian attack on Ukraine. If this does happen, there should be general consensus in public opinion – it should not be a decision pushed through by a small majority. Russia's policy in recent years has caused anxiety in many Eastern European countries.

recognition of its sovereignty. This model is crucial for Ukrainian democracy. If it had been followed, Europe might have avoided war. But none of the powers involved in the most recent crisis have ever taken it seriously.

Despite Ukraine's enthusiasm for NATO and EU membership, surveys conducted in late 2021 show that public opinion is far from united on these issues. Although more than half of those surveyed supported joining the EU, only 40-50% supported NATO membership—despite the fact that Crimea and the contested regions in eastern Ukraine were not polled. The data shows that Ukrainians are divided on whether to join NATO or draw closer to Russia. This is not a simple question that can be settled one way or another at the ballot box. It is a central issue. Not only are the two options impossible to reconcile, but they also express different visions of Ukrainian identity. Disagreements over questions of this kind make for the sort of social cleavage that prevents the consolidation of democracy: they transform diversity into a source of political conflict that cannot be settled democratically, because the minority will never accept the majority's decision. On the other hand, democracy cannot take full root so long as they remain unsettled, as was the case in all Ukrainian elections up to 2014. They cannot be settled with foreign support or by internal violence, which leads to long-term instability. There are only two solutions in such cases: a long-term compromise recognizing the impossibility of reconciling the two choices or neutrality vis-à-vis both Russia and NATO. The latter option is safer, and would require Ukraine to enshrine neutrality in its constitution in such a way that the question could no longer be contested in elections. When we look at the crisis from an international relations perspective alone, this point does not arise. This is exactly why we have to consider it from multiple perspectives. We are not only discussing actors on the global stage here – we are also talking about regimes, peoples, and societies.

## Conclusion

The war in Ukraine was predicted – the USA came close to determining the exact time that it would be launched. Although Russia repeatedly denied that it had any intention of occupying and annexing Ukraine, it never disputed that it was ready to use whatever means necessary to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO. Russia has produced an authoritarian regime with an anti-liberal ideology that we might call 'great power nationalism'. It is seeking to restructure the European order in such a way that its areas of influence and its role as a great power are taken into account. It is led by a president who has been in power, in real terms, since 2000, who believes passionately in a greater role for his country and in the importance of a politics of strength abroad, and who recognises only the principle of equal treatment in foreign relations.

Despite the predictability of the war, not enough effort was made to stop it. A war is not stopped by diplomatic visits or threats of and allusions to sanctions. It is stopped by a search for a settlement. For reasons having to do with domestic politics, and because of Russia's behaviour over the last ten years, none of the countries involved – not least the USA – was willing to find a compromise. And it



is Ukraine, the one country that was never given a chance to negotiate and whose interests have not been taken into account, that has paid the price.

Even if Russia was not concerned by the growth of democracy in its neighbours *per se*, democratisation has invariably led to calls for EU and NATO membership, which the USA sees as natural and Russia as a threat to its security. The USA could have made concessions to Russia – which is not a democracy, but is a great power, or at least is very keen to be seen as one – by distinguishing between democracy and NATO membership. But it has not. The Russian regime is no longer only anti-liberal, it is now also anti-democratic, a supporter of authoritarianism and military coups worldwide. It now sees democracy as an extension of US and NATO influence.

From a “security realism” perspective, moves that one country sees as crucial to its security may be seen as a threat by another country suspicious of its motives. This latter country may then take its own steps to protect itself, steps that the first country may itself see as a threat. This sets off an escalation that, if neither side trusts the other, can only be stopped through negotiations intended in the first instance to avoid war and secondly to develop a shared vision for mutual security.

In Ukraine there is a strong link between joining alliances and democracy, because the issue is linked to major domestic cleavages. Settling this issue by elections threatens to undermine democracy. Neutrality is the solution to the Russia-NATO problem and to one of the greatest internal threats to democracy in Ukraine. This essay has not discussed the future, which is difficult to predict because of the great number of overlapping factors that are likely to play a role. But if Western sanctions remain in place and resistance continues in Ukraine, they will inevitably undermine the Putin regime’s position within Russia itself and affect the shape of any prospective settlement.

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