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Mobilizing Against Russia?

Some Reflections on the Security Deadlock Called Ukraine

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Executive Summary

No event exists beyond the media. This is also the case with the current Russian-Ukraine war. Daily, we are flooded with analyses and opinions about Putin’s military threat in the East. These narratives – mostly polemical and shrill – are both the result of and the catalyst for the crisis. As such, the debate itself – consciously or unconsciously - becomes part of the Western-Russian standoff driven by the strategy of hybrid and decision-centric warfare.

This essay deliberately distances itself from the issues of the day and the hyper-polarized debate that currently takes place. Instead, a more detached exercise is made in which the polyphonic nature of the past and the intricacy of history is deliberately sought out. It shows the complexity of the process we have gone through, leading to the current deadlock. As such, we have to face the changes and continuities with which we have been confronted, or as Jeffrey Frank recently wrote in *The New Yorker*, “If a lot has changed since the end of the Cold War, there’s much that hasn’t”.¹

The essay develops four thoughts on the period since the Cold War thawed and the Soviet Union disintegrated (1989-1991).

ONE: THE CURRENT CRISIS IS DRIVEN BY AT LEAST FIVE RUSSIAN RIDDLES

Why did Michael Gorbachev agree with the US-German demand to reunify Germany as part of NATO in 1990? What and who brought Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin to the helm of Russian power in 1999? Why, after a period of close cooperation and dialogue, has Vladimir Putin changed his course towards the West since 2007? Why has Vladimir Putin significantly hardened his domestic and foreign policy, leading to a full-fledged authoritarian regime since 2012? What is the “end goal” of Vladimir Putin’s strategy? What are the real intentions of the Russian president and his cronies?

Even though the answer to these riddles would provide the key to understanding Russia’s current political attitude and military posture, nobody can give neat and precise answers to these questions. What is left is conjecture, if not speculation. Russia, indeed, remains an enigma.

TWO: THE PROCESS OF NATO ENLARGEMENT HAS BEEN CONFRONTED WITH ITS OWN LIMITS

One of the main driving forces fuelling the Russian-Ukraine conflict, NATO enlargement, is not necessarily an ill-advised policy. Yet it is a challenging strategy full of dilemmas and problematic considerations, the ultimate consequences of which have not always been thought through. Europe’s security dilemma is the result of the following developments:

Challenged by a new security situation in Europe, NATO enlargement had to balance two incompatible realities: the historically conditioned, nationalist-inspired, anti-Russian security request from the Central and Eastern European countries, and the clearly signalled Soviet/Russian opposition to the absorption of Europe’s “liminal spaces” into the Western sphere of influence. The “end of history” could indeed not erase the historical memory of the Central and Eastern European countries.



Russia's domestic developments magnified this security dilemma. Trauma has compromised Russia's future. And thus, the more confident and self-assured Russia became, the more aggressive its opposition to NATO's expansion. The more aggressive Russia's posture, the more urgent the Central and Eastern European countries' quest for NATO membership. This self-fulfilling prophecy has confirmed the "Russian tradition": a paradoxical combination of vulnerability, ambition, and militarism.

The Western debate on coping with this self-reinforcing dilemma is, in essence, an ongoing clash between two schools of thought: the value-based liberal tradition versus the interest-based realist tradition. With the euphoria that went with the end of the Cold War, the liberal school of thought gained the upper hand. Therefore, NATO enlargement became a liberal project. It made Madeleine Albright, Bill Clinton's Secretary of State, exclaim that "thanks in no small part to NATO, we live in a different world. Our Soviet adversary has vanished. Freedom's flag has been unfurled from the Baltics to Bulgaria".² Considering this mindset, has Europe, in Ukraine, been confronted with an example of "the tragedy of optimism"?

THREE: CETERIS PARIBUS, STRATEGIC COMPETITION, IF NOT CONFRONTATION WITH RUSSIA, IS INEVITABLE

Given the security dilemma mentioned above and without any fundamental changes in the position of Russia or the West, intensified competition, if not confrontation with Russia, is inevitable. George Kennan – the *éminence grise* of the West's Cold War strategy of containment – already issued this warning in 1997, when he wrote in the *New York Times*: "Expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era. Such a decision may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western, and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; [...] to restore the atmosphere of the Cold War to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking".³

Is this the essence of the Ukraine crisis we are witnessing today? Are we approaching a tipping point where confrontation with Russia becomes unavoidable, imposing a fundamental shift in Europe's security architecture?

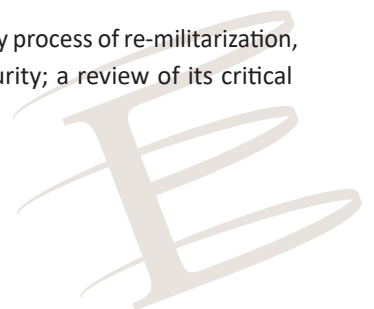
FOUR: "STATES MAKE WAR AND WAR MAKES STATES"⁴

Russia's current military posture will impact Russia's domestic policy and impose an alternative global and European security landscape. This new security architecture will have the following characteristics:

Contrary to the Cold War, which was a stringent, codified standoff with incorporated assumptions, attitudes, and behaviour shared by all parties involved, and its end, which was a negotiated process,⁵ the new era will be moulded by crisis in which the real enemy is miscalculation. As a result, Europe's security landscape will be chaotic, risky, violent, and thus critically uncertain for all the parties involved.

Fragile and unsustainable as it may seem, Russia's military power, lost in 1991, has been re-established to the point that the Kremlin considers itself strong enough to challenge the West. A tragic, historical truism has been reconfirmed, namely, the re-establishment of the "Imperium Auf der Anderen Seite."⁶ This is, an anti-Western Russian state mobilizing its military power against the West.

With or without a Russian invasion in Ukraine, Europe will experience an uninvited yet necessary process of re-militarization, including: augmented military budgets and increased investment in cyber and energy security; a review of its critical



infrastructure; a renewed build-up of military capabilities, reserve forces, and strategic stocks; and, where applicable, a renewed debate about conscription. But first and foremost, the new era will provoke a brutal awakening from a state of complacency, illusionary optimism, and overconfidence, a condition that in another context has been called “a state of sleepwalking”.⁷

Are we prepared to take responsibility for this challenge? Are we able and willing to make the decisions needed to cope with this new state of affairs? In short, are our states, societies, and citizens resilient enough to cope with an opponent who has the mindset and the tools to impose its will upon us?



Preface

This essay is the result of three decades of observing the Russian state and its society. In an attempt to interpret the current European security stalemate, I look at the Russian-Western relationship from a broad and long-term perspective. This approach is a deliberate choice that has its pros and cons. On the one hand, it allows us to distance ourselves from the current hyper-polarized Russia debate. It also enables us to avoid the obvious clichés and pompous speculations regarding Russia’s bellicose posture. On the other hand, this format does not allow for a specific analysis of the current Ukrainian crisis. Aspects of the Ukraine-Russian war considered as a local crisis I have covered in other publications.⁸

Implicitly, three paradoxes are buttressing my reflections on Russia’s current behaviour:⁹

- Russia’s 21st century begins in the 19th century.
- Russia’s power lies in its weakness.
- The causes of Russia’s behaviour are buried in the West.

Considering these paradoxes – this is my interpretation of “the Russian tradition” – may permit us to manage our confrontation with Russia and to anticipate its actions. Yet, opposing Russia’s multi-dimensional anti-Western strategy will demand wisdom, engagement, and resolve – characteristics that usually are only to be found among real statesmen.

This paper draws Europe’s history between 1989–2022 with a very coarse brush. Several events have been emphasized more than others. As such, I run the risk that my analysis might be passed off as anecdotal. I am most definitely aware that my choices are part of a “constructed story”. To overcome this deficit, I have added a substantial set of references, all within the limits of this format.

In this essay, the term “the West” has been used quite loosely. I know that this might be confusing, as the term is sometimes considered outdated, blurring the distinction between the United States, the EU, and its Member States. Yet, since the enlargement of NATO plays such an essential role in my reasoning, I mainly use “the West” to indicate the Euro-Atlantic world.

My analysis of Russia’s current behaviour will focus on NATO and US policy more than the EU’s position. Given the Russian tradition of emphasizing great power competition and military power over economic power, I consider this a justifiable choice. This does not suggest that the EC/EU has not played any role in the events I have highlighted.

I started writing this essay during Russia’s military build-up (end December 2021), unaware of Putin’s next move in Ukraine. Meanwhile, the invasion is a fact, and the “unthinkable” has taken place. I believe this analysis has not lost its significance despite these new events. Nevertheless, I request the reader to consider this issue of timing while reading this essay.

Finally, I want to thank several people who have encouraged and helped me to write this essay. In the first place, Silvy Baijens, my beloved wife, who recently passed away. Even in the most challenging stages of her battle, she entirely selflessly kept faith in me. Furthermore, I would like to thank Prof Dr. Sven Biscop and Mr. Paul Weeink for their encouragement and support. I also want to express my appreciation for Ms. Jill Kastner, who has helped with some editorial questions. Lastly, I thank Hilde, Jela, Lara, Nathan, and Vincent for providing structure, purpose, and comfort.

Joris Van Bladel

For Silvy, because I promised.



“The past is us in funny clothes”.

Mike Tyson¹⁰

“To be east of Eden, as we shall see, is to be in a fallen world, which is the only kind we know [...]”.

Thomas C. Foster¹¹

Tipping point Kyiv

It seems as if the genie of Russian history is out of the bottle again. Once more, nothing less than a fully-fledged authoritarian regime has replaced the short-lived dream of freedom and democracy in Russia.¹² Critical voices and political opponents have been silenced, if not murdered. History has been revised and memory censored.¹³ International borders have been redrawn by military force. A sphere of influence based on a “traditional power component, the existence of a common geopolitical space and a common history” is considered Russia’s natural privilege.¹⁴ Once again, a spectre is haunting Eastern Europe, and Russian society has become increasingly dependent on the unadulterated, brutal, and arbitrary application of power.¹⁵

These political developments have not had repercussions in Russia alone. The relationship between Russia and its neighbours, especially in the Near Abroad, has also been affected. Recently, this has become most evident in the relationship between Russia and Ukraine. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, if not earlier, this “Slavic Brotherhood” has always been rough and asymmetrical.¹⁶ Yet, for two decades, the mutual frustrations could be managed through diplomatic means.¹⁷ In sharp contrast, events have taken a dramatic turn since 2014. Not only has the Crimean Peninsula been annexed and remilitarized, but, under the guise of a domestic separatist uprising, the Kremlin has also carefully managed the pace and intensity of the fighting in Eastern Ukraine, making the Donetsk and Luhansk regions effectively Russian-controlled areas. Even though the Minsk Agreements could keep the violence on the 427-kilometer frontline more or less in check,¹⁸ in 2021, the conflict escalated anew. Besides an aggressive rhetorical campaign against Ukraine¹⁹ and the moulding of Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko into Moscow’s puppet, the Kremlin mounted a robust military force along Ukraine’s borders, raising rumours about an impending Russian invasion in Ukraine.²⁰ These rumours turned into an imminent threat by the end of the year.

The Russian-Ukraine conflict did not develop in a geostrategic vacuum. Geography and Europe’s savage history have made Russia an integral part of the Old Continent. Therefore, since the revolutionary events of 1989-1991, since the Cold War thawed and the Soviet Union disintegrated, the Western powers have been close observers of, if not crucial decision-makers in the fate of Central and Eastern Europe. The process of the eastward enlargement of NATO – starting with the unification of Germany in 1990 – is a clear example of this geopolitical disposition and is currently one of the main underlying elements that fuels the Russian-Ukraine conflict. Russia considers Ukraine’s westward orientation an existential threat: a red line, or if pushed to the extreme, a *casus belli*. The Kremlin’s military posture and its negotiation proposals, if not ultimatums demanding legal guarantees against NATO’s influence in Ukraine, were unmistakable signs of Russia’s uncompromising stance against Ukraine’s sovereign security choices.²¹



The response of the West did not hint at appeasement. NATO considers the strategic choices of sovereign states and their territorial integrity as sacrosanct, and signalled that Russia's meddling in NATO's open-door policy is not up for discussion, while portraying itself as a defensive alliance posing no threat to Russia whatsoever. Similarly, the EU warned Russia of massive economic, political, and strategic consequences if it were to attack Ukraine.

Consequently, instead of the enchanted dream of a Common European Home, poignantly formulated by Mikhail Gorbachev in Strasbourg only 33 years ago,²² Europe has been slowly but decisively shifting towards a renewed and perilous deadlock, with Ukraine as the focal point. Deep distrust and the use of rediscovered Cold War prejudices and metaphors characterize the current relationship between Russia and the West, as narratives of both sides contradict, perceptions oppose, and strategic interests collide with each other.

This may lead to some dramatic questions. For instance, are we moving towards a kind of tipping point in Ukraine that, once passed, will fundamentally alter the (geostrategic) landscape of Europe? Are we indeed transgressing from the post-Cold War period – and thus Western Hegemony – towards a new, uncertain era in Europe?



Situation alarming - Outcome uncertain

The most disappointing yet accurate answer to these questions is that we do not know. We may endlessly speculate about various scenarios and Russia's strategic end goal. Even experts who try to read Vladimir Putin's mind do not and cannot know the outcome of the current impasse.²³ Indeed, Vladimir Putin is notorious for letting the outside world guess his real intentions. Even well-informed Russian analysts, including Dmitri Trenin and Fyodor Lukyanov, confirm this view. Trenin, for example, says, "... And here there are many questions because we cannot know what Putin is thinking. What is his plan? What is his strategy? What options does he see? It's almost impossible to judge this from the sidelines". While Lukyanov exclaims: "The expert opinion that I can authoritatively declare is: Who the heck knows?".²⁴

Despite this rational reticence, many people have strong opinions about the recent developments in Ukraine. Social media and other public platforms allow observers of various levels of knowledge or responsibility and varying degrees of involvement or interest to ventilate their strategic advice and other comments, often based on nothing other than assumption and self-righteousness, or, as Katrina vanden Heuvel warns, "on bluster and a prayer".²⁵ Of course, while some of these analyses and opinions contain a kernel of truth, many lack relevance, subtlety, or accuracy.

In this essay, I deliberately distance myself from the issues of the day and the hyper-polarized Russia debate that currently takes place. Instead, I will undertake an exercise of a different kind. As a close observer of Russian affairs over the last three decades, with particular attention for the living world of "the other" coming of age in the post-Cold War period,²⁶ I will focus on one question: how have we ended up in this dreadful situation? How is it possible that over three decades we have developed from a state of "enchantment and euphoria" to a state of "disappointment and despair", from a sense of "victory and confidence" – independent of the appropriateness of these qualifications – to a sense of "fear and surprise"? The "age of extremes" that the twentieth century represents seems to have never ended.²⁷

There might be a simple and unambiguous answer to this question, namely Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. Many observers on the Western side of the debate believe that the Russian president bears all responsibility for the current stalemate between Russia and the West. Vladimir Putin's decision to escalate the current Ukraine-Russian conflict buttressed this argument. Yet, from a broader perspective, this answer is too easy, oversimplistic, and incomplete, as it ignores the polyphonic nature of the past and the intricacy of history.

Indeed, in my exercise, two epistemological assumptions expressed by two renowned historians – Vladislav Zubok and Sönke Neitzel – serve as a guide to add some nuances to this one-sided view:

- "Unpredictability and uncertainty are fundamental features of human, state, and world affairs. Social movements and ideological currents are not rational, and politics will propel history in unexpected directions. ... [in history] some accidents have huge consequences."²⁸ In other words, historical events are never predetermined and inevitable, regardless of how we may remember them.²⁹
- We need to allow contradiction [*Widersprüchlichkeit*] in our historical research. People are not one-dimensional creatures, as they assume different, sometimes contradictory roles in their lives. (For instance, an individual can be simultaneously perpetrator and victim.) Furthermore, we also need to realize that state-supported meta-historical narratives have nothing to do with history as an academic discipline. These metanarratives are constructs that illustrate a national identity rather than providing an accurate picture of the past.³⁰



Considering these epistemological guidelines, we might conclude that our certainties are our most significant enemies when we approach the past. We may decide that, with hindsight, decisions made in 1990 were indeed not necessarily wrong, but perhaps not as ideal as they have been presented; that the internalized historical periodization has not been as stringent as commonly accepted; and that our emotions that accompanied historical events have not been as universally shared as we might imagine in our collective memory.

One may rightfully ask why I take this “historical” approach in times of crisis when hundreds of tanks are threatening Ukraine and thousands of Ukrainian lives have already been lost.³¹ Why create potential mental confusion and hesitance when decisiveness, determination, and resolve are crucial? It is not that I am not aware of the risks at stake for the Ukrainian people. Yet, too often during my walks over Flanders fields, the Normandy beaches, the killing fields of Kigali and Srebrenica, and countless numbers of military cemeteries spread all over Europe, including Berlin, St Petersburg, and Kyiv, I have shaken my head in disbelief asking myself the European question par excellence: How for God’s sake was this possible? One could argue that this thought imposes an exercise against “cognitive closure” and one of mental restraint.³²

With this assignment in mind, I will tackle some issues related to the schismatic events of 1989 and 1990, the enlargement of NATO, and the Russian tradition, which will allow us to put these events and ideas into context as a reminder of the passions, the ambivalence, and the uncertainties that have crystallized into the current stalemate called Ukraine.



One: The fall of the Berlin Wall: an earthquake with massive aftershocks

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 is remembered by many of us as an event of joy and great expectations. Of course, the night was delirious, a real “Ode an die Freude”. However, eyewitnesses – politicians at the highest level, police and military officers on duty, conscript soldiers, and journalists; people who had to bear the responsibility in the moment – have reported the nervousness, the unease, and the uncertainty that went with this event.³³ “So many things could have gone wrong, and so many nearly did,” Anne Applebaum remembered.³⁴

The event itself, set in motion by the awkward intervention of Günter Schabowski, member of the SED politburo and spokesperson of the East German government, took many politicians by surprise. Among them were the key players of that moment: Egon Krenz, Helmut Kohl, George Bush, Mikhail Gorbachev, Margaret Thatcher, and François Mitterrand.³⁵ All reacted with restraint, however, as they understood the sensitivity and the potential explosiveness of this critical moment. What helped was that the protagonists knew each other reasonably well, trusted each other, and acknowledged the context in which each of them had to manoeuvre.³⁶ *Die Wende* – indeed an accident within a bigger context of social protest and political unrest – had huge consequences. Taken by surprise, nobody knew what to do other than to watch in disbelief. At least for a moment. Soon, the German-German relations would undergo ground-breaking changes that before the event of 9 November 1989 would have been unimaginable.



Two: The unification of Germany: an unlikely diplomatic triumph

The discussion of the reunification of Germany has a long history.³⁷ The fall of the Berlin Wall accelerated the debate. William Taubman would call it a massive aftershock of the earthquake called “the fall of the Berlin Wall”.³⁸ It was the political instincts of Chancellor Helmut Kohl and his advisor Horst Teltschik that made the reunification of Germany a priority. The *Kanzler der Einheit* started the process, issuing his 10-point programme on 28 November 1989.³⁹ The plan to overcome Germany’s (and Europe’s) division was edited rapidly, without much domestic or international consultation, as a move to deflect his domestic political opponents, including his political rival Hans-Dietrich Genscher, some SPD protagonists (for example, Oskar Lafontaine, Egon Bahr, and Gunter Grass), and Hans Modrow, the last communist prime minister of East Germany.⁴⁰

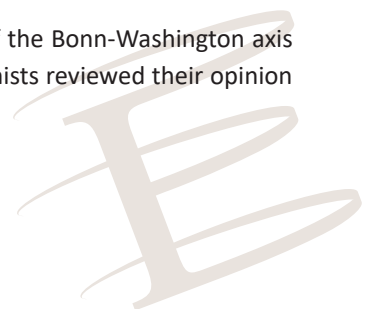
Helped by the outcome of the elections in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) on 10 March 1990, and the dreadful economic situation in Eastern Germany, the Reunification Treaty negotiated between the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the GDR became a reality on 3 October 1990.⁴¹ A political achievement, for sure. Yet, it was Gorbachev who jokingly warned Kohl that now he also had to face “his perestroika” in East Germany.

Indeed, despite the fact that the reunification of Germany has unquestionably restored freedom in the Eastern part of the country and that after three decades the net assessment may be qualified as positive, the transformation of Eastern Germany and the inner German merger has been proven to be a lot tougher and expensive than expected. Even today, German unification continues to cast its shadow on German politics and socio-economic development.⁴² Perhaps the fact that the very people who made the revolution possible – those who took the risk to stand up against the authorities of one of the most daunting police states in the world and those who chanted “*Wir sind ein Volk*” – were never seriously involved in the reunification process itself might have contributed to this situation. Once more, feelings of euphoria have proven to be premature and transient for those who made the revolution happen.

In the context of my reflections, a crucial aspect of this reunification process was the foreign policy implications of a new unified Germany within Europe. Many European states, including Poland and Israel, had significant doubts about Kohl’s reunification initiative.⁴³ The horrors of the Second World War were still casting their shadow over Europe as many European leaders were concerned about the potential economic power of a reunified Germany and the awakening of a renewed German militarism in the heart of Europe.⁴⁴ Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail Gorbachev, Francois Mitterrand, Giulio Andreotti, Ruud Lubbers, and others showed themselves to be very sceptical of Germany’s hurried reunification project.⁴⁵

Only the United States supported Helmut Kohl’s efforts, on the condition that a unified Germany would stay in NATO. Thus, besides the main actors in Bonn, it was the president of the United States and his national security team that was the main driving force of the German reunification process. As a reminder, outside the White House, there were also notoriously “realist” voices expressing their doubt about President’s Bush position, including George Kennan, Paul Nitze, and Henry Kissinger. George Kennan, for instance, said that “the only safe way to establish their true independence is to show a decent respect for Soviet security interest”.⁴⁶ Henry Kissinger, from his side, believed that the Bush Administration had an opportunity to “create a new international environment” in which Moscow received assurances that the changes in Eastern Europe did not threaten its military security.⁴⁷

Notwithstanding the initial opposition to Germany’s reunification, the diplomatic efforts of the Bonn-Washington axis assuaged all these doubts. Each within their own realm of interests, the European protagonists reviewed their opinion



and agreed with the Two Plus Four Treaty, which sealed the foreign policy aspects of the reunification of Germany on 12 September 1990.⁴⁸ A dramatic tug of war, yet a diplomatic achievement.⁴⁹ The question remains if the Treaty was evenly perceived as a success by all the negotiation partners.

On 31 May 1990, Gorbachev agreed with the US negotiators in Washington (and on 15 July 1990 with the German negotiators in Moscow) on the issue of a reunified Germany within NATO. Given the fierce opposition within the Soviet establishment,⁵⁰ Gorbachev's sudden consent – apparently without any consultation or coordination with his advisors – remains a bone of contention. Officially, he was convinced by US Secretary of State James Baker's "nine points" presented during a visit to Moscow on 16-19 May. This involved, among other things, NATO's transformation and adaptation to the post-Cold War, as expressed in the London Declaration of 5 September 1990.⁵¹ Moreover, Presidents Bush's additional argument that all nations had the right to join the alliance of their own choosing based on the Helsinki Final Act of the OSCE (1975) was also a solid argument which Gorbachev could not counter.

Despite their clever and skilful diplomatic offensive, even the Western negotiators were surprised by Gorbachev's impulsive consent. Indeed, Gorbachev's decision went against the (hard-line) advice of the so-called *Germanisty*, including Valentin Falin and Nikolai Portugalov, the security and military establishment, and many others members of the Soviet elite. Until Gorbachev changed his mind, the Soviet point of view was that either the GDR and the FRG would become a confederal state in which both entities remained in their respective alliances (the so-called "dual membership"), or Germany would become a neutral, non-aligned state outside NATO and the Warsaw pact. Both options were unacceptable for the West.⁵²

Whatever the reasons for Gorbachev's agreement – economic pressure, political rivalry, the increased assertiveness of Eastern European countries, genuine trust in his interlocutors, or personal conviction – he took a considerable political risk. Aware that her husband was in danger, Raisa Gorbacheva asked Genscher during a private conversation in the Caucasian mountains on 15 July 1990, to protect him from himself.⁵³ The Gorbachevs indeed understood that the Communist leader's consent could announce the end of perestroika and of his political career. Three hundred and twenty days later, on 19 August, the August Coup took place in Moscow, heralding the end of the Soviet Union.⁵⁴

Regarding German unification, Vladimir Putin admitted in 1991 that the changes of the time were inevitable. Still, he regretted that the Soviet Union had lost its position in Europe: "We would have avoided a lot of problems if the Soviets had not made such a hasty exit from Eastern Europe".⁵⁵ At that time, this was not necessarily a hard-line, let alone an influential opinion, but a view commonly shared among the Soviet establishment. Even 25 years after the Treaty was signed, in 2015, the State Duma speaker Sergei Naryshkin – since 5 October 2016 director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) – agreed to examine the possibility of issuing a statement condemning the "annexation" of East Germany by West Germany.⁵⁶ In 2021, the Russian political elite criticized Gorbachev's legacy, for:

- The absence of binding guarantees from NATO in the Treaty, although the issue of guarantees had indeed been mentioned within the context of German reunification;
- the speed of the Soviet withdrawal that was imposed;
- the low financial compensation the Soviet Union received for the vast Soviet concessions.

Thus, despite Gorbachev's consent, despite the formal agreement, Soviet/Russian discontent, if not resentment, about the Two plus Four Treaty was and still is a reality.

Currently, one may read many articles about the so-called NATO enlargement myth, denying that the West had pledged



not to enlarge towards the East.⁵⁷ From a legalistic and formal point of view, this is correct. The 7-page Two plus Four Treaty is clear about this issue. However, psychologically there are reasons to nuance this strong position.⁵⁸ Indeed, whoever takes the effort to recall closely what happened during the process of negotiations and the general debate on Germany's reunification must recognize that the negotiation talks were chaotic, complex, and dynamic, as well as full of misunderstandings and reformulations of positions. Moreover, the negotiators were well aware that Gorbachev's consent did not fully represent the Soviet/Russian opinion on NATO membership of the reunified Germany.

Beyond the formal world, there are many shades of grey that contradict the black and white discussion as it is portrayed today. Politics, diplomacy, and military affairs possibly do not tolerate a nuanced debate, certainly not in times of crisis. Nevertheless, since 1990, thus even before the Warsaw Pact dissolved and the USSR collapsed, NATO enlargement has been a controversial issue in the Soviet Union/Russia, and this long before Vladimir Putin came to power.



Three: The demise of the Soviet Union: a self-imposed tragedy

Bookshelves may be filled with analysis about “the end of the last empire”.⁵⁹ Recently, in November 2021, the Russian historian Vladislav Zubok published a new comprehensive study about the unravelling of the Soviet Union.⁶⁰ His research revealed that the Soviet Union was defeated from within, as internal factors more than external factors caused its collapse. According to Zubok, the two main reasons why the Soviet Union collapsed were the weak leadership of Gorbachev and the dreadful state of the Soviet economy. In other words, “a perfect storm and a hapless captain”.⁶¹ Clearly, Zubok’s work reflects a rather negative assessment of Michael Gorbachev as a leader, which is a common sentiment in Russia.⁶²

Zubok’s main points of analysis are:

- Despite the fact that the necessity of reform was already recognized by others, Gorbachev inherited a colossal, almost impossible reform task.⁶³
- Gorbachev’s political and economic reform plans (glasnost and perestroika) were ideologically outdated and economically flawed. This led to the destruction of the economy and polity from within.⁶⁴
- Gorbachev was unable to recognize his failure and modify his course. This enabled new actors to emerge from the rubble of the old system, who were to inherit nothing but chaos.
- Gorbachev’s political rivals were poorly organized and without a clear alternative strategy. The army, the security services, and bureaucracy adopted a wait-and-see attitude, waiting to gauge who would emerge from the power struggle.

This leads Zubok to a harsh assessment of Gorbachev’s policy: “He [Gorbachev] combined ideological reformist zeal with political timidity, schematic messianism with practical detachment, visionary and breathtaking foreign policy with an inability to promote crucial domestic reform”.⁶⁵ Broadening his scope, Zubov continues: “No one in the politburo could stomach enacting painful reforms or, if need be, maintaining order through force. The policies that Gorbachev favoured, appeasing the intelligentsia and devolving responsibility to the republican ruling elite, constituted a road to chaos, not to better reforms. This enabled and legitimized runaway separatism in the Baltics and South Caucasus, and, ultimately, in the core Slavic republic of the USSR”.⁶⁶

Thus, according to Zubok, the collapse of the Soviet Union was not predetermined nor an unavoidable event, but a result of bad choices and inconsistent policymaking.⁶⁷ As a result, the thesis, supported in some Western capitals, that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the result of Ronald Reagan’s policy against the “Evil Empire” is overstated, if not incorrect. It certainly does not justify the triumphalist attitude that is shown in certain political and academic circles, claiming that “America won the Cold War because Americans deserve to win it”, and that only Americans understood what “justice” was.⁶⁸ Indeed, one can ask the question whether the discussion on who won the Cold War is using the correct phraseology to describe its end, especially since the Cold War fortunately never reached its kinetic stage. Ultimately, was the end of the cold war not a negotiated settlement between Gorbachev and the Reagan/Bush administration?⁶⁹ And thus, as Gorbachev claimed, are we not all winners of the metaphorical war since the nuclear Armageddon was avoided for all?⁷⁰

In 2005, Vladimir Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.⁷¹ (For whatever it is worth, on 23 December 2021, Russian lawmakers, prompted by the right-wing nationalist LDPR party of Zhirinovskiy, sought to formally declare the fall of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”.⁷²) In contrast, and as an illustration of the European divide and Russia’s isolation, on 11 July 2019, Donald Tusk, the Polish head of the European Council, stated during a conference in Batumi (Georgia) that “the USSR collapse was a

blessing to Georgians, Poles, Ukrainians and the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. And also to Russians".⁷³ Within this dissonance of contradictory opinions, the following points are noteworthy:

Russia, the largest constituent of the Soviet Union, was the leading actor in the Soviet dissolution. On 8 December 1998, Yeltsin, pushed by his personal rivalry with Gorbachev, negotiated the Belavezha Accords with the President of Ukraine Leonid Kravchuk and the chairman of the Belarusian Supreme Soviet Stanislav Shushkevich. These Accords declared the Soviet Union effectively dissolved and established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This historical fact undermines the political spin of Vladimir Putin: the collapse of the Soviet Union was the result of a deliberately chosen path pushed by Russia.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a real tragedy for many of its inhabitants, including Russians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and others, as they all have gone through a long period of social chaos [*bezporiadok* and *bardak*],⁷⁴ economic uncertainty, and political upheaval. During the "Wild 1990's", everything changed at an enormous speed, crime was on the rise, and people could either make big money or instantly lose everything they had. Putin says about this catastrophe: "But back then, at the same time, when the fancy restaurants appeared, the Russian social security system was destroyed completely. Whole branches of the economy stopped functioning. The healthcare system was in ruins. The armed forces were also in a very depressive condition, and millions of people were under the poverty line. And we have to remember that as well".⁷⁵

The divide between rich and poor, due to an uncontrolled process of privatizations, took on breath-taking proportions, which undermined the state's social contract and moral code. It was a state of affairs that might be compared with what Harald Jähner called "*Wolfszeit*", "a time when man became a wolf; when everyone took care of himself or his own pack alone; when one retreated grimly into the family as a closed stronghold".⁷⁶ In this context, it might also be good to recall Svetlana Alexievich's book *Second-Hand Time*, an oral history about Soviet/communist nostalgia, a topic that since many other writers have explored.⁷⁷ Moreover, given the state of predictability and certainty of Western societies, Karl Schögel has observed that Western countries have no idea about the chaos the Eastern European countries went through during the wild 1990s. This ignorance, the German historian claims, has reinforced the mental divide between Russia and the West, contributing to the current stalemate.⁷⁸

Although the Russian Federation inherited the (legal) status of the Soviet Union, it was a state that was politically, economically, and militarily adrift throughout the 1990s. With this debacle in mind, one can argue that today's Russia seems to have re-consolidated the power it once lost. The Kremlin considers itself strong enough to confront Ukraine and to challenge the West. As such, a historical truism is reconfirmed: Russia has re-established itself as a conservative, authoritarian, anti-Western, and militaristic state on the European map.

The crucial analytical question remains to evaluate the strength of Russia and how sustainable its power is in economic, political, demographic, and military terms. These are tough questions. In any case, these questions do not allow answers formulated in terms of comfortable, contemptuous, and self-confident one-liners. The art of prediction lies in keeping estimations of Russia's power within the range of over and underestimation.⁷⁹ At the same time, it is vital to retain a realistic view of one's own capabilities and state of resilience.

For instance, recent reports of Russia's macroeconomic policy must induce a certain degree of modesty and vigilance in Western analytical and strategic centres:⁸⁰

- Russia has amassed foreign exchange reserves of \$635bn, the fifth highest in the world;
- It has a national debt of 18% of GDP, the sixth lowest in the world;



- The commodity boom is adding an extra \$10bn a month to Kremlin coffers from oil and gas (which is being squirrelled away in the National Wellbeing Fund);
- The Kremlin could sever all gas flows to Europe – 41% of the EU’s supply – for two years or more without running into serious financial issues;
- Russia today has a semi-autarkic economy, and its chief trade partner is China.

These results prompt Chris Miller to state that despite Russia’s corruption, cronyism, and overdependence on oil as an economic driver, Putin’s economic strategy has been surprisingly successful.⁸¹ It might also be helpful to keep military analyst Michael Kofman’s warning in mind: “Russia is not a rising power, but it will not decline as a threat to the United States in any appreciable way in the near- or medium-term. Moreover, the declining power mantra is puzzling as a basis for defence prioritization since declining powers can be more dangerous than rising ones”.⁸²

For those who predict the end of Putinism on short notice and qualify Russia as a regional power at most, it might be a sobering thought to realize that in Russian analytical circles, the end of the West is forecast with the same certitude. For instance, Ivan Timofeev writes: “There’s been a consensus among Russian international experts regarding the idea that the collective West is nearing extinction. It can be considered one of the basic premises of Russian foreign policy doctrine”.⁸³ This observation is not only another illustration of the Russian-Western divide, but also a worrisome observation. Indeed, a strategic situation in which each party considers the other as weak or in decline results in an unstable if not dangerous strategic situation, as it may invite some parties to take irresponsible risks (or maintain unsubstantiated illusions).



Four: The enlargement of NATO: a complicated and controversial strategy

After the reunification of Germany, the wheel of history kept turning at a revolutionary speed. A cascade of events took place in the next two years, in different degrees yet linked to each other. Significant events with impact on Europe's liminal spaces were:

- The Central and East European states regained and consolidated their independence while undoing themselves from their communist ideology.
- After the military alliance proved to be irreformable, the final destiny of the Warsaw Pact was sealed on 1 July 1991.
- The Central European countries and the Soviet Union signed bilateral treaties regulating the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from their national territory.
- The emergence of nationalist movements and the occurrence of nationalist-inspired conflicts in the periphery of the Soviet Union.⁸⁴
- The start of the Balkan war in the summer of 1991, revealing the risks and the brutality of nationalist-inspired politics.
- The August Coup staged by hardliners in Moscow on 19 August 1991.
- The end of the Soviet Union on 31 December 1991.
- The emergence of 15 new, independent states on the European map, including Russia itself, the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), the Slavic states (Belarus and Ukraine), the Caucasian states (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), the Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kirgizstan, and Tajikistan) and Moldova.
- The emergence of two new leaders who would shape the events of the 1990s: Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton.

As a result of the anti-communist revolution in Central Europe, József Antall, Vaclav Havel, and Lech Walesa, leaders of the dissident movements of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, came into power in their countries. These leaders understood well the fragility of their security situation as a security vacuum was apparent in Central and Eastern Europe. Soon, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia formed the so-called Visegrad Group, which reached out to get security guarantees from the West. Both political and security arguments buttressed their request. The danger of nationalism observed in neighbouring regions made them aware of the fragile foundations of their state institutions. The August Coup in Moscow made the dissident leaders mindful of the danger coming from a restored Russian power and the reinstatement of its sphere of influence.

Only after it became clear that both the OSCE – too weak – and the EC – too slow – were not able or willing to provide the requested security guarantee did the Visegrad countries knock on the doors of NATO, and more precisely on the doors of the White House. Initially, NATO was very reluctant, if not dismissive, towards this security request. “Realists” were aware of the risks such a step would pose for the democratization process in the Russian Federation as anti-democratic and anti-Western forces, still present in the collapsed empire, could abuse NATO's enlargement for their political gain. Over time, especially after the diplomatic endeavour of the reunification of Germany, NATO's strong position against NATO enlargement gradually mellowed down. At least there was room for debate about the issue.

During the administration of Bill Clinton (1993-2001), the US president developed from a reluctant observer, without a clear vision or strategy about the future of NATO, into a staunch supporter of the enlargement and modernization of the transatlantic organization. He became convinced that a window of opportunity existed to shape a new Europe that should

be “free, secure, and undivided”. He considered NATO – modernized and adapted to the new security environment – as the appropriate vehicle to implement this policy. His ideas about NATO’s enlargement were an exponent of the liberal policy that democracy had to be expanded and consolidated as widely as possible. Nevertheless, it would take until the 1999 Washington Summit before the Visegrad countries – Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia – would officially become NATO members. The reason why this took so long was that the debate about enlargement and modernization of NATO involved “major, and at times dramatic, fights and negotiations with the Russians, our European allies, and within the US where it produced a passionate debate over what the Alliance was for in the post-Cold War world”.⁸⁵

It goes beyond the purpose of this essay to present a detailed reconstruction of this long and challenging debate.⁸⁶ It is sufficient to mention that besides the endorsement of Bill Clinton and his National Security Advisor Anthony Lake of the idea of NATO enlargement, the US point of view was initiated and driven by a small group of lobbyists, including Republican senator Richard Lugar, three RAND experts, Steve Larrabee, Richard Kugler, and Ronald Asmus, supported by German Minister of Defense Volker Rühle (and his advisor admiral Ulrich Weisser). In contrast, the US military and diplomatic corps and the major European powers were negative, if not hostile, towards the idea.

Powerful arguments against enlargement, as expressed by General John Shalikashvili at the time, were:

- NATO members were not prepared to expand their security guarantee;
- Central and East European countries were not ready to assume the responsibilities of NATO membership; and
- Russia would inevitably view NATO enlargement as aimed against Moscow.⁸⁷

More important for us is to review the Russian point of view on NATO’s enlargement. During the initial period of euphoria, the Western-Russian relationship had good prospects. Even though Russia went through dire economic and social circumstances, in December 1991 Boris Yeltsin wrote a letter expressing his wish that NATO would transform from an “aggressive military machine” into an alliance of peaceful nations based on common values, and that under these circumstances he was prepared to cooperate in the political and military fields. Informally and as a long-term political objective, he didn’t even exclude Russian membership in NATO. Despite this promising start, the adversary image of NATO among hardliners in Moscow was still haunting the reformers in the Kremlin. For instance, during a meeting with NATO Secretary-General Manfred Wörner, on 10 December 1991, Yeltsin outlined the Russian view that NATO membership for Eastern European countries that wanted to join the alliance, such as Poland or the Czech Republic, would be unacceptable to Moscow.⁸⁸

In August 1993, Lech Walesa unexpectedly issued a press communique saying that Boris Yeltsin had agreed to allow Poland to become a member of NATO. Both the Western leaders and Russian hardliners were taken by surprise. This incident woke up the sleeping dogs on both sides of the discussion. From that moment on, the matter could not be discussed anymore without politicized domestic and international pressures. The states that wished to become members of NATO saw this message as a clear signal to lobby for their cause with increased fervour. Those who were opposed saw this as a call to harden their opposition against NATO expansion.

The result was clear. Under pressure from the military and the security apparatus, and, indeed, the civil war in Yugoslavia and NATO’s actions in the region, Yeltsin hardened his position and became an outspoken voice against NATO enlargement. On 9 September 1995, during an international press conference, the Russian president exclaimed that the expansion of NATO “will mean a conflagration of war throughout Europe, for sure”.⁸⁹ Kozyrev, Russia’s most Western-oriented minister of foreign affairs, considered two primary motives that could subvert Russia’s democratic experiment: the economy and NATO’s expansion to the East.⁹⁰ Yevgeni Primakov, at that time the director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service



(SVR), wrote a report in 1993 saying that NATO's expansion would force the military "to reappraise their defensive concepts, the reorganization of the armed forces, a review of the operational allocation of theatres of hostilities, the development of an additional infrastructure, the redeployment of major troop contingents, and the alteration of operational plans and the nature of combat training". Furthermore, it would stimulate a "siege mentality" in the country as well as foster isolationist trends, with all the negative consequences that would have for the implementation of the course of reforms".⁹¹

As mentioned, the enlargement of NATO started with the (legitimate) security request of the Visegrad countries and the process of acceptance of NATO membership went through a complex and challenging process that developed during the presidency of the Clinton administration, especially during his first term as president (1993-1997). However, during his second presidential period (1997-2001), NATO enlargement became one of Clinton's main presidential objectives. Fervent supporters of this policy, such as Madeline Albright and Richard Holbrook, would support him in his efforts. There are several reasons for that. During his first presidential term, one of Clinton's main objectives was to support Yeltsin and his democratic and economic reforms. It was a policy that Strobe Talbot mainly managed.⁹² As the political developments in Russia made clear, including Yeltsin's bombing of the Russian parliament in 1993 and the First Chechen War (1994-1996), this was not an outspoken success. It became evident that, from the outside, Russia's democratic, social and economic downward spiral was impossible to stop. On the contrary, foreign meddling only complicated the existing chaos and uncertainty. Was this a failure of liberal-inspired policy?⁹³

In any case, Russia's fate remained uncertain. Perhaps this last observation influenced Clinton's decision to make NATO enlargement a top priority during his second presidential term (1997-2001) while he nevertheless maintained a "dual-track" policy. As a result, he pushed his NATO enlargement policy while he tried to appease Russia with several proposals to keep Russia close, yet outside the Western security architecture.

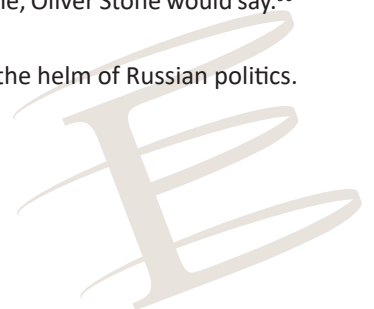
The Partnership for Peace programme, the adaptation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (originally signed on 19 November 1990 and updated in 1999), and the NATO Russia Foundation Act (Paris, 27 May 1997), among other initiatives, were examples of Clinton's attempts to convince Russia to agree with NATO's enlargement policy.⁹⁴ The NATO Russia Foundation Act, for example, promised closer consultation and cooperation among the former adversaries.

Among other elements, Russia agreed with the following principles:⁹⁵

- To commit to norms of international behaviour as reflected in the UN Charter and OSCE documents, as well as more explicit commitments such as respecting states' sovereignty, independence, and right to choose the means to ensure their security and the peaceful settlement of disputes.
- Not to delay, limit or dilute NATO's opening for the accession of new members, nor to see any new NATO member relegated to second class status.

The NATO Russia Founding act clearly expressed NATO's intention to endorse its open-door policy as described in Article 10 of the NATO Treaty. Thus, if there were any doubts about promises made by the West to Russia concerning the eastwards enlargement of the Alliance, the Russia-NATO Foundation Act is crystal-clear. Nevertheless, despite Russia's commitment to the Founding Act, ambivalence about NATO's enlargement kept lingering among the Russian elite. Sometimes, Boris Yeltsin was privately cooperative with the Western negotiators while publicly stubbornly opposing NATO's expansion and vice versa. The president's ambiguity and inconsistency towards the issue may be qualified as typical of his presidency, leaving the Russian Federation in social and economic despair and military collapse. A dark time, Oliver Stone would say.⁹⁶

In a context of political intrigue and social upheaval, Vladimir Putin unexpectedly arrived at the helm of Russian politics.



The exact conditions which brought him to power are still shrouded in mystery.⁹⁷ Was it an ill-informed selection as a result of a ruthless power struggle within the Kremlin? A balanced choice of the inner circle of Yeltsin – the so-called “Family” – that turned out differently than intended? A conspiracy initiated at the FSB headquarters on Lubyanka Square?⁹⁸ Whatever it may be, Putin inherited a country in complete disarray. The sinking of the nuclear-powered submarine Kursk on 12 August 2000, killing all 118 personnel on board, and the way the Russian authorities handled the disaster may be considered as exemplary of the situation in which the Russian state found itself at that time.⁹⁹

Against all odds, the new Kremlin man succeeded in restoring order in state matters and a certain level of predictability for the Russian people. One can discuss the methods he used to achieve this goal. Indeed, Putin did not shy away from intimidation, the use of violence, and, if necessary, the killing of his opponents. The brutal war in Chechnya, his handling of his political rivals, such as Michal Khodorkovsky, and his suppression of critical voices, such as Sergei Yushenkov, Paul Klebnikov, Alexander Litvinenko, Anna Politkovskaya, Natalia Estemirova, Boris Nemtsov, Aleksey Navalny, and many others, were clear signs of his relentless approach. Nevertheless, Putin’s popularity grew fast, resulting in a solid base of popular support. Based on the figures of the Levada center, his approval rate has never dropped below 60% since the year 2000.¹⁰⁰ (As a reminder and a clear indicator, in a wave of nationalistic and anti-Western rhetoric, Putin’s approval rate spiked above 80% in the period 2014-18, the period in which he annexed the Crimea Peninsula, waged war against Ukraine in the Donbas, and projected Russian military power in Syria to support the regime of Bashar al-Assad).¹⁰¹

Despite his tough domestic policy and his Soviet nostalgia – he rehabilitated Stalin, who may count on a popular approval rate of 70% (2019); he revived the Soviet anthem; the Soviet-style military parades; and Soviet-era medals – Putin’s foreign policy towards the West was at some point outspokenly cooperative. Former NATO Secretary-General George Robertson (1999-2003) recently testified about his cordial relationship with the Russian president.¹⁰²

Several observations may substantiate this. For instance, Putin supported the US in its battle against terrorism in Afghanistan as a result of the 9/11 attack and gave his famous speech in the German Bundestag, praising Russian-German relations and advocating building the European home, including a new relationship with NATO not based on declarations but “on partnership, equality, and mutual respect”.¹⁰³ In this context, on his first trip to Brussels, Mr. Putin delivered a speech in the Egmont Palace on 3 October 2001, in which he said, “Whether Western leaders heard our signals, signalling our great readiness to cooperate and interact. We have a feeling that those signals were heeded. [...] We have felt clear changes in President Bush’s position and attitude [...] Approximately the same feeling I have gathered from my meetings with my partners in the European Union. And the practical proposals made by the Secretary-General of NATO runs in the same direction [...] We are ready for this”.¹⁰⁴ Remarkably, within this context of optimism, Russia’s formal stance on NATO’s enlargement stayed unchanged and crystal-clear: “I think we should abandon this logic under which every time the subject matter of NATO enlargement is discussed, it creates some kind of destructive, rather than productive argument”.¹⁰⁵

Concerning NATO membership, it is noteworthy to recall a conversation in the year 2000 that took place between Lord Robertson and Putin as it is very revealing of Russia’s mentality. It may even be considered the main obstacle to building an inclusive European security architecture with Russia. During this conversation, Putin said: “When are you going to invite us to join NATO?”. To which Robertson answered: “Well, we don’t invite people to join NATO, they apply to join NATO”. Putin replied: “Well, we’re not standing in line with a lot of countries that don’t matter”.¹⁰⁶ As long as Russia complies with this “Axe and Icon” mentality, which demands respect and submission, small European countries will not trust the Kremlin.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, it is exactly this great power stance and disdain for “small countries” that motivate the latter to apply for NATO membership. This might also be one of the reasons why, later, Medvedev’s Proposals for a New Pan-European Security Regime (2008) were met with deep distrust.¹⁰⁸



Over time, irritation and distrust with Western security institutions only grew in the Kremlin. Putin had high expectations concerning his outreached hand to the West. Yet, several events, among others, increased his irritation:

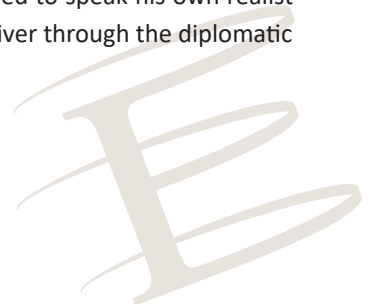
- NATO's bombing campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War (1999).
- The US withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty on 13 June 2002.
- The US plan to build a NATO missile defence system in Europe, initiated in 2002.
- The acceptance of Bulgaria, the Baltic states, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia – the so-called Vilnius Group – as members of NATO on 29 March 2004.
- The US Middle East policy centred around the “Axis of Evil,” misleadingly motivating the invasion of Iraq (2003) and the rivalry with Iran.
- The West's support for the so-called “colour revolutions”. These were protest movements using nonviolent civil disobedience to overthrow governments, as observed during the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003-04), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005). Moscow, clearly unhappy about this phenomenon of civil protest, accused the West of helping to stage these protest movements and, as such, meddling in the domestic affairs of sovereign countries.

Did Putin feel ignored, misunderstood, or rejected by the West? In any case, Putin steadily lost his trust in the West. As a result, on 10 February 2007, Putin gave his famous Munich speech in which he spoke his mind about international security problems, without “pleasant but empty diplomatic terms”.¹⁰⁹ It was a relentless rant against the US-led unipolar world, the non-ratification of the newly negotiated CFE treaty (1999) by NATO members, and the ongoing process of NATO enlargement.

Specifically concerning the latter, Putin said: “I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them. But I will allow myself to remind this audience of what was said. I want to quote the speech of NATO General Secretary Mr. Wörner in Brussels on 17 May 1990. He said at the time that: ‘the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee’. Where are these guarantees?”¹¹⁰

Robert Gates, a renowned Cold Warrior and at that time Secretary of Defense of the United States, was present at the meeting. As the official representative of the US government, he was expected to reply to the Russian President. In contrast to Putin's sermon, he chose a disarming, almost humorous tone stressing in his speech that none of the US actions Putin was referring to were targeted against Russia and that the US did not intend to initiate a new Cold War.

Remarkably, in his memoirs, Gates made some surprising remarks concerning this incident. Based on Putin's speech, he realized that from 1993 onward, the relationship with Russia had been badly mismanaged. As such, he considered the US agreements with the Romanian and Bulgarian governments to rotate troops through bases in those countries as needlessly provocative. Moreover, he considered trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO truly overreaching as it recklessly ignored what the Russians considered their own vital national interests.¹¹¹ In other words, Robert Gates' opinion shifted depending on whether he represented the official US point of view or he was allowed to speak his own realist mind. Whatever it may be, Putin's Munich speech was like an ice-cold shower that sent a shiver through the diplomatic corridors of Europe.



In the summer of 2008, another warning was transmitted to the West when Russian troops invaded Georgia, a country with Western aspirations and an overzealous President.¹¹² Was it a response to NATO's Bucharest summit in April 2008, during which Ukraine and Georgia were not offered immediate membership to NATO due to Germany and France's opposition, yet membership in the future was envisaged?

Despite the West's surprise, agony, and disappointment with Russia's military action in the Southern Caucasus, a more fundamental outcome of this war has been observed. Indeed, in spite of the fact that Russia quite easily achieved its military goals in Georgia, it became clear that the Russian army was confronted with several operational problems.¹¹³ For the Kremlin, this was the trigger point to take military reform seriously. Led by the Minister of Defence, Anatoliy Serdyukov, Russia started to implement an all-compassing programme of reorganisation, modernization, and training of its armed forces. It was supported by strategic concepts such as hybrid and decision-centric warfare.¹¹⁴ Moreover, operational planning was rehearsed in each operational direction during large-scale military drills (Tsentr-2019, Kavkaz-2020, ZAPAD-21). The results of the reform and modernization program and Russia's increasing military self-confidence can be observed in operations conducted in Ukraine (2014), Syria (2015), and the current military operations in Ukraine.¹¹⁵ In short, Russia's military build-up has been a clear priority in Russian policy that has been well-documented, since at least 2010.¹¹⁶

Putin's warnings aside, the mutual frustrations and the divide between Russia and the West kept growing. The following events, among others, have contributed to this situation:

- The recognition of Kosovo as an independent state by the majority of the EU and NATO countries, while Russia, China, and 95 other states do not recognize Kosovo as an independent state.
- The flat rejection of Medvedev's Proposals for a New Pan-European Security Regime (2008).
- In 2009, two members of the so-called Balkan group – Albania and Croatia – became members of NATO. (In 2017 and 2020, respectively Montenegro and North Macedonia joined NATO);
- Western support for the Arab Spring protests in the MENA region in 2011, especially in Syria and Libya.¹¹⁷ Irina Zvyagelskaya, a research fellow of the influential Russian Institute of Oriental Studies commented on this: "Later, due to the growing interference of Western countries in the region's affairs, new interpretations gained momentum. The perception formed that any anti-government action was in one way or another organized with Western assistance, above all in light of the 'colour revolutions' in the post-Soviet space (Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan), whose objective, many in Russia believed, was to take these states out of the sphere of Russian influence".¹¹⁸
- US-Led Operation Odyssey Dawn and NATO-led Operation Unified Protector in Libya in 2011 that led to the execution by insurgents of long-time Libyan leader Muammar el-Qaddafi and civil war.
- The open support of Western politicians, journalists, and activists for the so-called Snow Revolution in Russia in 2011-2012, including the mass protest against election fraud on Bolotnaya Square and broader anti-regime marches in December 2011.

The mass protests that occurred in Russia in 2011-12 can be qualified as a game-changer in Russian politics.¹¹⁹ Alarmed by these protests, and aware of their political significance, both Putin's domestic and foreign policy became less restrained, if not openly aggressive, transforming Russia into a full-fledged autocratic state and an increasingly aggressive player in the international arena. The hardening of Putin's regime has been realised by the increasing influence of the *Siloviki* at the expense of the liberals-technocrats.¹²⁰ The influence of the *Siloviki* was not a new phenomenon in Russian politics. Yet, the one-sidedness of their influence, in other words, the fact that a very select group of advisors surrounds Putin, driving him in a kind of isolation, is a relatively new phenomenon that has significantly influenced Russian politics.

Domestically, it was indeed the first time that Putin was confronted with mass protests against his regime and for what it stood: electoral fraud, institutional corruption, arbitrary use of power, lack of independent judiciary and parliamentary control, etc. It was not that the regime was in danger or that the protest mobilized the whole of society (Putin could still count on an approval rate of 62%).¹²¹ Nevertheless, the regime clearly panicked. In overdrive, it used all possible means to suppress the protest and eliminate the opposition, including legislative measures, the use of violence and intimidation, imprisonment, the organization of counter-protests, and cyber measures against its citizens. Not surprisingly, Putin accused the West of supporting these protests in an act to undermine his regime. The poisoning of Navalny and his imprisonment in January 2021, and, especially, the closure of Memorial, the oldest and most prominent human rights association of Russia with its origin in the period of perestroika, through the controversial NGO and “foreign agents” laws, in December 2021, can be seen as the latest highlights of Putin’s anti-democratic policy. (It is noteworthy to observe the same pattern of events in Belarus in 2020-2021 and in Kazakhstan in 2022, where the regimes of respectively President Alexander Lukashenko and President Kassim-Jomart Tokayev came under pressure due to mass protest and social unrest. Unsurprisingly, Russia supported the autocrats in their attempts to hold on to power, transforming them into puppets of the Kremlin).

In the field of foreign affairs, Putin’s policy became more assertive, if not outspokenly aggressive. Besides the already mentioned military interventions in Ukraine and Syria, Russia’s strategy is inspired by hybrid warfare, blending kinetic and non-kinetic means to achieve its political goals.¹²² As such, “active measures”, cyber, and political operations have been targeting the West, exploiting the fault lines of our societies with the disruption of our way of life as the main goal. Provocative maritime and aerial military manoeuvres have been carried out in order to test, intimidate, and disrupt Western security and military forces. In short, Russia is using political, diplomatic, economic, and other non-military measures in combination with the use of military force to exploit the West’s weaknesses and to achieve its political goals.

Some last remarks are noteworthy on this issue of NATO enlargement and the policy of Vladimir Putin.

Russian policy towards the West and its attitude towards NATO enlargement is clear, as it is officially stipulated in Russia’s foreign policy doctrine issued at the end of November 2016: “Systemic problems in the Euro-Atlantic region that have accumulated over the last quarter-century are manifested in the geopolitical expansion pursued by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) along with their refusal to begin implementation of political statements regarding the creation of a common European security and cooperation framework, have resulted in a serious crisis in the relations between Russia and the Western States. The containment policy adopted by the United States and its allies against Russia, and political, economic, information, and other pressure Russia is facing from them undermine regional and global stability, are detrimental to the long-term interests of all sides, and run counter to the growing need for cooperation and addressing transnational challenges and threats in today’s world.”¹²³

It is clear that in an authoritarian regime, the role of the leader is different compared with this role in democratic regimes. In an authoritarian state, the regime’s survival depends on the power position of the leader and his cronies. Despite this observation, Western analyses of Russia’s policy are overly focused on Putin and his personae. Moreover, calling Putin “the new Hitler”, which is wrong,¹²⁴ or “a murderer”, which might be only indirectly true,¹²⁵ is not a wisely informed communication strategy. It diverts the attention of the detached analyst. As shown throughout this essay, the Russian view against NATO enlargement is broadly supported by the Russian elite and consistent over the last 30 years. It is not a specific Putin issue. Moreover, Putin, although he has adopted a harsher policy over time, is not a brainless nationalist zealot. Instead, there are much harsher voices in Russian politics with much more outspoken anti-Western views than

Putin. For instance, political figures with influence on Russia's foreign and military posture such as Nikolai Patrushev (Russia's National Security Advisor), Sergey Naryshkin (Director of SVR, Russia's foreign intelligence Service), Alexander Bortnikov (Director of the FSB, Russia's Intelligence service), Sergey Shoygu (Minister of Defense), Igor Kostyukov (head of the Russian General Staff's Main Intelligence Department, GRU), and Viktor Zolotov (Commander in Chief of the National Guard) have much more outspoken and uncompromising anti-Western views than Putin.

Thus, instead of focusing on Putin as the only source of Russian power and decision-making system, we should be carefully watching the "changes of the guard" in an attempt to get insight into the nature, the form, and the dynamics of the Russian decision-making system and, thus, ultimately Russia's attitude and posture in the international arena. For instance, the question of who will replace Vladimir Putin at the helm of Russian power and what the effect will be on Russian policy is an important but difficult analytical question. Other analytical questions might be: is the policy of Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya affecting the power of the Kremlin?¹²⁶ Does Putin's excessive focus on geopolitical issues divert him from domestic stability?¹²⁷ What about the youth factor: are they the drivers of change and modernization in Russia?¹²⁸ In other words, besides the old "technique" of Kremlinology, sociological, demographical, and economic developments are equally important to study in order to understand developments in Russia. What is clear is that moral indignation is seldom a sound strategic advisor. Instead, the net assessment framework, pioneered by Andrew Marshall, is a more sophisticated and practical tool to analyse Russian military policy and more informative to develop a counter-strategy against Russia's hostile posture.¹²⁹

There are many opaque elements in Russian policymaking, but one element is clear and straightforward, and has been for the last three decades: Russian opposition to NATO expansion. One can dismiss this attitude. One can be outraged, indignant, or disappointed about this attitude. Yet, one cannot ignore it, especially since Russia's growing self-confidence and assertive behaviour in the international arena, based on its military power.

Therefore, two rhetorical questions remain:

1. Have we thought through this potential situation when the NATO enlargement policy was adopted by NATO and its member states? Have we considered all the consequences of our choices, including the risk to go to war for any and all the 30 members of the Alliance?
2. If so, why are we surprised to see what is happening along Ukraine's border; why are we so ill-prepared to formulate a strategic answer; and why have we lost the strategic initiative on NATO's Eastern flank?



Beyond Ukraine's tipping point: the end of the post-war world

Euphoria is very seldom a sound strategic advisor, while trauma is a very powerful driver of strategy. As soon as the Cold War ended, the West was confronted with another difficult security dilemma: on the one hand, the Central and Eastern European countries requested protection against Russia's sphere of influence in case of resurrection. On the other hand, Western key players had to cope with Russia, their main opponent which, both strong or weak, posed a security risk. NATO has chosen to apply its open-door policy and to grant protection to eligible Central and Eastern European states. At the same time, the alliance was well aware of Russia's opposition to this policy: Russia saw it as a – real or imagined – betrayal and felt threatened by NATO eastwards expansion. Clearly, a security stalemate was in the making as soon as Russia had rediscovered its self-assurance, and it has nestled itself back into the Russian tradition: a paradoxical combination of vulnerability, ambition, and militarism.

Within this context, West European states significantly cut their military spending, resulting in the so-called peace dividend. At the same time, the all-volunteer force was installed, while in other countries military conscription was significantly shortened in time. Defence lost its significance, and societies, both mentally and materially, became demilitarized. We were enjoying the high points of the post-war world. Yet at the same time, serious security engagements were assumed East of the Oder.

In 2022, with Putin's war threat in the East, the possibility of being involved in a war has become a notion that most of our citizens, not least the young people born in the post-2000 world, have rejected or never even considered. This realization, the fact that the possibility of war may overshadow our lives, the fact that our lives will not be carefree and light-hearted, indeed free, is the ultimate effect of Putin's military manoeuvres along and inside Ukraine. This is a sad but realistic assessment. It is a brutal awakening from a state of complacency, illusionary optimism, and overconfidence, a condition that in another context has been called "a state of sleepwalking."

As a result, even without a Russian invasion in Ukraine but certainly now that it has been launched, Europe will experience an uninvited yet necessary process of re-militarization, including: augmented military budgets and increased investment in cyber and energy security; a review of its critical infrastructure; a renewed build-up of military capabilities and strategic stocks; and, where applicable, a renewed debate over conscription. By the way, this is also the best way to support Ukraine and its citizens. Only with a credible military posture and the will to apply military force if needed can one stop opponents who allow themselves military adventures.

Finally, and most importantly. For those who decide about future steps in the expansion of our alliances, both NATO or the EU: Please do not base your decision upon idealistic, value-based arguments. Do not enlarge because you want to secure democracy. This doesn't work. Hungary and Poland are clear examples of this illusion. Instead, pose yourself one simple question:

Are you able and willing to wage war for your allies, old and new, wherever they are located on the European map, whatever the size of these countries, regardless of the specific history or security concerns of these states, whether it be Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Montenegro, Hungary, Poland, Albania, Turkey, or, in case, Ukraine or Georgia?



Only if this question receives a clear and uncompromising affirmative answer should you push the button of enlargement and accept the consequences of your choice. If you have the slightest doubt, do not push that button. Do not even consider it. It is not honest towards these new allies and it undermines the credibility of the Alliance as well as your own security guarantees. In the end, military security is a serious matter.



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Leipzig. Moreover, there were some brawls nearby some Stasi stations in Berlin as some KGB stations. The most famous of them was the incident in Dresden, where Vladimir Putin was stationed. Vladimir Putin has described a ‘traumatic experience’ in Dresden when his KGB post was surrounded by German protesters who demanded access to the building. (Vladimir Putin, *First Person, An Astonishingly Frank Self portrait by Russia’s President*, London: Hutchinson, pp. 76-81.); (2) According to Vyacheslav Kochemasov, the last Soviet diplomat in the GDR, the Soviet military command in Moscow had considered and suggested a military deployment in October and November 1989. On the night of 9 November 1989, the general command of the Soviet Western Group of Forces in Germany was put on the highest alert, ready to engage whenever necessary. (Egon Krenz, *Op.Cit.*, 2019, p. 254.)

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