

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

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### Abstract

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

### Keywords

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

### 1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2 Continuities

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### *4 Lessons for the West*

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

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

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

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, the comprehensive studies by iSANS (isans.org).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 5 Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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