



RUSSIAN MILITARY BUILD-UP AROUND UKRAINE – PART 1

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INTRODUCTION

The Ukraine Crisis in Context

The recent months have been dominated by a military and diplomatic crisis centred on fears about a Russian military attack on Ukraine and the Russian government's demands that diplomatic negotiations are required to address its long-standing grievances with regard to prevailing European security arrangements. Against this backdrop, the Russian Analytical Digest (RAD) invited a range of scholars and commentators to write short comments. The comments in this edition were completed on or before 14 February 2022, and thus reflect the authors' perspectives at this time. The views outlined in these comments are those of the named authors and not the RAD editorial board. The intention is that the comments cover a wide range of prevalent opinions, perspectives and thematic foci of relevance to the ongoing crisis. The next RAD issue, which is planned for next week, will present further comments.

COMMENTARY

(No New) Lessons Learned

By Irina Busygina (Higher School of Economics, Saint Petersburg)

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Russia's continuing military buildup on the border with Ukraine makes it clear that the stakes are much higher now than any time since 2014. As a result of the events of the last months, have we learned anything new about Russian foreign policy? The decision-making process in Russian foreign policy remains a "black box", we still do not know exactly which elite groups make certain decisions. So, analysts can only formulate informed guesses. I would say that, although we probably have not learned anything fundamentally new, the processes of recent months have allowed us to clarify some perceptions and possibly reaffirm certain guesses.

One of the most widespread conclusions (especially in the Western expert community) in recent years has been that Russian foreign policy is a tool of domestic politics, and moreover a mostly successful one in this regard. In other words, loud foreign policy statements and high-profile Russian foreign policy activism operate to maintain the incumbent president's popularity. This popularity is the main pillar for the stability of the political regime in Russia, and the guarantee of the political survival of its incumbent leader. So, it is not the West that is the addressee of the present "big ruckus", but rather the internal Russian audience. Indeed, this interpretation used to be a rather convincing argument.

However, the domestic demand for a "small victorious war" has evidently fallen in Russia. As recent polls by the Levada Center show, the majority of Russian citizens blame the West for the current escalation in ten-

sions, almost entirely absolving their political leadership from responsibility. At the same time, however, there is no mobilization of public opinion around the Russian leader, and the approval ratings of the president and the government have not been growing in recent months. The authorities cannot fail to understand and see this. Consequently, the argument about foreign policy as a continuation of domestic policy loses its cogency. I suggest that Russian foreign policy has indeed become "detached" from domestic politics.

Another conclusion that many experts have drawn from Russia's past foreign policy actions is that Russian President Putin likes to leave himself space to choose, and relies on the unpredictability of his external behavior. Indeed, if building a stable relationship of trust with the West is not the goal, then the unpredictable behavior may offer some advantages. However, these advantages are not strategic, but tactical. In other words, an approach that cannot be used in the long term. After 2014, Western countries no longer consider Russia to be predictable in any case, that is, in their calculations they *already* factor in Russia's unpredictability. The 2014 Ukrainian crisis is often described as a "game changer" for Russia's relations with the West. But this was also a "critical juncture"—a moment when Western policy towards Russia was radically changed, and new institutions—sanctions regimes—have emerged, and Russia's unpredictability became an indispensable premise on which Western expertise on Russia is framed.

Finally, the current crisis demonstrates how much importance Russia really (not declaratively) attaches to the different dimensions outlined in its foreign policy. In official declarations, the Russian leadership states that the post-Soviet space is an unconditional priority for Russian foreign policy. The current crisis shows, however, that it is not like this at all. By building up its military on the border to Ukraine, President Putin in fact sends the West a signal that he would like to see the fate of Ukraine discussed directly between Washington and Moscow, in a so called “Yalta 2.0”.

From this perspective, the current escalation is a part of Russia’s great power repertoire, based on the idea that major powers get together and decide the fate of smaller nations in Europe and elsewhere. However, Russia’s great power agenda is inconsistent with its regional agenda—the aim of playing the role of a regional leader for its post-Soviet neighbors. The attempts to build up the image of Russia as a “great power” provokes a reduc-

tion of its actual influence in the post-Soviet region. The more Russia acts as a “great power”, the less credible are Putin’s promises to respect the national sovereignty of the former Soviet republics. In other words, Putin’s global ambitions principally hinder the integration of the post-Soviet space and significantly limits its scope. To put it simply: if Russia deliberately peddles its great power agenda, it gives up its ambitions to dominate and control in the post-Soviet space, because it will be impossible to reconcile these two agendas in a consistent manner.

Russian foreign policy is internally inconsistent, whether in its domestic purposes, its neighborhood, or in relation to the West. The crucial question that remains open is: Will such a foreign policy pay off for Russia? Based on the insights gained over the last few months, Russia’s foreign policies efforts seem to be misaligned with its aims to act as both a great power and the leader in the post-Soviet space.

About the Author

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COMMENTARY

Russia’s Showdown over NATO Has Been a Long Time in the Making

By Ben Aris (BNE, Berlin)

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The talk is of war and an imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine, but this prospect hasn’t come out of the blue. Russian President Vladimir Putin has been complaining about NATO’s expansion for more than a decade, which he says threatens Russia’s security.

From the Kremlin’s point of view, Russia has been excluded from the current European security arrangements, which de facto defines it as “the enemy”. Indeed,

amongst the eight point list of demands that the Russian Foreign Ministry sent the west in December was one asking for an acknowledgement that “we are not enemies”, as well as the better known “no more NATO expansion eastwards and especially not for Ukraine” demand.

Some have argued that Putin has turned his guns on Ukraine as he abhors a democracy and sees a flourishing

Ukraine as a threat, but this idea holds little water as Russia maintains good relationships with many democracies, including Armenia with which it has a military alliance; they are both members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

The roots of the current crisis run much deeper than that, and began with the verbal promises made to Mikhail Gorbachev in a key meeting with US Secretary of State James Baker on February 9, 1990, in which Baker promised that NATO would expand “not one inch” to the east. The nature of these promises have remained controversial ever since. However, these promises are now a matter of historical record, after dozens of embassy, government and other documents were declassified and are now freely available on the internet. Those verbal promises were repeated by multiple western leaders at the time, although nothing was ever put on paper.

Putin has brought up the issue of Baker’s promises many times. In his famous Munich Security Conference address in 2007, Putin made his unhappiness with NATO’s expansion explicit. He specifically referred to a speech given by then NATO General Secretary Manfred Woerner, who said: “The fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee.”

Those promises have no legal standing, but it is clear that Putin intends to hold NATO to those commitments, by using the threat of force if necessary. And, he wants to get such a commitment recorded on paper, hence the Kremlin’s repeated insistence on “legally binding guarantees.”

During his first term in office, starting in 2000, Putin made several attempts to move politically closer to Europe and remake the post-Cold War security arrangements. His first foreign trip was to London to meet Tony Blair, a visit in which he signed off on a 50:50 joint venture between Russian oil major TNK and the British oil major BP on very favourable terms.

He also asked to join both the EU and NATO, but was rebuffed on both occasions. NATO told him that Russia could apply, but Putin replied that Russia “would not queue up with a lot of other unimportant countries” to join the alliance and the idea was dropped.

Relations worsened significantly after the US unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) in 2002, one of the pillars of Europe’s Cold War security infrastructure. Washington also later ditched the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and the OSCE Open Skies Treaty that allows overflights of other signatories territory to monitor arms distributions. This process was only brought to an end in the first week of US president Joe Biden’s term in office when he renewed the START III nuclear missile treaty

and Biden made it clear that he wanted to restart arms control talks.

Putin’s 2007 Munich speech is widely taken as the turning point, with Putin warning that if NATO expansion did not stop then Russia would start to push back.

As relations continued to deteriorate Putin bit the bullet in 2012 and started a crash course military modernisation in 2012. It was a dramatic decision as it sacrificed the relative prosperity that Russia had enjoyed during the boom years of the noughties. The former finance minister Alexei Kudrin, who had overseen this economic revival, objected to the re-tasking of the budget and was very publically sacked. The real income growth that Russian citizens had enjoyed for almost a decade evaporated and the economy began to stagnate as GDP growth fell to zero in 2013 despite oil prices remaining at \$100.

Relations with European states fell to an all-time low in 2014 when Putin annexed Crimea. The Euro-aidan revolution of dignity saw a pro-Western government installed in Ukraine that aspired to join the EU, although little mention of NATO membership was made at that time. Putin calculated that Ukraine was drifting out of Russia’s orbit and that US contractors had already offered to upgrade the ports on the peninsula, so Putin cut his losses and took Crimea to secure control over the key Russian naval base in Sevastopol once and for all.

The decision was also part of a wider naval strategy that has seen Russia re-establish itself as a naval force in the Mediterranean after an absence of almost two decades.

With all these pieces in place, Putin was ready to finally demand, and force if necessary, a new pan-European security deal on the West.

The diplomatic drive to this end kicked off in February 2020 during a disastrous visit to Moscow by the European Union’s top diplomat Josep Borrell, during which Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov delivered a new rules of the game speech that set the bar at zero: Russia would no longer tolerate the dual policy of doing business with one hand and imposing sanctions with the other. Lavrov later threatened to break off diplomatic relations with the EU entirely and Moscow did break off diplomatic relations with NATO that October.

Putin appears to have been preparing for the current showdown for at least a decade. The dispute is about more than just Russia’s control or influence on Ukraine, it is about a complete remake of Europe’s security infrastructure and Putin has already made huge sacrifices to put himself in a position to withstand any measures the West can throw at Russia.

Despite Russia Inc being in healthy profit, the Central Bank of Russia (CBR) has built up reserves of over

\$630bn—17 months of import cover, although three is generally considered sufficient. It has paid down its debt and has the lowest debt in the world among major economies. And the government has been in effect running austerity budgets since 2012.

The resulting Fiscal Fortress makes Russia largely impervious to sanctions, but it has also held the economy's potential growth to 2%, far below its potential say economists. If the tensions with the West disappeared and the cash pile was spent or if the government and businesses were allowed to leverage up, then the econ-

omy would boom. But that won't happen unless Putin can win a new security deal that he is confident will fulfil Russia's security needs.

If not, then Putin's annexation of Crimea shows that he is willing to make considerable sacrifices for the sake of Russian security, which he clearly puts at the top of his list of priorities, ahead of peace and prosperity, and is probably willing to start a new Cold War if he is not reassured by a new framework and turn to China as its long-term partner, despite Moscow's preference for a partnership with Europe.

About the Author

Ben Aris is the founder and editor-in-chief of business new europe (bne), the leading English-language publication covering business, economics, finance and politics of the 30 countries of the former Soviet Union, Central and South-eastern Europe and Eurasia.

COMMENTARY

“All-in” for Status. Russia's Risky Wargame with (in) Europe

By Maria Raquel Freire (Centre for Social Studies University of Coimbra) and Regina Heller (Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, Hamburg)

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Via Ukraine, Moscow prepares the ground both rhetorically and practically for making clear that Russia has legitimate security interests and that the West has no business being in Russia's neighborhood. Pushing for major power status by threatening war is a risky game.

Russia's Status Problems

The Ukraine conflict has intensified in recent weeks. Europe faces a serious security crisis. Russia ramped up its military forces along Ukraine's border. The West signals rigor, support for Ukraine, and adherence to its principles. At the same time, diplomatic activity is skyrocketing to ease tensions, as fears of war also increase in both Russia and the West. The goal of Russia's massive show of force is no longer only compelling rebellious Ukraine back to the negotiation table. Rather, the purpose is to lend weight to Moscow's demands issued in its proposal to NATO to stop further expanding to the East and to ultimately settle open questions of European security in a way that is acceptable to Russia.

From the Kremlin's perspective, the stakes are high. Russia is in danger of irreversibly losing its status as a regional power and of sinking into irrelevance in

matters of European security. This outlook weighs heavily, increasing the Kremlin's willingness to create facts on the ground. Ukraine is the linchpin, where Russia's status problems come together and, according to Moscow's will, should be resolved. The threat of war seems the best way to achieve these goals.

Identity: Russia as a Major Power

Influence in Ukraine's domestic affairs as well as control over its external policy secures the material foundations of the collective identity, which the Putin regime has promoted over many years and to which it has tied its political fate—i.e., its identity as a major power. Along with the claim of being a nuclear superpower on par with the US, this narrative has a regional dimension, claiming “exclusive” rights in Russia's neighborhood, as well as a European dimension, demanding an equal say in matters of European security. From the Kremlin's position, since the breakup of the Soviet Union and especially in the context of NATO enlargement, the West has ignored its claim of “indivisible” security in Europe. With Ukraine choosing its own path, turning westwards and dismissing Russian hegemony, Russia's status as a regional power is also under threat.

Opportunity: the Time is Now

Developments in Ukraine as well as in the international realm are leading Moscow to push more forcefully for major power status right now. From Russia's viewpoint, the window for maintaining a foothold in Donbas is gradually closing. Last year, a negotiated solution over Donbas with Kiev seemed tangible for the Kremlin, after Moscow had deployed forces at the Russian–Ukrainian border and a US–Russia summit took place thereafter. However, US approval of the Nord Stream 2 completion and the West's overhasty withdrawal from Afghanistan spurred fears in Kiev that the West could withdraw its support for Ukraine. These events triggered renewed resistance to further complying with the Minsk accords as well as more efforts to intensify defense cooperation with NATO. Drones delivered by Turkey to Ukraine and further military support might not be enough to change the military balance of power, but may provide grounds for a bloody war that no one wants.

An open window seems the West's current weakness. The Biden administration is still dealing with fallout from its Afghanistan withdrawal and faces difficult circumstances at home. In the EU, divisions remain an easy target for Russia. Presidential elections in France, a new government in Germany, and the effects of the pandemic have hampered Western alignment. Hybrid warfare, both toward Ukraine and Europe and the US, has been creating and will continue to create confusion and dissent. In the face of conflict escalation, the West has only slowly gotten off the ground and has stayed busy unscrambling Putin's conundrums.

Managing Loss: Can the Kremlin Handle the Costs of Confrontation?

Russia's economy is better prepared for confrontation with the West than it was in 2014. Despite two years of pandemic hardship, the government has secured macroeconomic stability. It stocked up Russia's foreign cur-

rency reserves and furthered the nationalizing and dedollarizing of the economy. Moreover, the Kremlin can take advantage of revenues from the relatively high price of energy and threatens Europe with supply cuts amid the latter's continuing dependence on gas.

While all these facts can cushion immediate economic damage, they most likely cannot prevent more structural economic problems emanating from a war. Severe Western sanctions, such as against large-scale Russian banks, combined with geopolitical instability, would discourage investments, raise the costs of attracting capital and further retard growth.

However, the Kremlin has ensured that such a scenario will not negatively impact its domestic power. The strengthened repression apparatus can intimidate and crush societal protest effectively in case dissatisfaction over declining living standards grows. Although the majority of the Russian population believes that the West is the aggressor in the current conflict, the Kremlin is well aware that the 2014 Crimea consensus is no longer mobilizing.

Conclusion

Further developments in the current crisis will depend on how Moscow navigates the three vectors of identity, opportunity and costs. The regime's concept of Russian major power status is based on a backward-looking imperial identity. The Kremlin seems to prefer hedging for economic costs and losses to giving up on Ukraine. Moscow overvalues short-term successes, enforcing negotiations with the West and Ukraine, but ignores long-term consequences: Ukraine will distance further from Russia, and Western countries will reassemble and reach a new consensus on Moscow. Nevertheless, talks about the foundations of European security would be difficult, lengthy and require concessions from all sides. Will Putin truly buy into this strategy?

About the Authors

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COMMENTARY

The Russia–Ukraine Crisis: Where Does Germany Stand?

By Stefan Meister (German Council on Foreign Relations, Berlin)

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The massive Russian troop buildup on the border with Ukraine since December 2021 has served to exert massive pressure on the U.S., NATO, and the EU member states to negotiate a new European security order. For the Russian leadership, the timing seems favorable for delivering an ultimatum to negotiate spheres of influence, guarantees for an end of NATO expansion in Europe, and a withdrawal by the U.S from eastern NATO member states, because they view the U.S. and key European states as weakened. U.S. President Joe Biden had wanted to withdraw from European security policy and give Europeans more responsibility for their own security, in order to focus on the global conflict with China. In France, there will be presidential elections in April, and the right-wing candidates, which are mostly Putin friendly, represent the most dangerous opponents for Emmanuel Macron. Since the German federal election in fall 2021, a traffic light coalition of Social Democrats (SPD) under Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the Greens and Liberals has been governing in Berlin, which has not yet established a consolidated position in dealing with Russia.

The coalition agreement already made it clear that the new German government is committed to greater involvement in the countries of the EU's Eastern Partnership and to the territorial integrity of Ukraine. However, the chapter on relations with Russia is vaguely framed and appears to be a difficult compromise between the

parties. The controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline is not mentioned directly, and only indirectly addressed in a statement that large energy projects are to be regulated by the EU. The polyphony from the Bundestag, the German parliament, on issues such as arms deliveries to Ukraine, the possibility of sanctioning Nord Stream 2 or Russia's disconnection from the international payment system SWIFT in response to any attack on Ukraine has caused irritation among allies in Europe and the U.S. Left-wing SPD politicians, such as Rolf Mützenich, have already questioned “nuclear sharing” during the election campaign. Just a year ago, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (also SPD) had called Nord Stream 2 and energy relations “almost the last bridge” to Russia.

Chancellor Scholz has failed to provide clarity through a lack of communication and ambivalent statements on sanctions and Nord Stream 2. Only on the subject of arms deliveries to Ukraine does there seem to be a consensus in the federal government, namely that there definitely will not be any. The closeness of some SPD politicians to former Chancellor and Chairman of the Board of Directors of Nord Stream 2 Gerhard Schröder, as well as his statements on saber rattling by Ukraine in the current conflict, have further irritated and raised the question of whether Germany is still a reliable ally.

There is no doubt that Germany will fulfill its obligations with regard to NATO's Article 5 and is cur-

rently increasing its troop contingent in Lithuania, as had been planned for some time. Members of the government have made it clear several times that, should a massive Russian attack on Ukraine take place, Nord Stream 2 will not go into operation and the German government will agree to sanctions coordinated with its allies in Europe and the United States. However, the ambivalence in Germany's position and communication does not seem appropriate in light of the current security threat. This behavior reflects the division in German politics and society about how to deal with Russia and Ukraine, as well as a refusal to assume more responsibility for security policy in Europe.

For the last 30 years, Germany was Russia's most important European economic and negotiating partner. Economic interests, Germany's economic importance as well as a sense of historical guilt (World War II) and gratitude (German reunification) have shaped the relationship between the two states. However, those days are over: Russia has slipped to 14th place in German foreign trade and German companies are leaving Russia. The annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas in 2014, as well as Russian disinformation campaigns, the Tiergarten murder, the Russian state's attempt to kill opposition politician Alexei Navalny, and the crackdown on Russian civil society and especially the human rights organization Memorial have led to an alienation between the two states. Russia is increasingly defining Germany as an adversary that it tries to weaken with hacking attacks and disinformation campaigns. German and Russian domestic and foreign policies follow fundamentally contrary goals and interests.

Against this backdrop, German policymakers have failed to adapt their Russia and Eastern Europe policies to current realities and to discuss this honestly with the German public. The government has continued to try to maintain the illusion of a policy of cooperation and engagement that has been going nowhere for years. Chancellor Angela Merkel has long described Nord Stream 2 as an economic project, and her successor Olaf Scholz also named the pipeline a purely private-sector project. The fact that this project primarily pursues geopolitical goals by making Ukraine superfluous as a transit country, and thus puts Ukraine in a posi-

tion in which it can be blackmailed by Russia has been ignored out of economic interests. Russia's transformation into a repressive state internally and an aggressive state externally since 2012, at the latest, has only been rudimentarily perceived in the German public debate in recent years. Germany now buys 55 percent of its gas from Russia and has sold key domestic infrastructure, such as gas storage facilities, to Russian companies. The largest gas storage facility in Germany operated by Gazprom is currently only 3.7 percent full, which could lead to supply bottlenecks in the event of a largescale conflict with Russia. Thus, already under Angela Merkel, Germany had made itself more vulnerable and dependent on an authoritarian state that is increasingly revisionist.

In the process, cracks are running through all major German parties on the question of how to deal with Russia. Pacifism, anti-Americanism, and ignorance of geopolitical and security policy shifts in both Europe and worldwide testify to a denial of reality in German politics. Germany has become the main donor and leader of Ukraine in recent years. For Angela Merkel, the war in the Donbas was a top priority; she used her political capital to negotiate with Russia on this conflict. Nevertheless, all previous federal governments have supported Nord Stream 1 and 2, undermining the goal of strengthening Ukraine. Russia's goal of building Nord Stream 2 aims to take the Ukrainian pipeline off the grid, making the country more vulnerable to Russia. The agreement with U.S. President Biden on Nord Stream 2 from July 2021, the idea of transporting refugees from Belarus to Ukraine by parliamentarians from the governing coalition, unfortunate debates about not supplying weapons due to the WW2 guilt with regard to Russia but not Ukraine, have led to a deep alienation with Ukraine.

For Germany, its international credibility and role as Europe's most important negotiator with the Russian leadership is at stake. The current German government has intervened diplomatically late in the negotiations with Russia. It is still assumed in Berlin that Moscow is bluffing and will not attack in the end, because of the high costs of a military attack on Ukraine. However, there is more at stake than "just" Ukraine. The conflict is also about the future of the European security order and Germany's role as a responsible leading power.

About the Author

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Three Lessons and Three Clues about Putin's Foreign Policy toward Ukraine and the West

By Olexiy Haran (National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy) and Petro Burkovskiy (Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, Kyiv)

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Vladimir Putin has made no secret of his intention to turn the CIS countries into the “friendly” vassal states of what he has called a “resurgent Russia.” The first wake-up calls came in 2003, when the Kremlin bullied Ukraine and Moldova. Moscow deployed military engineers in the Kerch strait in an attempt to change the demarcation line and take control of the maritime routes between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea. The standoff with Ukraine ended in a framework legal agreement that established mutual control and bilateral cooperation in the Sea of Azov.

Today, Russia is using this agreement to harass Ukraine's international trade and fishing industries, openly abusing and violating its provisions, which are written too broadly and therefore allow for different interpretations. Despite the efforts of different Ukrainian governments between 2003 and 2014, Russia has never been willing to clarify these provisions.

The first lesson for foreign leaders who want to deal with Russia is that Putin sees mutually binding agreements only as a tool to find a chink in the other's armor; he will then wait for the best moment to transform this into a cage.

Also in 2003, Putin's close associate Dmitriy Kozak attempted to impose “federalization” on Moldova as a “peaceful resolution” to a decade-long conflict between Moldova and the unrecognized “Transnistrian Moldovan Republic,” a Russian-controlled and -managed enclave. On that occasion, the Russian plan was rejected even by Moldova's ruling Communists, who found themselves in agreement with the pro-European opposition.

Today, Dmitriy Kozak represents Russia in the Normandy Four negotiations format. He demands that Ukraine accept the “special status” of the Russian-occupied areas of Donbas, which Kremlin propaganda has been framing as “people's republics” since 2014. The key elements of this “special status” are very similar to the “special status” of “Transnistria” and “Gagauz autonomy” that Kozak tried to enforce in Moldova in 2003.

The second lesson is that Russian proposals for compromises and arrangements may look reasonable at that moment, but will be detrimental for the other side in the medium term. Russia has no other goal than changing the other's perception of what “security” and their “interest” is, in order to give Russia the ultimate legal and

cognitive power to decide when its security and interests are threatened or violated.

In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, forging a R2P claim with Putin's false assertion of “genocide” against the “South Ossetian people.” This aggression against Georgia was neither condemned nor punished. Following the war, Russia recognized the occupied parts of Georgia as “independent states” and “allies” and posited that this was grounds for protecting them any time Russia deemed it necessary.

In 2014, the Kremlin used unilateral accusations of an “unconstitutional coup d'état” in Ukraine and “genocide of the Russian-speaking people” to occupy Crimea and areas in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine. Today, Russia threatens to recognize its proxy entities established in the occupied Donbas as “independent states” and to legitimize its open military build-up in the region.

The third lesson is that Russian diplomacy serves as a tool to legitimize the use of military force and deny the targeted countries their universal right to self-defense.

All this leaves an impression that few conventional instruments serve to achieve predictability, confidence, and peace in relations with Russia. However, several instances in Ukrainian–Russian relations provides us with clues as to how this can in fact be done.

The first clue came in 1995 under the leadership of the late SBU [Security Service of Ukraine] head Yevheniy Marchuk. He led a successful campaign to contain and deter Russian subversive action in Crimea. These strong preventive measures and the neutralization of Russian agents in Crimea demonstrated that Ukraine was determined to protect itself. As long as Russia is not fully prepared for conflict, then it can be prevented, and countries should take radical measures to prevent conflict at this early stage. Today, it means that the EU must approve a mechanism of imposing severe economic sanctions and deploy rapid response forces closer to possible areas of conflict if Russia starts military preparations. The events of February 2022 prove that only if it faces a complete shutdown of trade and a strong response across Europe will Russia decrease tensions and a conflict be avoided.

The second clue became visible in 2009 after the Russian gas blackmail of Ukraine failed. The Kremlin

had to accept that the contracts between Gazprom and Naftogaz fell under the jurisdiction of an independent arbitration institution in Stockholm. The Russian interest in stable commercial relations with the West was so strong that in 2016 the Kremlin agreed with the arbitration ruling in favor of Ukraine; it paid the associated fines in 2019.

Thus, a stable resolution of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia might be possible if it is connected to business opportunities for the biggest Russian companies. From this point of view, Germany has one of the most powerful levers for delivering peace to Donbas. Germany can not only determine the fate of Nord Stream 2, but also define how much Russian energy makes it to the European market. In other words, it would be reasonable to reward Russia for true de-escalation with access to the EU oil and gas markets or punish it with restrictions and a reduction of its share if it continues aggression.

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COMMENTARY

The Reasons for Russia’s Proposals

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In December, Russia invited the United States to sign a treaty and European NATO member countries to commit to an agreement on “security guarantees.” While the contents of Russia’s suggestions were not surprising, the timing, the no-compromise approach, and the public form of the invitation raised a lot of questions.

Ever since Vladimir Putin’s historic speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, the Russian government has consistently expressed concerns about trends in European security affairs, particularly NATO expansion and American involvement. Russia was somewhat pacified by former U.S. president Donald Trump’s isolationist foreign policy; once Joe Biden took office in

The third clue to be gleaned from Ukraine’s experience is that Russia cannot prevail if the opposite side is united. In 2014, despite weak defensive capacity and a disrupted economy, Ukraine withstood hybrid and open aggression because most political and civic forces put aside their differences and worked together. This saved Odesa and Kharkiv from hybrid occupation. Therefore, if the West wants to deter Russia, the EU and NATO member states must forget their disagreements and look for any opportunity to help near and distant neighbors. This is true across the political divides within the bigger alliances of the EU parliament and within the EU member states. It also applies to the European Social Democrats and other Left forces: after all, the background for the establishment of the 1st International in 1864 was solidarity with the Polish uprising against Russian tsarism.

early 2021, however, it became evident that restoring transatlantic solidarity was a top priority. The intensity of American foreign policy interactions with European partners triggered another wave of concern. The timing and the contents of Russia’s proposal in December 2021 relate to this change in American foreign policy position. Whereas the Trump administration appeared to be trying to undermine all the arms control treaties to which the US was a party, the Biden administration is taking a more constructive approach. The new administration has extended the START 3 treaty and expressed a willingness to negotiate arms control issues. Accordingly, Russia and the US launched a dialogue on strategic sta-

bility. Media reports following the meetings in summer 2021 suggest that they were somewhat successful.

Seizing this opportunity for talks and changes, Russia shared documents in December 2021 that lay out Russia's vision for the security architecture in Europe. Originally, this was not solely about Ukraine. But since the tone of the Russia's proposals suggested to the West that Russia was giving them an ultimatum, the Western policy community came to believe that Russia was threatening to engage in military aggression in Ukraine.

In reality, most of Russia's concerns are about American involvement in European security affairs. Russia considers this to be a national security threat and its actions can be understood as a reaction to this perceived threat. It seems that Russia wanted to put the US in a similar position with regard to European security as the one that it holds with respect to the Minsk Protocol on the Donbas conflict: a commitment to de-escalating the conflict, but without acknowledging itself as a party to it. Russian officials have repeatedly reiterated that the Minsk Protocol is the only possible way to de-escalate the conflict, thus implying that it has informal influence over the separatists. Russia sees the US role in European security operating in a similar fashion.

Russia's proposals aim to institutionalize American involvement in European affairs through contractual agreements. Such institutionalization would make the international environment intelligible to the Russian government. After all, most of Russia's current top decision-makers established themselves during a period of confrontation against the United States. It remains difficult for them to adapt to the new international environment, where economic performance defines international competitiveness.

The Trump administration would probably have avoided engaging in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in line with its principles of "America first" and "Europe should raise its own defense spending before Washington returns to its NATO commitments." The Biden administration, on the other hand, is clearly looking to enhance transatlantic cooperation and increase American influence in European security affairs. However, many things have changed in the 5 years since a Democrat was in the White House.

For the United States, it would be more comfortable to have a predictable and reasonable Russia. But of

course, it is not possible to change one's foreign policy to increase engagement in a region and at the same time hope for a stable reaction from one's counterpart. Furthermore, Russia actively plays the ambiguity card. No one, even pro-Kremlin experts, can articulate what Russia's strategic goal is, making it unclear whether the current moves are beneficial or damaging to Russia's strategic plans.

Russia has never attempted to persuade the West to lift sanctions, which are obviously damaging to the Russian economy. Indeed, Russia keeps making moves that provoke new sanctions. This behavior seems irrational to the West, exacerbating their view that Russian behavior is more and more unpredictable and the whole European security system unstable.

What seems unique about the current escalation of tensions is not only the ambiguity, but also the publicity.

The proposals which Russian Foreign Ministry presented as a form of "openness of Russia's policy" may suggest that the current stand-off is more an information operation than an expression of any actual intent to conduct military activities. Its primary aim is to be heard and perceived.

During the last few weeks of tensions, there have been an unprecedented number of leaks, fake news, and outrageous propaganda. All this passive-aggressive rhetoric is in line with Russian tactics based on the "threat to use force", but not any actual intention of using real force. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has stated that "only by threatening to use force did we succeed in making sure that our concerns were heard, and our Western partners have agreed to negotiate." The Russian proposals depict Russia as a victim of NATO expansion. The chairman of the Russian Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, even went so far as to claim that "NATO plans to occupy Ukraine." In the eyes of Western societies, however, it is Russia who is the aggressor. It is also unclear to the West why keeping Ukraine out of NATO is in Russia's national interest.

Information warfare may explain, at least to some extent, why Russia has taken such an uncompromising position: its goal is not to reach a specific agreement, but to maintain tensions. It remains unclear what Putin's plan is, but such behavior in international affairs certainly raises his approval ratings at home.

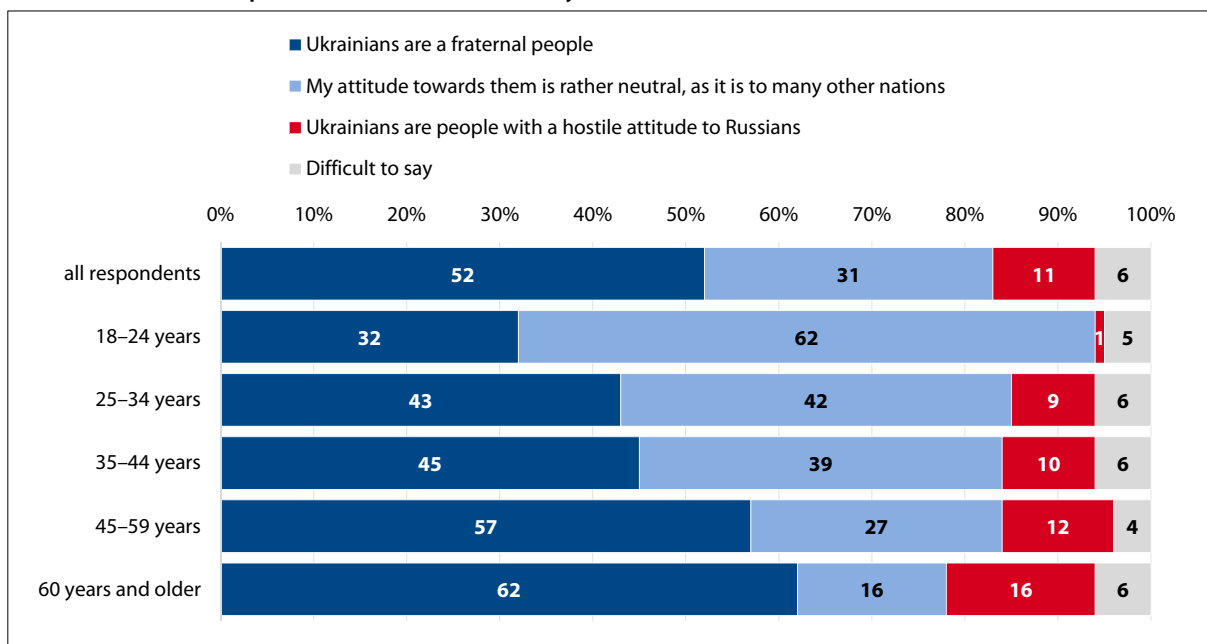
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OPINION POLL

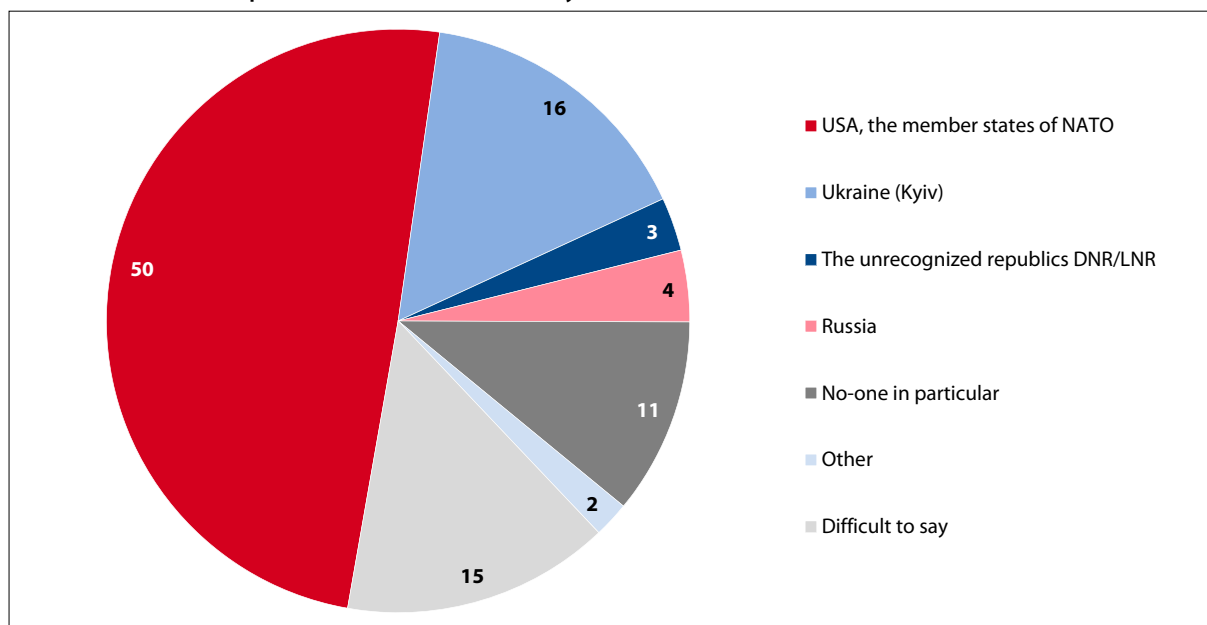
Attitudes towards the Crisis

Figure 1: How Would You Describe Your Attitude toward the Ukrainian People at the Moment? Russian Population (in %, one answer only)



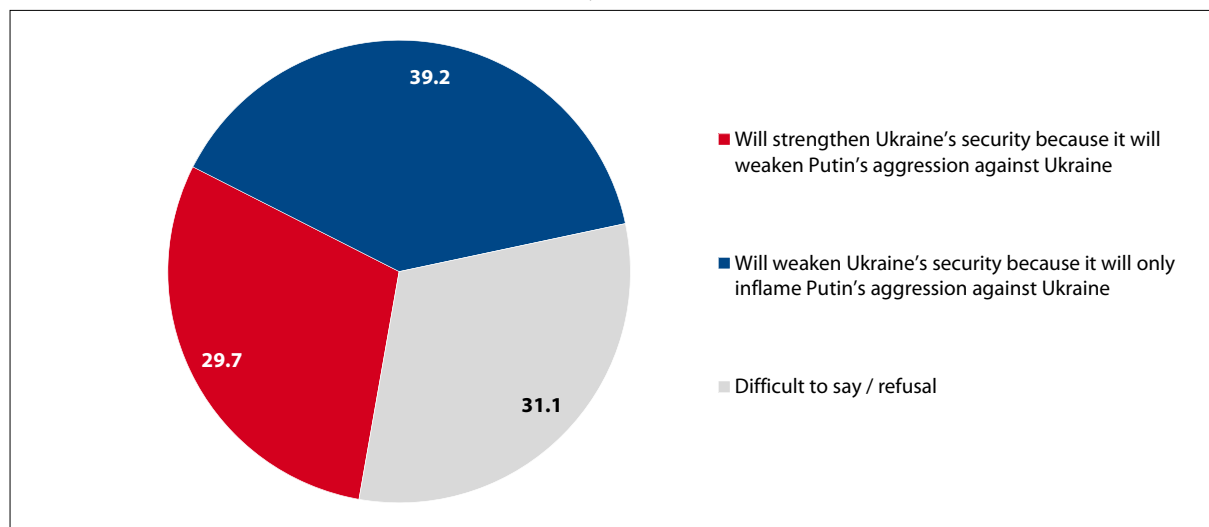
Source: Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM): *Ukraine and Ukrainians—brothers, enemies or neighbors?*, representative opinion poll conducted on 10 January 2022, <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/ukraina-i-ukraincy-bratja-vragi-ili-prosto-sosedi>

Figure 2: In Your Opinion, Who is Responsible for the Escalation of the Situation in Eastern Ukraine? Russian Population (in %, one answer only)



Source: Levada Center (2021): *Escalation in Donbas*, representative opinion poll conducted 25 November–01 December 2021 among 1,603 respondents, in Russian, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/12/14/obostrenie-v-donbasse/>

Figure 3: Russian President Vladimir Putin is Demanding that the West Commit Itself Not to Expand NATO to the East, Which Means Denying Ukraine the Prospect of NATO Membership. In Your Opinion, Such a Step ...? Ukrainian Population (in %, one answer only)



Source: Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) (2021): Attitudes towards Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO, attitudes towards direct talks with Vladimir Putin and the perception of the military threat from Russia, representative opinion poll conducted 13–16 December 2021 among 1,203 respondents, in English, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1083&page=1>

Table 1: What Actions Are Ukrainians Ready to Take in the Event of Russian Armed Intervention in Their Settlement Ukrainian Population (in %, more than one answer)

	Ukraine as a whole		West*		Center*		South*		East*	
	Dec. 2021	Feb. 2022	Dec. 2021	Feb. 2022	Dec. 2021	Feb. 2022	Dec. 2021	Feb. 2022	Dec. 2021	Feb. 2022
Will resist (choose one of the two below or both options):	50.2	57.5	60.5	72.2	52.2	62.9	43	48.4	37.2	30.5
Put up armed resistance	33.3	37.3	39.7	44.8	33.7	42.2	29.7	32.6	25.6	17.8
Resist by participating in civil resistance actions—such as demonstrations, protests, marches, boycotts, strikes, civil disobedience	21.7	25	28.6	31.2	22.5	26.9	15.8	20.2	16.8	16.1
Go to a safer region of Ukraine	14.8	12.4	8.8	5.7	14	12.1	16.7	15.8	25.6	20.2
Go abroad	9.3	7.5	9.6	6.9	8.7	6	10.1	7.4	9.1	12.6
Would not do anything	18.6	17.9	14.4	11.6	17.8	14.8	22.1	21	22.7	32.8
Do not know	12.1	7.6	10.9	6.6	13.7	7	12.1	9.4	10.7	7.9
Refusal to answer	1.1	1.2	0.8	0.5	0.7	0.8	1.7	2.3	2.2	1.9

* See overleaf for a map of the Ukrainian macroregions as defined for the purposes of this poll

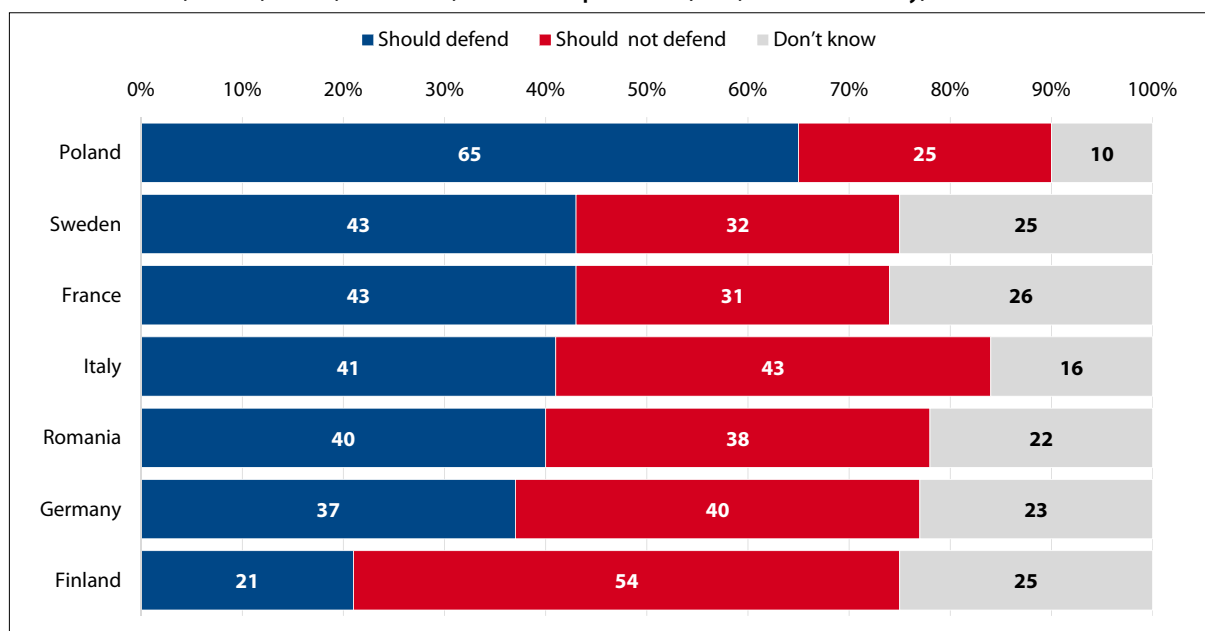
Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) (2021): Will Ukrainians resist Russian intervention, representative conducted between 03.12.-11.12.2021 as well as 05.02.-13.02.2022 among 2,000 respondents, in English, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1079&page=1>, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1099&page=1>

Figure 4: A Map of the Ukrainian Macroregions (see Table 1 on p. 13)



Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) (2021): Will Ukrainians resist Russian intervention, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1079&page=1>, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1099&page=1>

Figure 5: If Russia Were to Invade Ukraine, Should My Country Come to Ukraine’s Defence? Finnish, French, German, Italian, Polish, Romanian, Swedish Populations (in %, one answer only)



Source: European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) (2022): The crisis of European security: What Europeans think about the war in Ukraine, representative opinion poll conducted 21–30 January 2022 by Dataprix, AnalityQs, and Dynata, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-crisis-of-european-security-what-europeans-think-about-the-war-in-ukraine/#top>

The most recent opinion polls on the topic from selected countries in the order of geographical location of the countries from East to West.

Russia

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- Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) (2021): Will Ukrainians resist Russian intervention, conducted between 03 December – 11 December 2021 as well as 05 February – 13 February 2022 among 2,000 respondents, in English, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1079&page=1>, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1099&page=1>
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Compiled by Olivia Faust

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

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