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## WAR

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# RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE: REASONS AND CHALLENGES

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*Both the political elites and society at large in Russia are obsessed with Ukraine because of, firstly, Russia's perennial quest for a strong state; secondly, the struggle of the Kremlin with the colour revolutions; thirdly, the perception of Ukraine as a mirror image of Russia; fourthly, "East Slavic" ideology; finally, Putin's belief that Ukraine is "an artificial country". In the 2022 war, Putin wants to make progress towards all these aims through toppling the pro-Western government of Ukraine, making the country a vassal state like Belarus, and signalling that further expansion of NATO to the east will not be tolerated. The status of a buffer state for Ukraine would become a factor that affirms the tumultuous situation not only in Ukraine but in the whole region.*

## **The Goals of the Russian Federation in Ukraine**

The development of Russian-Ukrainian relations is overburdened by socio-economic, political, and ideological problems. The sense of unity generated by their common Soviet past gradually disappeared and has been replaced by the search for a new identity – which has been dramatic for both societies. After 1991, the goal of Moscow was 'a friendly and neutral Ukraine'. The relations were built primarily on an economic basis, but even then, Russia widely used a ban on the import of some goods as a political instrument. In Ukraine, there has been a struggle between liberal Europe-oriented ideas and the traditional nationalism of a smaller nation. In Russia, Putin received consensus on the base of both traditional patriotism and a new post-imperial nationalism. After 2004, problems in Russian-Ukrainian relations related to the Russian Black Sea Fleet base in Crimea

were aggravated. Both countries had a high level of mutual distrust, especially noticeable because in the past they had been so close.

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 ***In Russia, Putin received consensus on the base of both traditional patriotism and a new post-imperial nationalism***

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Since 2000, when Putin was first elected president, the Kremlin has adopted a Tsarist imperial nationalism towards Ukraine and Ukrainians that denies the existence of the country and its people. In the eyes of the Kremlin, Ukraine is a 'Russian land' and Ukrainians are one of three (alongside Russians and Belarusians) branches of a pan-Russian nation. Putin's Russian nationalism views Ukrainians as "Little

Russians” – as was clear in his July 2021 article<sup>1</sup>. President Putin views his historical legacy as a “Gatherer of Russian Lands”. The first territory to be “gathered” was Crimea in 2014 and the second was Belarus in 2021. Ukraine is the third and last part of the “Russian lands” which Putin seeks to “gather.”



***This sense of having a special mission has contributed to Russia’s paucity of formal alliances and reluctance to join international bodies, aside from as an exceptional or dominant member***

Maybe the biggest driver of Russian foreign policy has been the country’s perennial quest for a strong state. Many Russian politicians considered that in a dangerous world with few natural defences, the only guarantor of Russia’s security was a powerful state willing and able to act aggressively in its own interests. Russians have always had an abiding sense of living in a providential country with a special mission – an attitude often traced to Byzantium, which Russia claims as an inheritance<sup>2</sup>. This idea has been expressed differently over time – the Third Rome, the pan-Slavic kingdom, the world headquarters of the Communist International. Today’s version involves Eurasianism, a movement launched among Russian émigrés in 1921, that imagined Russia as neither European nor Asian but a sui generis fusion<sup>3</sup>.

This sense of having a special mission has contributed to Russia’s paucity of formal alliances and reluctance to join international bodies, aside from as an exceptional or dominant member. This furnishes Russia’s people and leaders with pride, but it also fuels resentment towards the West for supposedly underappreciating Russia’s uniqueness and importance. Therefore, there is psychological alienation added to the institutional divergence driven by relative economic backwardness. As a result, Russian governments have generally oscillated between seeking closer ties with the West and recoiling in fury at perceived slights, with neither tendency able to prevail permanently.

Yet another factor that has shaped Russia’s role in the world has been the country’s unique geography. It has no natural borders, except for the Pacific Ocean and the Arctic Ocean (the latter of which is now becoming a contested space, too). Buffeted throughout its history by often turbulent developments in East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, Russia has felt perennially vulnerable and has often displayed a kind of defensive aggressiveness. Whatever the original causes behind early Russian expansionism – much of which was unplanned – many in the country’s political class came to believe over time that only further expansion could secure the earlier acquisitions. Russian security has thus traditionally been partly predicated on moving outward, in the name of pre-empting an external attack. Today, too, smaller countries on Russia’s borders are viewed less as potential friends than as potential beachheads for enemies. In fact,

1 *Статья Владимира Путина «Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев»* [Article by Vladimir Putin “On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians”], Президент России, 12 июля 2021. [<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>].

2 Н. А. Бердяев, *Национализм и мессианиззм* [Nationalism and Messianism], «Судьба России. Кризис искусства», М., 2004; К. Н. Леонтьев, *Византизм и славянство* [Byzantism and Slavism], «Избранное», М., 1993; В. С. Соловьёв, *Русская идея* [Russian Idea], «Соч. в двух томах», Т. 2. М., 1989.

3 *Исход к Востоку. Предчувствия и свершения. Утверждение евразийцев. Книга 1*, «Библиотека первоисточников евразийцев: 20–30-е годы» [Exodus to the East. Premonitions and Accomplishments. The Approval of the Eurasians. Book 1], [<http://nevmenandr.net/eurasia/1921-ixhod.php>].

this sentiment was strengthened by the Soviet collapse. “Unlike Stalin, Putin does not recognize the existence of a Ukrainian nation separate from a Russian one. But like Stalin, he views all nominally independent borderland states, now including Ukraine, as weapons in the hands of Western powers intent on wielding them against Russia.”<sup>4</sup>.



***Russia has shown the breadth of its geopolitical ambitions, and intends to act from the standpoint of “Russian civilization” versus the West. Putin explained back in 2008 the origin of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in terms of the haste with which the USA promoted the expansion of democracy and the EU sought association with Ukraine***

Russia has long been engineering a pretext to invade Ukraine by conducting a false flag attack – blaming Kyiv for actions Moscow in fact instigated – and alleging that the government of Ukraine poses a threat to Russian speakers in the country’s east<sup>5</sup>. For example, leaders of the so-called “Luhansk People’s Republic” and the

“Donetsk People’s Republic”, the regions of Ukraine that Russia has propped up since 2014, have constantly blamed Ukraine for a series of explosions and attempted acts of sabotage, such as a supposed attack on a water treatment facility, which seem to be staged provocations. The Russian military mobilisation on the borders with Ukraine, combined with the Russian-Belarusian military exercises and hundreds of violations of the ceasefire by the administrations of the Ukrainian separatist territories<sup>6</sup>, kept Kyiv on high alert during January-February 2022. Ukraine’s concerns were seen to be valid, after Putin signed documents recognising the independence of the two breakaway Ukrainian regions of Luhansk and Donetsk.

On the political, diplomatic, military, and financial front, the West took Ukraine’s side. At the same time, efforts were under way to bring Russia to the negotiating table to avoid a conventional Russo-Ukrainian war<sup>7</sup>. By January 2022, Russia had positioned more than 150,000 troops on Ukraine’s borders – this figure did not include Russian-led forces in the occupied territories of the Donbas (which might number 15,000), the Russian national guard or other auxiliary forces. Counting those, Russia had more than 190,000 troops near the Ukrainian border. These numbers implied that Moscow was not planning a

- 4 S. Kotkin, *Russia’s Perpetual Geopolitics. Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern*, “Foreign Affairs”, 2016. [[https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/russias-perpetual-geopolitics?utm\\_medium=promo\\_email&utm\\_source=special\\_send&utm\\_campaign=ukraine\\_russia\\_022422&utm\\_content=20220224&utm\\_term=all-special-send#author-info](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/russias-perpetual-geopolitics?utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=special_send&utm_campaign=ukraine_russia_022422&utm_content=20220224&utm_term=all-special-send#author-info)]
- 5 M. Kofman, J. Edmonds, *Russia’s Shock and Awe. Moscow’s Use of Overwhelming Force against Ukraine*, “Foreign Affairs”, 2022. [[https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-02-21/russias-shock-and-awe?utm\\_medium=promo\\_email&utm\\_source=special\\_send&utm\\_campaign=ukraine\\_russia\\_022422&utm\\_content=20220224&utm\\_term=all-special-send#author-info](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-02-21/russias-shock-and-awe?utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=special_send&utm_campaign=ukraine_russia_022422&utm_content=20220224&utm_term=all-special-send#author-info)]
- 6 *Press Statement of Special Representative Kinnunen after the proposed Meeting of Trilateral Contact Group on 19 February 2022*, OSCE. [<https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/512623>]
- 7 D. Cenuşa, *Russian crisis 2.0: Ukraine’s demands towards the West in the face of new scenarios in Moscow*, “IPN”, 2022. [[https://www.ipn.md/en/russian-crisis-20-ukraines-requests-to-the-west-7978\\_1087988.html#ixzz7LokzKKxv](https://www.ipn.md/en/russian-crisis-20-ukraines-requests-to-the-west-7978_1087988.html#ixzz7LokzKKxv)]

limited incursion, but intending to attempt to seize substantial tracts of Ukrainian territory, including the capital<sup>8</sup>.

Russia has shown the breadth of its geopolitical ambitions, and intends to act from the standpoint of “Russian civilization” versus the West. Putin explained back in 2008 the origin of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in terms of the haste with which the USA promoted the expansion of democracy and the EU sought association with Ukraine: it was perceived by Russia as an invasion of the West of their territory, which was considered as a space within its vital interests<sup>9</sup>. Russia seeks to acquire an unofficial right of veto to prevent the further expansion of NATO and the EU to the East. So, in the war of 2022, Putin’s first order of business is to topple the pro-Western government of Ukraine and to make the country a vassal state like neighbouring Belarus. And thirdly, to signal to the world that any further expansion of NATO to the east will not be tolerated. The neutrality imposed on Ukraine at an international level, first of all, would mean Russia’s ability to influence the situation in Ukraine much more than the EU could. The status of a buffer state would become a factor that affirmed the tumultuous situation, not only in Ukraine, but also in the whole region. Sudha David-Wilp, deputy director of the Berlin Office of the German Marshall Fund, said that “Putin seeks a significant expansion of Russian

territory in the region; an increase in Russian influence globally; and a clear expression of Russia military strength relative to its neighbours (including in both the physical and cyber domains), as well as – and perhaps most importantly for Putin – yet another demonstration of Western impotence in the face of Russian aggression”<sup>10</sup>.

Russia’s demands during the 2022 talks showed Putin’s intentions to revise history and change the post-1989 European security order<sup>11</sup>. Attacking Ukraine has probably assuaged his damaged ego from the claim that Russia is a declining power. On one hand, Putin wants to restore the notion of empire and does not recognise the legitimacy of the former Soviet republics. At the same time, military aggression against manufactured enemies is a way to deflect discontent at home and maintain his hold on power. Jamil Jaffer, founder and executive director of the National Security Institute, went on: “Essentially, having launched this war, unless it goes horribly poorly for Putin with massive Russian casualties – a highly unlikely outcome at this point given the limited weaponry, training, and intelligence support we’ve been willing to provide to Ukraine thus far – it is likely that he is once again going to walk away with a net gain for Russia, all at the expense of the system of international order that the U.S. and our allies have worked for decades to establish and nurture”<sup>12</sup>.

8 M. Kofman, J. Edmonds, *Russia’s Shock and Awe. Moscow’s Use of Overwhelming Force against Ukraine*, “Foreign Affairs”, 2022. [[https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-02-21/russias-shock-and-awe?utm\\_medium=promo\\_email&utm\\_source=special\\_send&utm\\_campaign=ukraine\\_russia\\_022422&utm\\_content=20220224&utm\\_term=all-special-send#author-info](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-02-21/russias-shock-and-awe?utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=special_send&utm_campaign=ukraine_russia_022422&utm_content=20220224&utm_term=all-special-send#author-info)]

9 Владимир Путин и Джордж Буш подводят итоги совместной работы [Vladimir Putin and George W. Bush sum up joint work], «1tv.ru Новости», 6 апреля 2008, [[https://www.1tv.ru/news/2008-04-06/193438-vladimir\\_putin\\_i\\_dzhordzh\\_bush\\_podvodyat\\_itogi\\_sovmestnoy\\_raboty](https://www.1tv.ru/news/2008-04-06/193438-vladimir_putin_i_dzhordzh_bush_podvodyat_itogi_sovmestnoy_raboty)].

10 M. Ward, *Why Putin chose war*, “POLITICO Nightly”, 2022. [<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-nightly/2022/02/24/why-putin-chose-war-00011491>]

11 Лавров назвал требования России к соглашению по безопасности для Украины [Lavrov named Russia’s demands for a security agreement for Ukraine], «РБК», 1 апреля 2022. [<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/01/04/2022/6246d13e9a79475188c9f750>].

12 M. Ward, *Why Putin chose war*, “POLITICO Nightly”, 2022. [<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-nightly/2022/02/24/why-putin-chose-war-00011491>]



So, Putin's goals since February 2022 have gone beyond occupying the eastern regions of Ukraine. The Russian president's ultimate aims are delegitimising President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the government in Kyiv, and the occupation of all of Ukraine, and propping up a government supportive of Moscow. Therefore, ex-President Yanukovich was soon brought from Rostov-on-Don to Minsk<sup>13</sup>, as Putin once again intends to put him in the chair of the Ukrainian Presidency.

## On the Brink of War

Having outlined Russia's goals in Ukraine, let's look at the main milestones of the slide into the current war, in order to understand whether it was possible earlier to identify a threat to the Ukrainian state, and even to stop it with the help of non-military foreign policy tools.

Russian ex-President Dmitrii Medvedev's October 11th, 2021 article in "Kommersant" demonstrated that the Kremlin had lost patience with President Zelenskyy, who was ridiculed as a "US puppet". The Kremlin said it would no longer talk to Kyiv and would only negotiate with its 'puppet masters' in Washington. Medvedev warned that Russia would "wait for the emergence of a sane leadership in Ukraine" that "is aimed not at a total confrontation with Russia on the brink of war... but at building equal and

mutually beneficial relations with Russia"<sup>14</sup>. Medvedev's warning implied the Kremlin sought regime change in Ukraine.

On October 27th, 2021, the Kremlin was infuriated by Ukraine's first use of a Turkish drone to successfully eliminate Russian proxy forces in the Donbas region<sup>15</sup>. This suggested to the Kremlin that Ukraine's military had been becoming strong enough to prevent Russia using proxy forces to pressure Ukraine into accepting the Russian interpretation of the Minsk agreements that Moscow had pressed for. On December 17th, 2021, the Kremlin issued two ultimatums to the West demanding 'written security guarantees' – a "Treaty between the United States and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees" and an "Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of the Russian Federation and the Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]"<sup>16</sup>. The tone of the two ultimatums suggested that the Kremlin never considered a compromise deal. The US sent a written response in late January 2022 that turned down Russian demands<sup>17</sup>. January-February meetings with the Russian leadership involving the US, NATO, OSCE, and bilateral ones failed to achieve diplomatic breakthroughs.

On February 11th, 2022, British Minister of State for Europe James Cleverly predicted that a wider war in Ukraine "would be a

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13 *Ukraine's former President Yanukovich ousted in 2014 is in Minsk, Kremlin wants to reinstall him in Kyiv*, «Українська правда», 2 March 2022. [<https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/03/2/7327392/>].

14 Д. Медведев, *Почему бессмысленны контакты с нынешним украинским руководством* [Why contacts with the current Ukrainian leadership are meaningless], "Коммерсантъ", 11 октября 2021. [<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5028300>].

15 *Kremlin says Turkish drones risk destabilising situation in east Ukraine*, "Reuters", 27 October 2021. [<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kremlin-says-turkish-drones-risk-destabilising-situation-east-ukraine-2021-10-27/>].

16 *Russia demands NATO roll back from East Europe and stay out of Ukraine*, "Reuters", 17 December 2021. [<https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-unveils-security-guarantees-says-western-response-not-encouraging-2021-12-17/>].

17 *Blinken announces US has delivered written responses to Russia over Ukraine crisis*, "CNN", 27 January 2022. [<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/26/politics/us-russia-ukraine/index.html>].

quagmire” for Russia. In a rational cost-benefit analysis, the thinking went that the price of a full-scale war in Ukraine would be punishingly high for the Kremlin and would entail significant bloodshed. The United States has estimated as many as 50,000 civilian casualties. Along with undermining Putin’s support among the Russian elite, who would suffer personally from the ensuing tensions with Europe, a war could endanger Russia’s economy and alienate the public. At the same time, it could bring NATO troops closer to Russia’s borders, leaving Russia to fight a Ukrainian resistance for years to come. According to this view, Russia would be trapped in a disaster of its own making<sup>18</sup>.

Kyiv urged Western partners to introduce sanctions without waiting for negative scenarios to materialise, believing that sanctions would discourage Russian aggression. The Ukrainian side saw little point in post factum sanctions, given that Western partners had evidence of an impending war. Zelenskyy also hinted that if the sanctions were not applied pre-emptively, they should at least be announced, to increase pressure on Russia<sup>19</sup>. The sanctions list was coordinated between the US and the EU, along with some other G7 states<sup>20</sup>. However, they were rejected, to secure a strategic advantage over Moscow. In addition to the economic costs of sanctions, the West warned Russia of a serious blow to its prestige on the international stage, which

could make it a “global pariah”. “It might be useful because Russia’s reputation is one of Putin’s main sensitivities”<sup>21</sup>.

Ukraine’s request for sanctions at that moment was not supported by the allies for several reasons. The West considered that expressing the political will to impose sanctions was already exerting pressure. Unanimity was also needed to impose sanctions, which was not unambiguous in two critical areas: disconnecting Russia from the Information System for International Financial Transactions (SWIFT) and sanctioning the energy sector. This was due to the exposure of the European financial sector, mainly in Austria, Italy, France and the Netherlands, which credited the Russian economy with tens of billions of euros. The situation in the energy sector also required surgical attention from the EU. The heavy dependence on Russian gas (40% of EU imports) could only be resolved in the long term<sup>22</sup>, and EU countries such as Italy opposed energy sanctions. This opposition was also fuelled by the gas market crisis.

But the worst-case scenario was enacted by the Kremlin: on 24th February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. Several officials and analysts immediately called the invasion the largest conventional military attack in Europe since World War II<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, the Russian occupying forces have used

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- 18 L. Fix, M. Kimmage, *What if Russia Wins? A Kremlin-Controlled Ukraine Would Transform Europe*, “Foreign Affairs”, 2022. [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-02-18/what-if-russia-wins#author-info>]
  - 19 Санкції проти Росії після того, як станеться ескалація на кордоні, неефективні – Зеленський, «Радіо Свобода», 15 грудня 2021. [<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-zelenskyi-sanktsiyi-rosiya-eskalatsiya/31610967.html>].
  - 20 *U.S. Details Costs of a Russian Invasion of Ukraine*, “The New York Times”, 2022. [<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/us/politics/us-sanctions-russia-ukraine.html>].
  - 21 D. Cenuşa, *Russian crisis 2.0: Ukraine’s demands towards the West in the face of new scenarios in Moscow*, “IPN”, 2022. [[https://www.ipn.md/en/russian-crisis-20-ukraines-requests-to-the-west-7978\\_1087988.html#ixzz7LokzKKxv](https://www.ipn.md/en/russian-crisis-20-ukraines-requests-to-the-west-7978_1087988.html#ixzz7LokzKKxv)]
  - 22 *Speech by President von der Leyen at the Munich Security Conference 2022*, An official website of the European Union, 19 February 2022. [[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_22\\_1221](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_1221)]
  - 23 *Ukraine conflict world reaction: Sanctions, refugees and fears of war*, “BBC”, 24 February 2022. [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60507016>].

methods that violate the rules of war<sup>24</sup>. They have attacked civilian infrastructure, which causes the death and injuries of civilians including children and can have regional and even global effects.

## Conclusions

The destruction of Ukraine's democracy through a Russian invasion and installation of a pro-Kremlin puppet regime would energise the anti-democratic onslaught of autocratic regimes, such as China and Iran, around the world and send a signal that the democratic West is in decline. A successful overthrow of democracy in Ukraine would increase the threat to the three Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, all of them NATO members, and encourage China to consider the military conquest of Taiwan.

There is an impression that in Russia both the political elites and the society as a whole are obsessed with Ukraine. There are several reasons for this: the struggle of the Kremlin with the colour revolutions in an effort to prevent the same scenario in Russia; the perception of Ukraine as a mirror image of Russia; 'East Slavic' ideology; Putin's beliefs that Ukraine is 'an artificial country' and 'a failed state'. So, two countries that had once declared themselves to be strategic partners entered a period of protracted conflict because of differences in their development models. The two states have a high level of mutual distrust, especially noticeable because in the past they were so close.

In the 2022 war, Putin's first order of business is to topple the pro-Western government of Ukraine and to make the country a vassal state like neighbouring Belarus. And thirdly, to signal that any further expansion of NATO

to the east will not be tolerated. Russia always interpreted "neutrality" in a different manner to that of Finland or Austria during the Cold War. As witnessed by the Kremlin's aggressive policies towards Ukraine in 2012-2014, Russia understands the "neutral" status of Ukraine as the country returning to Russia's sphere of influence. Russia seeks not only Ukraine's formal renunciation of NATO membership. The Kremlin would also apply pressure on Ukraine to renounce all forms of military cooperation with NATO<sup>25</sup>. The neutrality imposed on Ukraine on an international level would mean Russia's ability to influence the situation in Ukraine much more than the EU could. The status of a buffer state would become a factor that enhanced the tumultuous situation, not only in Ukraine, but also in the whole region.



***There is an impression that in Russia both the political elites and the society as a whole are obsessed with Ukraine***

The consensus in Russia that Ukraine was "really" part of Russia meant that there was always a benefit to Russian politicians in making claims on Ukraine, while there was risk in openly accepting its independence. It seems unlikely that Putin would have ordered the annexation of Crimea if it had not been massively popular. This raises a point that has been underappreciated: as much as analysts have focused on the erosion of democracy in Russia as a source of the conflict, a more democratic Russia may not have had a more benign attitude towards Ukraine.

24 *The Law of War and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine*, "Legal Sidebar", 16 March 2022. [<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/LSB/LSB10710>].

25 T. Kuzio, *Vladimir Putin's Imperialism and Military Goals against Ukraine*, "E-IR", 2022. [<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/02/24/vladimir-putins-imperialism-and-military-goals-against-ukraine/>]

The essence of the security dilemma is that either pursuing new security measures or not doing so can leave one feeling vulnerable. In this perspective it is the situation, or the system, which is to blame, not the individual actors, who find themselves trapped in this dynamic. Escaping the security dilemma would have required one side or the other – or both – to abandon its understanding of what was acceptable as the status quo after the Cold War. Either the West and Ukraine would have to give up on the idea that in the new Europe democracy was the norm and democratic institutions were free to grow, or

Russia would have to give up on its claims over Ukraine. And this can only be achieved through the victory of Ukraine in this war, which it did not unleash, but which today is capable of changing the global security situation.

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