The Meaning and Consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian War for European Security

Znaczenie i konsekwencje wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej dla bezpieczeństwa europejskiego

Oleksii Polegkyi

Ph.D., Academic Director of the Centre for Public Diplomacy, Ukraine
e-mail: polegkyi@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1025-551X

Abstract: Russia's invasion on Ukraine in 2022 has undeniably escalated security threats in the region, marked by heightened geopolitical tensions and increased militarization. However, the war has also catalyzed a strengthening of security frameworks and cooperation in Europe. North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) commitment to the region has intensified, and the European Union (EU) has taken significant strides towards a more cohesive defense strategy. This dual effect of the war presents a complex scenario where immediate risks are coupled with long-term strategic enhancements. The EU finds itself at a crossroads, grappling with the immediate need to support Ukraine while also contemplating the long-term ramifications of the conflict on its enlargement policies and neighborhood relations. How can peace in Europe be preserved in the face of an unpredictable, nuclear-armed state? Moreover, what are the implications for European security should Ukraine loses its independence or Russia experiences a systemic collapse? Europe appears regrettably unprepared for the resurgence of 19th-century power dynamics and *realpolitik*, exemplified by Russia's aggressive actions.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, war, European security

Streszczenie: Inwazja Rosji na Ukrainę w 2022 r. niewątpliwie nasiliła zagrożenia bezpieczeństwa w regionie, co przełożyło się na wzrost napięć geopolitycznych i zwiększoną militaryzację. Jednak wojna ta przyspieszyła również wzmocnienie ram bezpieczeństwa i współpracy w Europie. Zaangażowanie Organizacji Traktatu Północnoatlantyckiego (NATO) w regionie wzrosło, a Unia Europejska (EU) realizowała znaczące kroki w kierunku bardziej spójnej strategii obronnej. Ten podwójny efekt wojny przedstawia złożony scenariusz, w którym bezpośrednie zagrożenia łączą się z długoterminowymi usprawnieniami strategicznymi. Obecnie UE znajduje się na rozdrożu, zmagając się z natychmiastową potrzebą wsparcia Ukrainy, przy jednoczesnym rozważaniu długoterminowych konsekwencji konfliktu dla swojej polityki rozszerzenia i stosunków sąsiedzkich. W jaki sposób można zachować pokój w Europie w obliczu nieprzewidywalnego państwa posiadającego broń jądrową? Co więcej, jakie będą implikacje dla bezpieczeństwa europejskiego, jeśli Ukraina utraci niepodległość lub gdy Rosja doświadczy systemowego

upadku? Niestety, Europa wydaje się nieprzygotowana na odrodzenie się dynamiki władzy i *realpolitik* z XIX w., czego przykład stanowią agresywne działania Rosji.

Słowa kluczowe: Ukraina, Rosja, wojna, bezpieczeństwo europejskie

1. Introduction: Strategic Challenges for European Security

Understanding the triggers of the Russo-Ukrainian war is crucial to comprehending its broader implications. Some argue that the war was driven by Vladimir Putin's irrationality, rooted in a distorted imperial fantasy that denies Ukraine's right to exist as a sovereign state (Bäcker, Rak 2022; Oksamytna 2023). Others suggest that the invasion was a predictable outcome of Russia's dissatisfaction with the post-Cold War European security architecture, particularly North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) expansion towards its borders (Götz, Ekman 2024). From a realist perspective, the situation in Ukraine is the manifestation of a classic "security dilemma," where Russia, feeling threatened by the encroachment of Western alliances, sought to enhance its own security through military action (Götz, Staun 2022).

Constructivist theories offer an alternative view, emphasizing the role of ideational factors over material concerns in international relations (Steele 2008). Russia's increasingly antagonistic behavior is often seen as stemming from a "renewed sense of confidence," a recovery from the humiliation it experienced in the aftermath of the Cold War. This resurgence of confidence is closely linked to a deep-seated ontological insecurity within Russia, which has struggled to reconcile its identity as a non-imperial state in the modern era. Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine can thus be seen as both a geostrategic conflict with the West, aimed at reshaping the global order, and an attempt to solidify the ideological foundations and stability of his regime (Polegkyi 2024).

This analysis delves into the specific outcomes for European security of both potential victory and defeat scenarios for Ukraine. The paper argues that a clear Ukrainian victory, defined by territorial restoration and Russian accountability, is essential for lasting European security. A victory, defined not only by the retention of sovereignty of Ukraine but also by the restoration of its internationally recognized borders, would set a precedent for the inviolability of national borders and deter future acts of aggression by revisionist states. Conversely, a Russian victory, if ever realized, could embolden Moscow to extend its coercive tactics beyond Ukraine, potentially

destabilizing the Baltic states and testing NATO's resolve under Article 5. The West's response, focused on deterrence rather than proactive measures, left Ukraine exposed to further Russian aggression.

Currently, European and global security face two profound challenges at the strategic level. The first challenge is the unprecedented global systemic shifts and the absence of effective models for a new world order, particularly in the realm of collapsing international security architecture. Political elites in many countries, especially traditional political parties, appear disoriented, struggling to devise innovative approaches to world politics that do not destabilize the established order and power relations (Ágh 2024). Traditional models and approaches, rooted in past geopolitical contexts, have become obsolete, yet no viable alternatives have emerged. The political elites in many countries are resistant to radical transformations, constrained by electoral dependencies and increasingly prone to populist temptations. This reflects a fundamental weakness in contemporary democracies, which are more invested in preserving existing comforts and familiar governance systems than in addressing the complex challenges that demand new, adaptive solutions.

The second challenge, deeply intertwined with the first, is regional yet profoundly consequential: the strategic conundrum posed by Russia. The question of "what to do with Russia" encapsulates a multifaceted dilemma. How can peace in Europe be preserved in the face of an unpredictable, nuclear-armed state? Moreover, what are the implications for European security should Russia experiences a systemic collapse or expands its aggression beyond Ukraine?

To address the second crucial challenge posed by Russia, it is essential to understand the role of war in V. Putin's Russia. War is not merely a tool of national security; it is a fundamental and dynamic component of V. Putin's regime. Kremlin ambitions seek not only to restore Russia's status as a global power through a calculated revival of its imperial legacy but also to create conditions where V. Putin's regime can maintain power indefinitely. The invasion was not only a geopolitical maneuver; it was rather a domestic strategy designed to consolidate support for V. Putin and reinforce his grip on power. The relationship between the Russian state and its population, characterized by simultaneous admiration for and disdain towards power, has created a society that is passive yet primed for violent outbursts. The current war in Ukraine can be seen as an export of this potential internal conflict, with the regime redirecting social entropy outward in an attempt to maintain internal stability.

In this context, war has been inherited as a central element of V. Putin's project for Russia and the consolidation of the regime's power. Russia's inability to solve the fundamental question of its own existence as a non-imperial state, and more precisely, the question of building its own identity in modern conditions, is a manifestation of deep ontological insecurity.

War and empire have been integral to V. Putin's vision for Russia from the very beginning, rooted in the internal dynamics of his system. These dynamics have also revitalized the long-standing patrimonial structures of the Russian state, where power is concentrated in the hands of a few (Kolstø, Blakkisrud 2018). The Kremlin has effectively leveraged trauma and ressentiment as powerful tools to manipulate public sentiment and reinforce its authoritarian rule under V. Putin (Mälksoo 2022). By evoking historical traumas and cultivating a pervasive sense of victimhood, the regime has systematically fostered a culture of fear, repression, and defensive nationalism (Bernsand, Törnquist-Plewa 2019). "The Kremlin reinvented Russia as an imperial power because other forms of great power expression, especially soft power, failed to deliver what the Russian authorities were hoping for: the right to shape the post-Cold War order in Europe and in Eurasia" (Laruelle 22.08.2022). As a result, V. Putin has turned to more aggressive tactics, using military force and the threat of violence to reassert Russia's role as a global power. References to Russia's imperial past, particularly the notion of a "one-thousand-year statehood," are not mere nostalgia; they are strategic tools used to legitimize the Kremlin's aggressive policies. By invoking the glories of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, V. Putin appeals to a deep-seated desire among many Russians for national greatness and respect on the world stage. This imperial narrative provides a justification for expansionism and conflict, portraying them as necessary for the defense and revival of Russia's historical identity (McGlynn 2023).

2. The Western Response to Russian Aggression

One of the critical factors contributing to Ukraine's precarious situation is the lack of clarity among Western leaders regarding their strategic objectives in the region. Western actions, or inactions, often suggest a lack of awareness about the severe consequences that a Ukrainian defeat could entail. It is improbable that V. Putin will abandon his goal of dismantling

Ukraine as a sovereign state. As Ian Bond (24.04.2024) has argued, the West must fully comprehend the implications of a Russian victory in Ukraine, which could precipitate a dramatically increased threat to the rest of Europe from a militarized Russia. Such an outcome might embolden Moscow to test NATO's Article 5 guarantee, especially if the United States withdraws its presence from Europe. Additionally, the West would face the migration of millions more Ukrainians fleeing atrocities, heightened instability along the European Union's (EU) eastern borders, significant disruptions to global trade and food security, and a surge in nuclear proliferation as countries conclude that nuclear armament provides more reliable security than alliances. A Russian victory would also diminish Western influence globally while amplifying the strategic power of Russia and China.

There is a pervasive reluctance among Western nations to commit to more direct involvement in the conflict. However, there is no viable alternative. Confronting Russia in eastern Ukraine, though fraught with peril, is preferable to facing Russian aggression later on NATO territory. The West must relinquish the illusion that Russia can be transformed into a peaceful state in the near future or that it will cease its expansionist ambitions. On the contrary, Russia possesses a comprehensive toolkit for gradual aggression and will likely continue to employ it.

A robust Russia thrives on a weakened Europe. Consequently, any development that undermines the EU fortifies Russia's influence. This underscores the necessity of a decisive Ukrainian victory, not only for the stability of the European security architecture but also for global equilibrium. A world where might supersedes right could embolden other major powers to engage in further aggression, reshaping international relations in a manner reminiscent of darker historical periods. Therefore, it is insufficient for Ukraine merely to survive; Russia must be decisively defeated. Instead of harboring illusions, the West must develop a coherent, unified strategy to contain, limit, and counteract Russian aggression. The end of the war in Ukraine, particularly if achieved at Ukraine's expense, will not resolve the broader issue of Russia as a persistent threat to European security. It is Russia, not China, that poses an immediate existential danger to Europe in both the short and long term. Russia's strategy is not limited to military force; it also encompasses a wide array of hybrid threats aimed at weakening Western societies.

As Steven Everts (2024) emphasizes, the EU faces four critical tasks in addressing contemporary challenges. First, the EU must redefine its

relationship with power politics. Traditionally a norm-shaper, Europe must now engage more decisively in power politics, marking a significant departure from its founding principles. Second, the EU must enhance its organizational cohesion to effectively consolidate member states, exert influence, and negotiate agreements. This necessitates urgent reforms in the decision-making process to overcome the problem of dispersed power. Third, ensuring the security of the European continent remains paramount, requiring a clear strategy toward Russia and Ukraine. Europe's security is inextricably linked to a free and secure Ukraine, particularly as long as the Kremlin harbors imperial ambitions. Fourth, Europe must adeptly navigate the escalating tensions between the United States and China that are reshaping global dynamics. While maintaining its alliance with the United States, Europe must recalibrate its approach to China, ensuring that its foreign policy serves its unique interests rather than merely aligning with American policies. In an increasingly multipolar and fragmented world, Europe must strategically strengthen its partnerships with emerging powers and key states in Africa, the Indo-Pacific, and Latin America. This approach is crucial for Europe to effectively build and wield influence on the global stage.

The West must abandon any hope of a near-term transformation within Russia. As Fredrik Löjdquist (3.07.2024) astutely observes, the issue extends beyond a mere conflict with Ukraine; it is a systemic challenge originating from Russia itself. Vladimir Putin's regime has demonstrated a consistent pattern of aggression, dating back to the 2008 invasion of Georgia and continuing with the ongoing war in Ukraine. According to him, the "Russia problem" is multifaceted:

1. Long-term: V. Putin's Russia has articulated and acted upon antagonistic goals since at least the 2007 Munich speech, the 2008 invasion of Georgia, and the ongoing war against Ukraine since 2014.
2. Structural: Russia's unprecedented external aggression is a byproduct of its internal political system, ideology, and worldview. There is a direct correlation between internal repression and external aggression. The war is not an anomaly; it is an inherent feature of the system.
3. Systemic: Russia's aggression transcends local or regional conflicts; it is a direct assault on international law and the European security order. The war is merely a symptom of a more significant problem. Ending the war, without addressing the root causes, will not solve the problem.

3. Ukraine – Existential Conflict and the Global Stakes

For Ukraine, the war is existential, centered on its survival as a sovereign state. Russia frames it as a conflict for vital national interests, a confrontation that historically concludes with the unequivocal victory of one side (Ash et al. 2023). Calls for compromise are based on false analogies and a gross underestimation of the stakes involved. Vladimir Putin's objectives extend beyond territorial conquest; he seeks to obliterate Ukraine's sovereignty and democratic framework, firmly opposing any outcome that would solidify Ukraine as a Western-oriented democracy.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has exposed significant gaps and ambiguities in the Western response. The initial wave of outrage following Russia's aggression led to a temporary strengthening of transatlantic unity. However, as time passes, this unity is eroding. The United States and some European countries are increasingly advocating for a "normalization" of relations with Russia, reflecting a broader uncertainty about the long-term consequences of a Ukrainian defeat for European and global security. The fear of nuclear escalation has deeply influenced Western public perception and policy, limiting military aid to Ukraine and constraining Kyiv's retaliatory capabilities. This cautious approach, aimed at preventing a larger conflict, paradoxically increases the likelihood of a wider war by enabling Russia to achieve incremental victories. Western leaders must adopt a firmer stance, balancing deterrence with robust support for Ukraine's sovereignty (Gady, Kofman 2024).

NATO, in particular, is facing a crisis stemming from its failure to adequately respond to V. Putin's aggression. For the past three decades, NATO's strategy has been marked by contradictions, simultaneously expanding while disarming. New and old members alike believed that the alliance's mere presence would suffice to ensure security and stability on Europe's borders (Treisman 7.05.2024). However, the invasion of Ukraine has exposed these assumptions as dangerously flawed. A Ukrainian defeat would be perceived, both internally and externally, as a defeat for NATO, further eroding confidence in the alliance. The indecisiveness of NATO and its allies in the face of Russian aggression has sent a negative signal to Moscow, reinforcing the Kremlin's belief in the effectiveness of a war of attrition. The dilemma of how far to support Ukraine remains unresolved within the alliance. Expanding support could potentially trigger a global conflict, while half-hearted measures undermine trust in NATO and weaken it from within.

The ideological dimension of this confrontation between Russia and "the West" is also crucial. Vladimir Putin has explicitly framed the conflict as not only geopolitical but also cultural and civilizational, with the goal of resisting the imposition of neoliberal values by Western states. Consequently, negotiations over the only territorial issues are unlikely, as V. Putin's broader aim is the destruction of Ukraine's statehood and the weakening of the West. In response, it is imperative for the West to bolster Ukraine's military capabilities, enabling it to conduct significant offensive operations. Such support is vital not only for preserving Ukraine's territorial integrity but also for inflicting substantial losses on Russian forces, potentially shifting the strategic balance in Kyiv's favor.

The global implications of Russia's success in Ukraine cannot be overstated. Observing the Western response, authoritarian regimes like China and Iran are gauging the West's resolve in defending the liberal world order. As Nico Lange and Carlo Masala (28.11.2023) warn, this conflict could mark the beginning of a new era, where stronger states, emboldened by a lack of international resistance, may aggressively pursue territorial ambitions or regional dominance. A Chinese assault on Taiwan, for instance, would become not only possible but highly probable. Vladimir Putin's vision of a "reorganization of the world order" could proceed with alarming momentum.

Conclusion: A New Strategic Reality

In conclusion, war is not just a tool of statecraft for V. Putin; it is a core element of his vision for Russia, deeply intertwined with the internal dynamics of his regime. The invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing conflict are manifestations of a broader imperial project aimed at securing Russia's place as a global power while maintaining domestic stability through external aggression. This strategy has profound implications for regional and global security, as it suggests that Russia's aggressive posture will persist as long as the current regime remains in power.

The most significant outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine should be a shift in European awareness of threats. There can be no return to "business as usual" with Russia in the foreseeable future, even after V. Putin is no longer in power. However, this change in Western thinking is not yet permanent. Divisions remain evident within and between countries regarding the war. A realistic

and comprehensive assessment of the threat posed by Russia to NATO and global security is still lacking (Polyakova et al. 30.11.2023: 19).

The West must recognize the strategic implications of V. Putin's approach, understanding that the war in Ukraine is not an isolated conflict but part of a larger pattern of Russian aggression. To address this threat, a comprehensive and coordinated response is required, one that not only counters Russia's external ambitions but also addresses the underlying ideological and societal factors that drive its aggressive behavior.

Russia's aggression is not solely aimed at Ukraine; it is a broader assault on the Western democratic world. If Russia is not stopped, other European countries will face similar threats. "Russia must be seen for what it truly is: an imperialistic, authoritarian regime that aims to destroy the international order and establish a sphere of influence. It must be contained" (Polyakova et al. 30.11.2023: 89). The dream of a secure and prosperous Europe could be shattered if the West fails to confront Russia's expansionism. Sanctions against Russia, though necessary, have come too late to prevent the war. Helping Ukraine win the war now may prevent future conflicts in Europe, but it will not undo the devastation already wrought.

It is delusional to believe that Europe can avoid a confrontation with Russia. The Kremlin perceives itself as being at war not with Ukraine, but with NATO and the West as a whole. Consequently, if Ukraine loses, the West will have lost as well, with Europe bearing the brunt of the consequences. The West must not allow itself to be cowed by V. Putin's threats, particularly his nuclear saber-rattling. The security architecture of Europe cannot be complete without integrating Ukraine and other so-called "grey areas" into the EU. Ukraine's security is fundamentally linked to Europe's, necessitating the modernization of NATO's defense posture and a permanent presence on the eastern flank. The foundation for a secure Europe is a clear vision of a democratic, sovereign Ukraine fully integrated into the EU. Such integration poses a greater threat to V. Putin's regime than NATO membership, as it would enable Ukraine to solidify its status as a stable, consolidated democracy. Ukraine's integration into the EU has the potential to end its status as a buffer state, necessitating a more serious approach to defense against Russian threats. Failure to fulfill promises of EU membership for Ukraine undermines the EU's credibility as a geopolitical actor and could result in significant geopolitical setbacks.

The future of Russia will profoundly impact Europe's geopolitical landscape. The cultivation of a "special" society in Russia, characterized by

hierarchical totalitarianism and a deep-seated sense of ressentiment, ensures that the regime can mobilize the population in support of its imperial ambitions. However, this also creates a volatile internal dynamic that could lead to explosive conflict should the regime's stability falter. The EU must be prepared for various scenarios to maintain peace and stability on the continent. The EU must learn to speak the language of power, not necessarily through military means, but by taking the threats from Russia and China seriously. The situation in Ukraine highlights the dangers of engaging with authoritarian regimes solely through the lens of mutual interests and business priorities. The West must abandon the illusion of a peaceful Russia and instead develop a unified strategy to contain, limit, and counter Russian aggression. A strong commitment to Ukraine's defense is essential for the long-term security of Europe and the world. Finally, the West must recognize Russia's hypocrisy as a state that flagrantly violates international norms while exploiting them when convenient. This requires a reassessment of how the West engages with such a dangerous actor on the global stage.

References

Ágh, A. (2024), *The Emerging New World System and the European Challenge*, "Politics in Central Europe" 20(1): 141–167. DOI: 10.2478/pce-2024-0006.

Ash, T. et al. (2023), *How to End Russia's War on Ukraine: Safeguarding Europe's Future, and the Dangers of a False Peace*, (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs). DOI: 10.55317/9781784135782.

Bernsand, N., B. Törnquist-Plewa (eds.). (2019), *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin's Russia*, (Leiden–Boston: Brill).

Bond, I. (24.04.2024), *Does It Matter If Ukraine Loses?* Centre for European Reform, https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2024/does-it-matter--if-ukraine-loses (28.05.2024).

Bäcker, R., J. Rak (2022), *Why Did Putin Go Too Far? The Rationality of Vladimir Putin's Decision to Begin a War with Ukraine*, "Society Register" 6(3): 57–71.

Everts, S. (2024), *Navigate a Power Political World*, The European Union Institute for Security Studies, https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/navigating-power-political-world (12.05.2024).

Gady, F.S., M. Kofman (2024), *Making Attrition Work: A Viable Theory of Victory for Ukraine*, "Survival" 66(1): 7–24.

Götz, E., P. Ekman (2024), *Russia's War Against Ukraine: Context, Causes, and Consequences*, "Problems of Post-Communism" 71(3): 193–205. DOI: 10.1080/10758216.2024.2343640.

Götz, E., J. Staun (2022), *Why Russia Attacked Ukraine: Strategic Culture and Radicalized Narratives*, "Contemporary Security Policy" 43(3): 482–497. DOI: 10.1080/13523260.2022.2082633.

Kolstø, P., H. Blakkisrud (eds.). (2018), *Russia Before and After Crimea: Nationalism and Identity, 2010–17*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

Lange, N., C. Masala (28.11.2023), *War Against Ukraine: What if Russia Wins?*, GLOBSEC, https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/commentaries/war-against-ukraine--what-if-russia-wins (2.06.2024).

Laruelle, M. (22.08.2022), *Imperializing Russia: Empire by Default or Design?*, "Ponars Eurasia Policy Memo" 789.

Löjdquist, F. (3.07.2024), *The Need for Taking the Strategic Initiative Towards Russia – An Outline for a Policy to Contain, Constrain and Counter Russian Antagonistic Behaviour*, "Sceeus Report" 11, https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/sceeus/2024-publications/the-need-for-taking-the-strategic-initiative-towards-russia.pdf (12.07.2024).

Mälksoo, M. (2022), *The Postcolonial Moment in Russia's War Against Ukraine*, "Journal of Genocide Research" 25(3–4): 471–481. DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2022.2074947.

McGlynn, J. (2023), *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic).

Oksamytna, K. (2023), *Imperialism, Supremacy, and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine*, "Contemporary Security Policy" 44(4): 497–512. DOI: 10.1080/13523260.2023.2259661.

Polegkyi, O. (2024), *Russia's War on Ukraine: From Ontological Insecurity to Postmodern Neo-Totalitarianism*, "Warsaw East European Review" 13: 163–174.

Polyakova, A. et al. (30.11.2023), *A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance: The Future of European Security, the United States, and the World Order after Russia's War in Ukraine*, Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/a-new-vision-for-the-transatlantic-alliance-the-future-of-european-security-the-united-states-and-the-world-order-after-russias-war--in-ukraine/ (12.06.2024).

Steele, B. (2008), *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-identity and the IR state*, (n.p.: Routledge).

Treisman, D. (7.05.2024), *America Is in Denial About NATO's Future*, "Foreign Policy," https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/07/05/america-nato-ukraine-denial/ (12.08.2024).