



# The Need for Taking the Strategic Initiative Towards Russia – An Outline for a Policy to Contain, Constrain and Counter Russian Antagonistic Behaviour

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## Executive Summary

The West must now move from a reactive to a proactive mode in dealing with the Russia problem, taking the strategic initiative in formulating and articulating a clear strategic vision for Ukraine, and a strategy to contain, constrain and counter Russia. The *Zeitenwende* must now be fully operationalized. Getting the nature of the Russian challenge wrong means that we will not be able to formulate the solutions correctly. Too often, we are still prisoners of a Russia-centric analysis and of Russian reflexive control. The lack of a clearly articulated strategic vision is the most important impediment to effective execution of the Ukraine and Russia policies of the west.

Ukraine can and must be resolved, with some effort. Russia will have to be managed by constraining its destructive aims and behaviour. The underlying goal must be a secure Europe with restored respect for international law. The opportunity costs of not succeeding in this goal are enormous. There is no going back: only forward. A new global and European security architecture will have to be forged.

The final chapter of this report outlines the necessary elements of such comprehensive, sustainable and effective Ukraine and Russia policies.

## 1. The Nature of the Problem

The problem is not a Ukraine crisis, or “the war in Ukraine”, it is a **Russia crisis**, the scope of which, in time and space, reaches far beyond Ukraine. Resolving Ukraine, i.e. upholding its full sovereignty and territorial integrity, is the goal of a Ukraine-strategy, and it's also the most important single element of a Russia strategy, but far from the only element. Making Ukraine succeed is a necessary precondition for a better future Russia, but certainly not a sufficient precondition. Therefore, we need a long-term strategy to **contain, constrain and counter** the imminent Russian danger to global and European peace and security.

The **Russia problem** is:

- **Long-term:** Putin's Russia has declared its antagonistic aims and acted accordingly at least since Munich in 2007, Georgia in 2008 and the war against Ukraine since 2014.
- **Structural:** Russia's unprecedented external aggression is a function of the nature of its internal political system and its underlying ideology and worldview. There is a direct link between internal repression and external aggression. The war is not a bug, it's a feature.
- **Systemic:** Russia's aggression is not a local or regional conflict, it's a direct attack on international law and the European security order. The war is not the problem itself, it's a manifestation, a symptom of the problem, which is bigger than the war. Ending the war doesn't in itself solve the problem.

**Putin's underlying goals** are:

- **Regime survival:** the Kremlin perceives democracy, the rule of law and human rights as existential threats. These threats are fought both domestically and abroad. For this reason, a pro-European democratic Ukraine is seen as an existential threat to the Putin regime.
- **Restoration of Russia's historical empire:** this objective is a direct attack on the fundamental principles of the international order, such as sovereignty, territorial integrity and self-determination. It is an imperialist and neo-colonial, revanchist and revisionist programme that aims to re-establish the Soviet and Russian spheres of influence.
- **Demolition of the rules-based international order and the European security order** as it evolved after World War 2 and at the end of the Cold War, with the aim of replacing it with an order based on military might ("multipolarity").
- **Ending and reversing NATO enlargement and the US presence in Europe,** effectively making Northern and Eastern Europe undefendable (the so called treaty proposals of December 2021).

Further, Putin would ultimately like to **undermine Western unity and solidarity**, effectively debilitating the credibility of deterrence and NATO's article 5, the main counterforce to further Russian expansionism and aggression. NATO-enlargement is seen as a threat to Russia, as it limits Russia's freedom to pursue its antagonistic goals against NATO-allies.

**Russia's war aims in Ukraine since 2014** have been to thwart Ukrainian sovereignty and take full political control of the country. The Kremlin has tried to achieve these aims by various means in separate phases over the past decade. These aims will remain for as long as Putin stays in power and not unlikely beyond.

Russia believes that the political gains from this behaviour outweigh the costs and risks, and it will continue the war as long as it is able to make that calculation.

Based on his aims, experience and worldview, Putin is not irrational. His decisions, however, are based on serious misjudgements: on Russia's own military strength and political attractiveness; on Ukraine's resilience and on the reactions of the west.

## **Some Conclusions**

- The aggression against Ukraine is a symptom of a much larger Russia crisis.
- The Russia crisis cannot be resolved but needs to be managed for the foreseeable future.
- Any negotiations, ceasefire or Minsk 3-type of arrangement will not resolve either Ukraine or the underlying Russia crisis, they must not be mistaken for peace efforts, rather the opposite. Any temporary deal that will reward Russia's aggression will be escalatory, not de-escalatory.
- Putin leaving power is a necessary but insufficient condition for any improvement in Russia's behaviour and the nature of its system.
- Grey zones (*buffer states or so called "countries in-between"*) are not part of the solution but part of the problem. Any opportunity that the Kremlin sees to further its aims will be exploited. Any ambiguity on the part of the West on the nature of the costs of Russia's behaviour will prove escalatory.

## 2. Russia Today

Russia today is a neo-totalitarian regime. It is waging the largest and most brutal military aggression in Europe since 1945 with genocidal intent. It considers itself to be in a broad and existential conflict with the West. Its underlying ideology, worldview and political practice have strong similarities with fascism.

There is no need to assume historical determinism and that Russia a priori cannot change, but the prospect of a democratic, non-imperialistic political system with an open society in conformity with human rights and rule of law is now further away than at any time in the past 35 years. Russia will now have to deal not only with its imperial and totalitarian past, but also with this war. As we have learned from the past, positive changes are reversible.

Putin's personalized system of power cannot be maintained after he leaves office but Putinism as a political worldview, ideology and practice may well survive Putin. War has now become the political system in Russia, underpinning the modus operandi of its politics, society and economy. The Kremlin is in no hurry to end the war, as long as it sees it as conducive to its aims and goals.

Long-term economic, demographic and technological trends are not in Russia's favour. Russia's ability in the short to medium term to cause lasting damage to the international order and European security, however, not to speak of Ukraine and other Eastern European countries, is real, imminent and immense. It is Russia, not China or the Middle East, that constitutes a direct existential threat to Europe.

Military power, like all power, is relative. Putin therefore thinks that time is on his side, and that he can outlast Ukrainian and western political will and stamina while he is ahead. In the longer run, western capabilities vastly outnumber Russian.

Unless checked, constrained and countered by western support to Ukraine at sufficient levels, the Russian economy and its society will be able to sustain and increase its military capabilities on the battlefield in Ukraine in the coming years. Russian military industrial production capabilities are currently outpacing western capabilities and willingness to support Ukraine.

There is no immediate danger to Putin's hold on power in Russia, and it must be assumed that Putin or a Putin-like leadership will be able to remain in power in Russia for the foreseeable future. Russia will apply the means available to achieve its political goals. War is never an end in itself but a means to an end. If the goals can be achieved by other means, such as hybrid threats and reflexive control (see below), this will be all the better.

Russia's leadership respects NATO so far. Article 5 protects allies against armed aggression. However, Russia will use other, non-military means and hybrid threats to cause damage to or influence western countries. Russia has a holistic antagonistic toolbox. We need to have a similarly holistic view of the nature of the threat and our measures to counter that threat.

Russia's internal political system is intimately linked to its external behaviour (link between internal repression and external aggression). The West must therefore not lose sight of internal developments in Russia and hold Russia accountable for violating its international commitments to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

### 3. The Russia Ghost in our Mind

Russia has long been seen and treated as a special case: too different, too strong, too dangerous and too irrational to be understood and analysed like any other country. Policymakers and policy shapers have wittingly or unwittingly adopted a “Russia first” mental and political paradigm at the cost of Central and Eastern Europe and the European security order. We have too often been paralysed like deer in the headlights by Russia's actions and our own fears.

Russia's actions since 2014/22 should have had a sobering effect on our thinking about Russia, a mental *Zeitenwende*. However, there seems to be a lingering wish among western policymakers and shapers, as well as voters to return to the comfort zone, a normalization and some kind of business as usual. One version of this is that limitations on Ukraine's sovereignty (assuring it stays “neutral”) in an imaginary “peace deal” would somehow placate Russia and be part of the solution and not the problem.

However, Putin's Russia has crossed the Rubicon. There is no status quo ante to return to. There is no new stabile equilibrium to be established as long as Putin remains in power and Russia's aims remain unchanged. Russia cannot be allowed to **harvest the fruits of its aggression** because then the future of Russia, Ukraine and Eastern Europe, and the whole of the European project would be unrecognizable. The locomotive of history has been set in motion in Ukraine, and history only moves forward. The question is to what degree the collective West wants to be a subject or object of History to be reactive or proactive.

**Either the West can stabilize Europe eastwards, or we will be destabilized from the East.**

Soviet and Russian actors have skillfully exercised **reflexive control**, limiting our mental space and what are considered possible policy options, tuning our minds to Russian advantage, having us exercise self-deterrence. One example of this is the narratives that some western policymakers and -shapers have been telling themselves since 2022 as reasons not to support Ukraine in a militarily decisive manner:

- **fear of escalation** (ultimately nuclear escalation and/or World War III), which peaked in February to October 2022.
- **fear of Russian “collapse”** (*often not more precisely defined, but loosely understood as territorial disintegration, civil war and nukes on the loose*), which peaked in the summer of 2023 but waned after Prigozhin fell out of the sky. Somehow, at least subconsciously, some western policymakers seem to think that a change of government in Russia (a fully normal thing in all democracies) would amount to fatal chaos and collapse.
- **military stalemate**: the concept that the war cannot be won, and that it is therefore futile to provide more decisive support to Ukraine, which would just prolong the unnecessary bloodshed.
- **our own impotence**: the idea that Russia is too strong, or too crazy, for us to contain, constrain and counter, therefore we need to compromise, because we have no other alternative.

A tacit corollary to all the above, which is not spelled out, is that Europe and the broader West could somehow digest a Ukrainian defeat (being unable to defend its territorial integrity and sovereignty) and a Russian victory, and that this could be contained and localized to Ukraine or otherwise compartmentalized without further negative effect on European and global peace and security.

Looming on the horizon is a fourth narrative:

- **How to deal with a Russian victory?** (*already assuming that Ukraine will not be able to defend its territorial integrity and full sovereignty*).

These narratives are often accompanied by various imaginary “**Russian red lines**”. This kind of self-deterrence only amplifies the sense of resignation, fatalism and defeatism that Moscow wants to embed in the western political psyche.

Part of this **reflexive control** is to suggest to westerners what is escalatory or not (*subtly turning the mental tables away from the fact that it is Moscow that has escalated and not the West*). Assisting Ukraine to defend its territorial integrity or full sovereignty is somehow perceived as escalatory. A cooler look at the situation bears witness to the fact that it is the unwillingness or inability of the victims of Russian aggression to decisively defend themselves that has been escalatory. Russia being able to draw the conclusion that massive scale and brutal military aggression and nuclear blackmail have been a successful means of achieving its political goals in Ukraine (*let's say in some kind of Minsk 3-type of arrangement*) will most certainly not be de-escalatory.

Another corollary is that all (or almost all) wars and conflicts end up (and are resolved) at the negotiation table (with the necessary compromises). Well, World War 2, Korea, Vietnam, Iran-Iraq, and several Afghanistan and Iraq wars do not corroborate that thesis.

## 4. How Will it End Then?

The question is often asked: how this will end? This is a fair question, but not without pitfalls.

The first problem with the question is the lack of understanding of what “it” is: the military aggression against Ukraine (the symptom) or the underlying Russia crisis (the cause). The second problem is that the question leaves aside western agency. The outcome of the military conflict in Ukraine will depend on the level of western support to Ukraine. We are not outside observers.

An opportunity cost analysis must be applied when looking at various possible outcomes. What are the costs in terms of security and economics of Russia partly achieving its aims and Ukraine failing to secure its territory and sovereignty?

For a clearer way of analysing Russia and Ukraine, there are three aspects:

- **Framing/perspective:** Do we have a clear understanding of the nature of the problem, what is at stake and the opportunity costs?
- **Agency:** Do we understand our own role in both being affected by and shaping possible outcomes?
- **Proportions:** Do we have a sober view of Russian capabilities (relative our own); and have we made the calculation of what it would take to ensure that Ukraine succeeds?



Another problem with our way of thinking and speaking about Russia is the misleading semantics of the **concepts of victory and defeat**. The possible outcomes of Russia's war against Ukraine are often termed as either side's victory or defeat, as if they were interchangeable entities, and that defeat is understood as the absence of victory. Russia being defeated in Ukraine means nothing more than that Russian troops leave Ukraine, and that Ukraine exists as a sovereign country within its internationally recognized borders. This is the Ukrainian "victory". Respect for international law is restored. It does NOT entail Russia losing territory or foreign troops marching in Red Square. A Russian victory, on the other hand, means the end of a sovereign Ukraine and the self-determination of the Ukrainian nation and people AND a serious blow to international law and the European security order. Russian and Ukrainian victories are not symmetric concepts. The inability of western policymakers to declare a Russian defeat and Ukrainian victory desirable or even necessary amounts to destructive (as opposed to constructive) ambiguity.

Ultimately, how we succeed in managing and ending the Russia crisis will define who we are as Europeans and westerners. The post-war European and Transatlantic project is very much a formulation of the never again, ***nie wieder***: never again to military aggression, never again to totalitarian regimes, never again to genocide and never again to the likes of fascism. We now face exactly these threats. This is a generational challenge.

### Some Conclusions

- Getting the formulation of the Russia problem right is essential to designing the response and proactive policies.
- Being aware of Russian reflexive control and critically examining our own mindset are necessary for a sober analysis and formulation of policies.
- We in the West are not only affected by but have a significant amount of agency in shaping the future of Ukraine directly, Russia indirectly, and thus our own future.
- The opportunity costs of our policy actions (and inaction) should be an integral part of our deliberations.
- The absence of a clearly formulated and articulated strategic vision for Ukraine and Russia is a major constraint on successful western action and a problem for strategic communication to our own electorates, to Ukraine and to Russia. Ambiguity on the strategic vision is not constructive and will be destructive.
- False framing of the concepts of defeat and victory could be not only misleading but fatal for how we formulate policies.

## 5. What to do? Elements of a Comprehensive Russia Policy

One conclusion from the above-mentioned elements is that the collective West must formulate, articulate and implement a long term, sustainable, unified, comprehensive, coordinated and coherent strategic Russia policy, since our vital interests and values are at stake. The alternative would be worse – not to say unthinkable – and more costly. This is feasible but will entail costs and challenges that need to be explained to voters, something that requires political leadership and a realization that we are outside of our comfort zone.

The starting point should be for the West to take the strategic initiative; to not just react to and be constrained by Russian antagonistic behaviour, but act in order to contain, constrain and counter Russia.

The basis of such a policy must be an unequivocal vision of a democratic, free, sovereign and secure Ukraine integrated into European and Transatlantic communities, in combination with a clear statement that Russia will not be allowed to harvest the fruits of its aggression by undermining international law and the European security order based on the principles of Helsinki and Paris.

The single most important factor in constraining Russian antagonistic capabilities and intentions and creating the conditions for a more benevolent Russia to emerge over time is to make sure that Ukraine succeeds and Russia fails in their respective ambitions. This is a necessary investment not only in the future of Ukraine and Europe as a whole, but also of Russia.

Our Ukraine policy is therefore also a cornerstone of our Russia policy. Rather than letting our Ukraine policy be a function of our Russia policy, however, it is time to turn the tables and start with the formulation of our Ukraine policy. We should mentally decouple our Ukraine and Russia policies and not frame them in a joint “post-Soviet” setting. If there is one lesson to be learned from the past ten years it is how differently Russia and Ukraine have developed. We need to decolonialize our intellectual perspectives on Russia and Ukraine.

### Fixing Ukraine

Unlike Russia in the short to medium term, Ukraine can be resolved and “fixed”. This entails:

- securing an eventual Ukrainian **EU-membership**;
- successful **recovery and reconstruction** (including the necessary short-term financial and humanitarian support) of Ukraine;
- short- and long-term security and military support to guarantees that Ukraine will be able **to win the war** – i.e. to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity - and win the peace – i.e. to ensure that Russia will not be able to repeatedly threaten Ukraine.

EU enlargement to Ukraine and the reconstruction of Ukraine are necessary and mutual preconditions. Both these goals presuppose that there is a Ukraine left to reconstruct and integrate; hence the need for sufficient military and other forms of security support.

Russia's war against Ukraine will be decided by military factors on the battlefield and effectively by Russian vs western military industrial production capacities – and Western willingness to supply Ukraine with the necessary equipment, training and maintenance. Ukraine must also be able to liberate Crimea. As long as Russia controls Crimea, Ukraine will never be safe.

This will require budgetary resources and be challenging but it can be done. It requires the West, the G7, the EU and NATO-allies, to think and operate outside the box and mobilize the necessary resources. More needs to be done than so far. So, let us suppose that the necessary investment for economic and military support to Ukraine will amount to 0.5% the collective EU-member states GDP annually for say the coming decade. This support should not be framed as a cost or something done solely out of solidarity with Ukraine. Instead, it



should be framed as a necessary investment in our own security and future. We can see the contours of what needs to be done but we have not yet mustered the necessary resources and political will to do it.

A crucial element is the long-term security of, arrangements for and guarantees to Ukraine. Ultimately, only NATO membership can provide Ukraine with security guarantees. Previous EU enlargements to post-communist countries have been preceded by or coupled with NATO membership. The alternatives to NATO membership for Ukraine must be seriously analysed in terms of risks and costs. The long-term deterrence effect of the bilateral security treaties with Ukraine (as a follow-up to the 2023 G7 Vilnius Declaration) that have now been concluded remains to be seen. Deterrence is at the end of the day a question of credibility (regarding capability and willingness).

Beyond Ukraine, more efforts will have to be made by the West to strengthen the resilience of countries such as Moldova, Georgia and Armenia, which are increasingly vulnerable to Russian influence and attacks.

### **Managing = Containing, Constraining and Countering Russia**

Fixing Ukraine is the single most important means of also indirectly influencing Russia. The West will have limited opportunities to directly influence developments in Russia. It must develop elements that will restrain Russia's ability to do harm, and limit its options and room for manoeuvre militarily, economically and politically.

These elements are:

- A 2.0 policy of **containing and constraining** Russia. This means not only containing the current situation but also **countering and pushing Russia back**. Containment today cannot mean accepting Russian "facts on the ground" in Ukraine.
- **Accountability** - politically, diplomatically, economically and legally for its destructive behaviour, crimes of aggression, war crimes and other violations of international law, as well as violations of its international commitments to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, in order to uphold a comprehensive concept of security. This will entail various forms of cost imposition at various levels but also war reparations. The seizure of immobilized Russian assets needs to be addressed more effectively.
- **Isolating** Russia internationally – politically, financially, economically and diplomatically. One current example would be refusing to recognize the 2024 presidential elections as free and fair, thereby delegitimizing Putin.
- **Collective deterrence** (credible through capabilities, commitment and communication) and **credible (total) defense capabilities**, including forward defense of the Baltic states and the Suwalki gap.
- **Countering hybrid threats**.
- The West can also engage in a number of overt and covert activities that will **counter and frustrate the ability of Russian actors** to operate freely and with impunity.
- **Ridding ourselves of Russian dependencies** and **strengthening our own resilience**.
- **Countering Russian alliance and support building internationally**
- **Upholding international law** and principles, including freedom of navigation.

While the above elements are of a negative, restraining nature, other more positive actions such as possible investments in Russian free media, democratic forces and civil society in exile also need to be addressed more systematically and effectively.

Overall, this will constitute a **strategic posture towards Russia** and be part of **strategic signalling** (overt and covert), or strategic communication in its original meaning, to the Russian leadership and population.

All of this will require a **whole-of-government** and **whole-of-society** approach nationally and through strong international cooperation. Mechanisms for coordinating Russia policy should be established at the national levels and in the G7, the EU and NATO. Business communities and civil society should establish codes of conduct for dealing (or limiting interactions) with Russia.

**Sanctions** are an important part of cost imposition, restraining destructive capabilities and increasing accountability. The effect of sanctions can be enhanced by:

- Designing new and adapting and fine-tuning the existing sanctions regimes.
- Better coordination between the sanctions regimes of various actors (the EU, the US, the UK and other G7 members).
- Stronger enforcement and implementation of sanctions in our own systems.
- Countering sanctions evasion through third countries.

Existing G7 cooperation mechanisms could be institutionalized to achieve the above in parallel with strengthening national sanctions institutions. A Cocom 2.0 regime should be established. The single most important financially restraining measure would be to lower the oil price cap and limiting the use of the Russian ghost fleet.

Part of strengthening our own resilience will be sharpening national legislation and law enforcement on illicit financing, corruption, money laundering, sanctions violations, counterespionage, migration controls and so on.

As Russia's military means for causing us harm have hopefully been blunted, Russia will increasingly apply **non-military antagonistic means**, to cause damage and influence our societies and democratic political decision-making processes, in the form of **hybrid threats**.

Managing **hybrid threats** effectively requires:

- A new and more **comprehensive security culture** that understands the composite and comprehensive nature of the threat. Hybrid threats are not a potential risk, they are happening 24/7 and need be managed accordingly.
- Improved and comprehensive **threat assessment and situational awareness**; connecting the dots.
- **Strengthened resilience** (*deterrence by denial*).
- Development of an **effective countermeasures** (*cost imposition*) that over time will forge a **hybrid deterrence posture** (*deterrence by punishment*).

All of the above must be accomplished at the national level and through international

cooperation (deterrence by alliances, international solidarity and unity). While hybrid threats by definition constitute a foreign and security policy issue they often manifest themselves in the arena of internal security. The line between external and internal security is blurred, as is the line between war and peace. The tools we possess to address hybrid threats are a mix of domestic and foreign policies.

Many cultural, organizational, constitutional, legal and mental barriers will have to be overcome in order to address and manage hybrid threats effectively. Hybrid threats should not be seen in isolation from, or in opposition to, military threats; they are means in a 360-degree antagonistic toolbox and can be combined and designed to reinforce each other. This is why we need to develop a new holistic and comprehensive security culture.



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## About SCEEUS

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