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No Great Russia without Greater Russia: The Kremlin's Thinking behind the Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

This paper argues that to understand the invasion of Ukraine, it is necessary to have better insights into the Kremlin's particular worldview and Russia's place within it. This view is based on a sense of entitlement to great power status going hand in hand with an identity of itself as a country that extends beyond the actual borders of the Russian Federation. What makes the position unique is that the geopolitical and identity arguments are inseparable: in the Kremlin's worldview, Russia can only be a great power if it also exists as greater Russia. This structural factor is labelled the geopolitics-identity nexus. To explain why the invasion happened in 2022, three additional process factors are outlined: a radicalization of the view of Ukraine as Russian lands, driven by the feeling of existential crisis when tensions over Ukraine escalated in 2014; an escalation of policy options resulting from consecutive failures in Russia's Ukraine policy; and a reversal of the argument that Russia has to be a great power to exist within its 1991 borders into the argument that Russia has to expand its territory to be a great power.

Introduction

In the avalanche of the early analysis of Russia's war against Ukraine, a large part of the discussion focused on the motivations of the Kremlin to launch a major offensive on February 24, 2022. In the discipline of International Relations, Moscow's decision has often been read as a confirmation of a particular theoretical view. Yet major events like the current war invite critical self-reflection rather than the hardening of theoretical positions. After all, this is a war that many—including foreign policy experts close to the Kremlin—were not expecting. Taking a step back to grasp the complexity behind Russia's decision may therefore be a more fruitful approach.

The analysis starts from the idea that Russia's often-voiced security concerns cannot explain the decision to go to war for different reasons. First, the war has dramatically aggravated Russia's security situation rather than improving it. Second, there is a huge discrepancy between Russian-Western tensions over security prior to the war and Russia's aim of territorial expansion as the main objective of the war. Any explanation necessitates a better understanding of the Kremlin's worldview. In particular, it is argued that in this worldview, Russia's sense of entitlement to a great power status has blended with a form of identity thinking whereby Russian lands extend well beyond Russia's borders. It is against the background of this geopolitics-identity nexus that the Kremlin has come to see territorial expansion as an essential part of its 'greatpowerness.'[1] It constitutes a key structural factor required to understand the Kremlin's decision to go to war. Yet it does not explain why this major war was launched in 2022 and not in the three decades preceding. Therefore, the paper suggests three complementary process factors that explain how the Kremlin's thinking radicalized between 2014 and 2022.

The first section reflects critically on some recurring interest-based explanations of the war and pleads to take the worldview of the Kremlin into account. This paves the way for developing the central argument of the paper, whereby the geopolitics-identity nexus is seen as a key structural element crucial to understanding the decision. The following section focuses on the process factors that explain the dynamics of the process and considers both the radicalization of identity thinking and policy failures. In the last section, some reflections are made about the significance of these findings for the ongoing war and Europe's security order.

Explaining Russia's War against Ukraine

A variety of explanations have been provided for Russia's decision to start a full-scale war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The one that received the most attention was undoubtedly John Mearsheimer's structural realist explanation. Renewing the argument he originally launched to explain the Ukraine crisis in 2014, Mearsheimer continued to state that the West was to blame. The conflict, he stated, is "all about the West's efforts to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russian borders" (Mearsheimer 2022). It is the West that, through its actions, posed "an existential threat" to Russia and left it "no choice" but to react (Mearsheimer 2022). Others have explained the war from radically different theoretical perspectives. Yudin (2022), for example, spoke from a critical theory perspective and linked the war to neoliberalism. He qualified the Putin regime as a "radical version of neoliberalism" and argued that the decision to invade has been wrongly understood in terms of geopolitical goals superseding economic interests (Yudin 2022, 1). Yudin states, "This war is not so much a collision of two imperial powers as it is a war waged by capital unchained. Putin's successful

[1] Although the word 'greatpowerness' is not an English word, it has been widely used as a translation of the Russian word *velikoderzhavnost'*. See, for example, Smith 2014.

experience of building a neoliberal state and corrupting global elites made him consider brute force as the ultimate political argument" (Yudin 2022, 9). Drawing on resource dependency theory, Johannesson and Clowes (2022) claimed that "Russian control of both Ukraine's energy markets and resources for its own use and their strategic denial to the EU was the key motive for Russia's aggression towards Ukraine" in 2014 (7). They claimed that "scholars have not fully considered how Russian control over the more strategic areas of Ukraine could close the [resource] gap" (Johannesson and Clowes 2022, 6).

What all these explanations have in common is that they use abstract, theoretical schemes and apply them to the reality of the war, not to test these theories, but to offer a particular framework for interpretation and select information in function of that. To put it more bluntly, the reality gets adapted to the theory rather than the theory to the reality. In the case of Mearsheimer, this means that exclusive attention is given to one line of argumentation by the Kremlin. In particular, in 2021 – the year preceding the war, Putin systematically built up a discourse of Russia's security being threatened by the West. In April 2021, he spoke about a "red line" for Russia's core security interests that could not be crossed and would invite an "asymmetrical, swift and tough" response, adding: "We ourselves will determine in each specific case where [the red line] will be drawn" (Putin 2021b). By the end of the year, in December 2021, this undefined threat was translated into three unconditional demands that became the diplomatic focus in US-Russia relations: no further expansion of NATO to the post-Soviet space, no deployment of offensive weapons in the proximity of Russia, and the withdrawal of NATO military infrastructure from countries that joined NATO after 1997. It was clear—and telling—that these were unrealistic demands that did not have the slightest chance of being met. Interestingly, when the war was about to break out in February 2022, these elements faded into the background in the Russian discourse (Putin 2022a and 2022b). It is only considerably later during the war that the Kremlin will return to framing the war as a war with the West and Russia only defending itself – something that stands in sharp contrast with the reality of the war.

The one-sided focus on Russia's security rhetoric ignored a second discourse, equally coming from the Kremlin, which was identity-based and spoke about Ukraine as essentially 'Russian lands.' In the summer of 2021, Putin (2021a) published an article in which he presented a long and selective reading of history to make the claim that Russians and Ukrainians, as well as Belarusians, are part of one "triune nation."[2] He questions the borders of Ukraine and speaks of an "artificial division of Russians and Ukrainians." In retrospect, it can certainly be argued that many analysts have not taken Putin's article seriously enough. Dmitry Shlapentokh, for example, argued that "Putin's article was not just one of his intellectual exercises; as events have revealed, it was also implicitly a plan for possible actions. Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrates that Putin's vision must be taken seriously" (Shlapentokh 2021, 9). That the article was more than the gimmick it was taken for became clear with his speech on February 21, 2022, a few days before the invasion, where Putin (2022a) made similar, very elaborate 'historical' arguments, calling Ukraine a Bolshevik creation and suggesting it should be undone.

However, there is more than this twofold discourse of the Kremlin about security and Ukrainian sovereignty. A lot speaks against the assumption that the war can be explained on the basis of Russia's security concerns.[3] First, the fact that tensions over security between Russia and the

[2] The term "triune" is used in the Kremlin's official translation. The term triune expresses the idea of three in one, referring to the religious idea of the Holy Trinity.

[3] Alternative explanations have gone in many different directions referring to a clash of values, Putin's personality, the diversion from domestic issues to Russia's 'expansionist' and 'revisionist' nature (see Stubb 2022 for this multi-factor analysis). Maria Mälksoo argued that "Russian imperialism and colonialism are among the many blind spots of the academic field of IR" (Mälksoo 2022, 4). Götz and Staun (2022) looked into Russia's strategic culture and singled out Russia's sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis the West and sense of greatpowerness as key factors.

West preceded the 2022 war does not mean these tensions have caused the war. A lot more evidence is required to make that point. Second, the prospect of eventual accession to NATO was offered to Ukraine back in 2008.[4] This was not less than 14 years before the invasion, and the offer was nothing but a political statement. Accession was simply not on the agenda. Third, the question remains how the war against Ukraine would have alleviated Russia's security concerns. Russia is now involved in the biggest interstate war in Europe since the Second World War, and its outcome is very uncertain. It is the target of unprecedented Western sanctions. It has seen the export of its oil and gas to EU countries dwindle. Finland and Sweden are due to become NATO members. Moreover, Russia is often isolated and has arguably lost a lot of its influence both regionally and globally, as, for example, the summit meeting of the European Political Community in Prague in October 2022 underlined.[5] European states have drastically increased their defence spending. Germany, a country that has been so crucial in the reconciliation between the West and the Soviet Union (and later Russia), has gone through a 'historic shift' and is an active supplier of lethal weapons to Ukraine.

In an interview briefly before the invasion of Ukraine, Dmitri Trenin—a pre-eminent Russian foreign policy analyst—made an important point:

> No degree of NATO expansion, including to incorporate Ukraine, will threaten the military balance and deterrence stability…Therefore, in terms of military security, it's correct to say I don't see NATO expansion as such a terrible threat…But there is another factor: a country that becomes a NATO member undergoes profound reformatting, which touches upon all walks of life. The country transforms politically and ideologically. While Ukraine is outside of NATO, it's still possible that the entire country or some part of it may decide that the Slavic identity, the 'Russian world,' and other things matter, and this may lead to a normalization of relations with Russia, and even closer relations with it. At least, from Moscow's vantage point, such a possibility remains. But if a country joins NATO, that's it: that ship has sailed. In this sense, yes, there is a threat but not a military one; rather, it's geopolitical and geocultural. (Trenin 2022)

Trenin suggests that Russia's real concern is not security related but is derived from a combination of geopolitical and cultural factors. It is about 'losing' Ukraine to the West. This article argues that this blend of geopolitical and identity-based thinking is key to understanding the Kremlin's attitude. At the same time, this argument is an invitation not to discuss Russia's motivations purely in terms of rationality or irrationality. Rather, it is necessary to understand the Kremlin's 'worldviews,' the representations that inform their decisions but do not represent rational, 'objective' calculations. In other words, what matters is not whether this war was rational but how it seemed 'reasonable' to the Russian leadership. According to Katzenstein and Seybert, standards of reasonableness are variable and diverse (2018, 88). They represent different worldviews, historical memories, emotions, moral prescriptions, etc. They filter information and thus explain how the same information may lead to different choices and risk-taking.

The analysis in the rest of the paper demonstrates that the Kremlin's motivation cannot be understood without reference to a blend of geopolitical and identity reasoning. The latter

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[4] Art. 23 of the Bucharest Summit Declaration states that "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO" (NATO 2008).

[5] The European Political Community is a broad intergovernmental forum that was proposed by French President Macron and seeks coordination of foreign policy positions beyond the EU member states.

combines the idea that Russia is entitled to being a great power and that it can only be so by being 'greater Russia' – a Russia that extends beyond the borders of the Russian Federation and minimally encompasses the Slavic core of the former Soviet Union. This will be presented as a key structural factor essential to explaining why the Kremlin decided to launch a large-scale war against Ukraine. This, however, leaves another element to be answered. Simply put: why did it happen when it happened, in 2022? Why not in 2014, and why not prior to that? While many different elements may have played a role, this paper focuses on the radicalization that took place between 2014 and 2022: a radicalization of this blended geopolitical and identity thinking that reinforced the view of Ukraine as 'Russian lands,' as well as a radicalization of the policy options to find a permanent solution for the perceived 'Ukraine problem' and Russia's feeling of an 'existential crisis' after the events in Ukraine in 2014 (Youngs 2017). These elements constitute the process factors that help to explain why the Kremlin decided to start a far-reaching war in 2022.

Structural Factor: The Geopolitics-Identity Nexus

Ever since the demise of the Soviet Union, the objective of regaining great power status for Russia has been a key objective of its leaders (see *inter alia* Freire 2019; Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2017; Tsygankov 2005). This ambition is at the heart of its strategic culture (Götz and Staun 2022). It has been a constant objective; what has changed is the way in which Moscow seeks to achieve it.

The seeking of great power status is not simply a result of geostrategic thinking, as expressed in Brzezinski's famous statement: "Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire. Russia without Ukraine can still strive for imperial status, but it would then become a predominantly Asian imperial state…" (Brzezinski 1997, 46). Presented this way, geopolitical thinking appears as purely objective, unbiased by cognition. Yet the geopolitical reasoning in the Kremlin cannot be disconnected from the way it perceives Russia and its relations with others and is interwoven with its identity as empire. The Kremlin lacks the capacity to think of Russia as something else but a great power, as something else but an empire. The collapse of the Soviet Union did not lead to the disappearance of the imperial mindset. Russia never went through its post-colonial moment and has never taken the first step to come to terms with its own colonial past (Mälksoo 2022). As a result, Russia's current war can be seen as "an epitome of its struggle to reconnect with its past imperial self" (Mälksoo 2022, 7).

Of course, this colonial past has its own specifics. Russia was a "pre-modern empire" (Lieven 2002) that expanded its territory gradually by conquering neighbouring lands and absorbing diverse populations and cultures into its empire. As a result of its rapid expansion, it grew as an empire before it developed a clear concept of nation. Some of the newly conquered territories were Russified, while others maintained their identities to some extent. In contrast to modern colonial empires, such as the British Empire, the borders between the centre and periphery of the empire, between the fatherland and the colonies, were never clear-cut.

As a result, when the Soviet Union collapsed and Russia was reduced to the borders of the Russian Federation, the country maintained a complex relationship with its national identity**.** It had difficulties in dissociating itself from its imperial past. Akopov aptly describes the sentiment of "national loneliness" that dominates the Russian mindset (Akopov 2020, 296). Russia on its own is not considered to be complete; it is a "fortress of solitude" (Akopov 2020, 305). As a result, Russian thinking continues to be imbued with "fraternalist narratives concerning brotherly links and paternalistic relationships to the Russian leaders, who continue to consider former Soviet states, especially Ukraine and Belarus, as 'naturally' belonging to

Russia's cultural and political sphere of influence" (Akopov 2020, 295-296). They appear powerfully at the policy level, *inter alia* in the idea of Russia as a "state-civilisation" (Tsygankov 2017; Akopov 2020). These representations never entirely disappeared from the Russian mindset, but—as will be argued in the next section—received a new boost after the start of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, of which the outcome was read in the Kremlin as 'losing' Ukraine to the West – very much in line with Trenin's geocultural argument above.

These sorts of representations are clearly visible in many of Putin's statements. In his article on Ukraine in 2021, he made the following statement about Ukraine and Russia: "Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people" (Putin 2021a). In his television address on February 21, 2022, he added that "modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia" and "never had stable traditions of real statehood" (Putin 2022a). In sum, Ukraine was defined as "an inalienable part of our [Russia's] own history, culture and spiritual space" (Putin 2022a) and this is, per definition, understood to mean it is essentially Russian and, therefore, Russia can make legitimate claims to it. In other words, there is an essentialist claim as to what is Russian, fully determined by the centre and not leaving any agency to Ukraine. Nothing illustrates the Russian claims better than Putin's reference (and apparent comparison) to Tsar Peter the Great a few months into the war: "It seemed [Peter the Great] was at war with Sweden, he took something from them. He did not take anything from them, he returned [what was Russia's]…Well, it seems it has also fallen to us to take back and strengthen [territories]" (Putin 2022c).

This way of thinking pictures Russia not as an empire that came about by territorial expansion but as an empire entitled to the territories it once controlled, territories that are essentially theirs. This allows Putin to position Russia not as an imperialist force or colonizer but exactly the opposite. In his speech on the occasion of the annexation of four Ukrainian regions in September 2022, he managed to present Russia as the spearhead of the "anti-colonial movement," thus obfuscating Russia's imperialist role at the time of a brutal, expansionist war: "deep down, the Western elites have remained the same colonisers. They discriminate and divide peoples into the top tier and the rest…While we – we are proud that in the 20th century our country led the anti-colonial movement" (Putin 2022d). It is this type of reasoning that also paves the way for a harsh language of vilifying all forces that do not recognize Russia in this role. They get labelled as either 'Russophobes' or 'Nazis.' Both terms have historical roots. The term Russophobia was already widespread around the time of the nineteenth-century Crimean War (Figes 2010). Fighting Nazism has been mythologized as Russia's historic mission in a selective reading of history and a reductionist claim that the victory over Nazism was an exclusive Russian achievement.

The idea that Russia 'naturally' extends beyond the current borders of the Russian Federation is traditionally intertwined with the concept of *derzhavnost*, a concept that translates the idea of 'greatpowerness' but with the underlying assumption of destiny. According to Legvold, *derzhavnost* "has a meaning all its own, one missing from the English language, simply because the phenomenon is missing. Only the Russians in moments of distress revert to an affectation of great-power standing—that is, to asserting their natural right to the role and influence of a great power whether they have the wherewithal or not" (Legvold 2007, 114) Russia is thus entitled to 'greatpowerness' and this has always been central to its self-identity.

The idea that Russia is bigger than the current Russian Federation has been present in its foreign policy ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was, most visibly, translated into the concept of *russkiy mir* (Russian world), grasping the meaning of a Russian-speaking diaspora existing outside the Federation's borders. However, the way the concept was used politically

has evolved significantly over time. Suslov (2018) argues that the concept has evolved from a de-territorialized concept in the 1990s to more geopolitical interpretations. As of 2009, the "Russian world" was equated with the idea of an "autonomous, expanding state-civilization'" (Suslov 2018, 346), forming an alternative to the West and reflecting irridentist claims.

Already prior to the Ukraine crisis, there is thus both a deeply-rooted idea of Russia's destiny to 'greatpowerness' and an evolution to a more territorial interpretation of greater Russia. How this developed into the decision for territorial expansion through war can arguably be explained by policy failure and a sense of frustration over the (perceived) lack of recognition of Russia as a great power. The next section will zoom in on this evolution, in particular, the escalation of the Kremlin's policy towards Ukraine as a result of relative policy failure and a radicalization of its identity thinking. This represents the process factor, the dynamic element that helps to explain why the invasion happened in 2022.

Process Factors: Radicalization and Policy Failure

What the world witnessed between early 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a radicalization of great power imaginaries along the nexus of geopolitical and identity arguments. Without claiming to offer an exhaustive explanation, this paper argues that this radicalization happened along three lines.

The first line is constituted by the way the Ukraine crisis was perceived by Russia's leaders in 2014.

> The Ukraine conflict [of 2014] has undoubtedly been pivotal. It threw into question Russia's self-understanding as a great European power and smashed to smithereens the two main pillars of the Kremlin's long-term strategy: maintaining good working relations with Europe, especially with Germany and France, and promoting the 'Eurasian integration' of former Soviet lands. (Torbakov 2021)

The developments in Ukraine in February 2014 radicalized the Kremlin's reasoning, rooted in a blend of geopolitics (Russia's entitlement to great power status) and identity thinking (Russia being 'by nature' larger than the borders of the Russian Federation). Ukraine drifting away from the 'Russian world' was perceived as a 'loss' of Ukraine to the West, causing not simply geostrategic concerns but an "existential crisis" (Youngs 2017). According to Freire, Ukraine "ended up reflecting Russia's anxiety over its own identity-building, contributing to ontological insecurity. Russia was again losing a part of the self, by losing Ukraine" (Freire 2020, 13). Earlier mentioned ideas of Russia's loneliness, detached from part of its own self, got a new boost after the 2014 Ukraine crisis, leading to widespread debates on Russia's identity (Torbakov 2019). It was echoed powerfully in the words of Vladislav Surkov, former advisor to Putin, who saw the Ukraine crisis as "the end of Russia's epic journey to the West" and a return to "one hundred (two hundred? three hundred?) years of geopolitical solitude" (Surkov 2018). These debates fostered a revival of the concepts of 'greater' and 'historical' Russia, leading to expansionist and irridentist positions (Akopov 2020, 295).

The second line of radicalization was in the policy field. Russia redesigned its foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine in the wake of the events of early 2014. Perceiving the developments as a Western take-over of Ukraine, the Kremlin mainly focused on undermining Western control in Ukraine, destabilizing the country by provoking war in the Donbas, and annexing Crimea. Russia tried to keep a foot in the door, for which the Minsk II agreement was to serve as a

vehicle.[6] Based on the idea of far-reaching autonomy for the Donbas, Moscow would *de facto* maintain a degree of veto power in Ukraine's policy. In other words, its strategy was largely based on "negative compulsory power" aimed at "preventing effective control by and to the advantage of the West," making Ukraine a liability for its Western partners rather than a benefit (Casier 2018, 103). This strategy was not very successful, partly because the Minsk II agreement was not implemented, and the military effort in the Donbas ended up in a stalemate. Moreover, Moscow's policy lacked coherence and clear long-term objectives beyond destabilization. The Ukraine policy was scattered over different decision-making bodies and largely ineffective (Watling and Reynolds 2022). An attempt at centralization was undertaken when the responsibility for Moscow's Ukraine policy shifted from Vladislav Surkov to Dmitry Kozak on January 25, 2020 (Hurak and D'Anieri 2022, 121; Watling and Reynolds 2022, 6-7). Despite this change, it remained unclear what the permanent solution for the 'existential' Ukraine 'problem' would be. Watling and Reynolds (2022) argue that consecutive failures in Russia's Ukraine policy led to a radicalization of policy scenarios, driven by trial-and-error rather than a coherent set of strategic goals. Next to annexing Crimea and fuelling a war in the Donbas, the Kremlin tried a variety of tactics to put pressure on Ukraine: economic coercion, exploiting energy dependence, 'passportization' in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, the naval blockade of the Kerch strait, religious influence, support for pro-Russian politicians, intelligence operations, attempts at toppling the regime, and troop mobilization along the border in 2021 (Hurak and D'Anieri 2022; Watling and Reynolds 2022). All these tactics delivered few results. Ukraine was not won back but only further alienated from Russia. Eventually, this pushed the Kremlin to a scenario of recognition of the People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk on February 21, 2022, followed swiftly by a military invasion on the 24th. With this change, Russia abandoned a strategy of using relatively limited means to resort to maximal effects, as it had done by taking over Crimea by stealth or denying its role in the Donbas war. It now opted for brutal and massive warfare, aimed at territorial expansion.

Finally, the third line of radicalization was in the reversal of the geopolitics-identity argument. Back in 2003, Putin stated that "such a country as Russia can only survive and develop within the existing borders if it stays as a great power. During all of its times of weakness…Russia was invariably confronted with the threat of disintegration" (Putin quoted in Tsygankov 2005, 132). 'Greatpowerness' was thus presented as a condition for Russia's survival and development within its given borders (Tsygankov 2005). The argument was not that Russia had to expand in order to be a great power. In his early years as president, Putin explicitly rejected imperial ambitions (Legvold 2007; Tsygankov 2005).[7] The argument was that only as a great power Russia can continue to exist and flourish within its current borders; only as a great power can disintegration be prevented. This argument was radically reversed in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine. Perceiving that it was withheld its recognition as a 'great power' and that its rise to 'greatpowerness' was hampered by the West (Krickovic 2017), Russia changed course and opted for territorial expansion as an alternative way to establish itself as a great power. In the mindset of the Kremlin, Russia could only be great Russia if it constituted a greater Russia. It needs to be underlined that there is no objectivity or geopolitical necessity in this. Rather, it echoes a deeply rooted way of thinking that connects Russia's great power status with territorial expansion.

[6] The Minsk II agreement was signed in February 2015 seeking to put an end the war in Eastern Ukraine. It was built on the idea of the restoration of the state border between Ukraine and Russia in the conflict zone and autonomy for the Donetsk and Luhansk districts. The latter would have allowed Russia to exert significant influence in Ukrainian politics.

[7] The concept of *derzhavnost* was not understood by Putin in his early years as president to mean imperial ambitions but rather "economic revitalisation" (Legvold 2007, 116).

This equation between Russia's great power status and the size of the territory can be explained in different ways. In one interpretation, it is simply historical continuity, with Moscow inevitably returning to an old tradition of connecting strong statehood with territorial expansion. Legvold, for example, stated: "More than usual, Russia, while amid the upheaval, sinks back into a tortured quest to define its very identity, one manifestation of which is an ostentatious preoccupation with its great-power standing (or *derzhavnost*) and the other, a sharpened version of its permanently vexed relationship to the West" (Legvold 2007, 92). This lines up with the continuity thesis, which assumes that the essence of Russian foreign policy does not change over time, as its national interests remain constant, resulting in a return to policies of anti-Westernism and expansionism. Self-evidently, a thesis like this leaves a lot to be explained in terms of variation in Russia's foreign policy and protracted periods of time whereby these hallmarks were not valid. When considered as the only explanation for today's war against Ukraine, the argument risks becoming historically determinist.

An alternative explanation takes into account the process dynamics. Russia's current expansionist policy is then not an inevitable return to the traps of the past but the outcome of domestic and international processes that resuscitate this way of thinking. It is within these dynamics that the radicalization of territorial, irridentist thinking about Ukraine and the escalation of policy options can be situated. This is not to say that historical factors do not matter. They do so strongly, as images of Russian *derzhavnost* and empire feed and propel this way of thinking. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it is the fact that Russia has never come to terms with its own imperial past that prevents it from breaking these dynamics of radicalization.

The Significance of the Geopolitics-Identity Nexus for the War

Russia's war against Ukraine is the biggest interstate war in Europe since the Second World War, and its human toll is already an unspeakable tragedy. On the basis of the above, there are reasons to assume that—in the absence of major game changers—the war will be fought till the end, whatever exactly this may mean in practice. For Ukraine, accepting any peace deal with territorial concessions is hard to imagine. The belief prevails in Kyiv that any peace deal will be temporary and that Russia will be back one day – precisely because of the geopolitics-identity nexus that guides its foreign policy thinking. After all, Ukraine had Russian guarantees for its territorial integrity through the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 – guarantees that proved worthless with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The brutal invasion of February 2022 took away any doubts about the Kremlin's intentions and readiness to use massive force and destruction to achieve territorial expansion. For Russia, withdrawal is equally hard to imagine, not just because it means losing face, but because it would threaten the survival of the regime itself. Moscow has annexed four territories of Ukraine in September 2022 that it now considers to be an integral part of the Russian Federation, despite the fact that it does not even fully control them at the time of writing.

As argued above, this territorial expansion into Ukraine is disconnected from the security concerns Russia claimed vocally and escalated in its rhetoric throughout 2021. The war provoked the total collapse of what was left of the post-Cold War security order (Alcaro 2022; Casier 2022). Most importantly, with the invasion of Ukraine, Russia went one step further in breaking a major taboo, the linchpin of the European post-World War II security order: the inviolability of borders. The lesson learnt from two destructive world wars was that territorial expansion by force poses the biggest threat to security and easily spills over into uncontrollable war. The principle of the inviolability of borders is one of the most fundamental principles of

international law. It obtained a central place in the UN Charter and was at the heart of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. The war has turned Russia into the biggest security threat in Europe, and as a result, all previous discussions about the legitimacy of Moscow's security concerns are futile and bygone. The war has redrawn the European security landscape. There is a united transatlantic front that has imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russia and has massively delivered increasingly heavy arms to Ukraine. The EU has upgraded its security role. It has delivered EUR 5.6 billion in military assistance to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility (Council of the EU 2023). Moreover, it set up the unparalleled European Union Military Assistance Mission for Ukraine (EUMAM), aimed at strengthening the capacity of the Ukrainian armed forces through training (EEAS 2022). In a way that was hard to imagine before the invasion, EU countries have largely cut themselves off from Russian natural gas, with the import now being around one-fifth of what it was the previous year (Zachmann, Sgaravatti, and McWilliams 2023) and oil imports from Russia (except oil transported by pipeline) being phased out by the end of 2022. Equally important, the EU granted Ukraine candidate member status. Despite the fact that this will only be the beginning of a long accession process and that huge obstacles have to be overcome, the symbolic significance of this can hardly be overestimated. In a context in which the Kremlin denies Ukraine the right to sovereign statehood, this offers a forceful recognition of its statehood. Moreover, it indicates a change in the EU's strategy away from its policy of association and privileged relations under the Eastern Partnership towards a policy of enlargement for the region. In light of Trenin's argument above, where he claims Russia's real concern is that countries slip out of Russia's geocultural sphere, offering Ukraine the prospect of accession to the EU is a most significant step.

Complementary to the argument above that the war has drastically aggravated the security situation Moscow has expressed concern about, this means that Russia will also find it harder to maintain its geocultural sphere and the influence that comes with it. Post-war Ukraine will likely be firmly anchored in the West. While it is far too early for conclusions, this effect will probably not be limited to Ukraine but may leave a deep imprint on Moscow's relations with its traditional partners within the Eurasian Economic Union and within the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. Without a change of spirit and regime, this loss of influence will be hard to digest in Russia.

Conclusion

It is important to be careful not to end up living in a 'defactualised world' because of the love for theories (Arendt 1972, 36). Russia's war against Ukraine presents a test for International Relations theories, which are too easily used as a universally applicable framework to give a certain interpretation of the war. Instead, it is necessary to understand the complexity and test the validity of theoretical assumptions against the reality of the current war, including domestic particularities.

Against this background, this paper has argued that Russia's decision to launch a large-scale war against Ukraine is not the result of escalating tensions with the West, whereby Russian security concerns prompt it to act. It has introduced the idea of a geopolitics-identity nexus that is crucial to understanding the Kremlin's decision to go to war. This nexus suggests that in the Kremlin's worldview, Russia's sense of entitlement to 'greatpowerness' got anew entangled with its self-identity, whereby the Russian lands extend beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. The imaginary that informed the decision embodies a 'geocultural' sphere, a 'civilization' of its own that comes with a geographic notion that cannot be reduced to the

borders of 1991. In other words, in the Kremlin's worldview, Russia can only be a great power if it also exists as greater Russia.

While this worldview is not alien to Russia's thinking throughout history, it was argued that different process factors have led the Russian leadership to fill in this nexus radically. Three elements of change were indicated: a radicalization of the view of Ukraine as Russian lands, prompted by the feeling of an existential crisis when tensions over Ukraine escalated in 2014; an escalation of policy options resulting from consecutive failures in Russia's Ukraine policy; and a reversal of the argument that Russia has to be a great power to exist within its 1991 borders into an argument that Russia has to expand its territory to be a great power. These elements do not pretend to give a complete or exhaustive explanation for the Kremlin's decision to wage war, but they form essential components to understand why it did.

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