

## **An Unnecessary War of Fame: The East and West NATO's Enlargement Strategies and the Geopolitics of Russo- Ukrainian Conflict**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Russian invasion of Ukraine is one of the most critical geopolitical crises the world leaders are facing currently. And is being seen as one of the most serious test of European security in the recent time, and its presents a serious challenge as to understanding of President Putin's geopolitical intentions while, these grievances included the long-simmering dispute over the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the legitimacy of Ukrainian identity as well as their statehood. It reflected a worldview Putin had long expressed, emphasizing the deep-seated unity among the Eastern Slavs-Russians and Ukrainians who they both trace their origins to the medieval Kyivan Rus commonwealth-and suggesting that the modern states of Russia and Ukraine should share a common political destiny now and in the future. Owing to that view is the claim that distinct Ukrainian identity is the product of foreign manipulation mostly, by Russia's acclaimed imperial rivals; using Ukraine as part of an "anti-Russia project. Consequently, the paper revealed that NATO is not only Russia's problem but, Russia's ambitions to extend beyond preventing Ukrainian NATO membership and encompass a more detailed aspiration to dominate Ukraine politically, militarily, and economically triggered the current conflict in Ukraine. The paper further revealed that Russia is almost certain to flop in its bid to establish lasting control over its neighbors owing to external factors, mostly the West and the nonconformist nature of Ukraine government. Therefore, concludes that if Russia must feel fully secure with regard to Ukraine, Ukraine must be territorially truncated or geopolitically neutralized by Russia. Then, if neutralization is not feasible as a strategy, Russia must renewed stability, though, this option would largely depend either on the West agreeing in renewed Russian control of Ukraine, or on Russia accepting the loss of Ukraine. It is most likely that a non-cooperative result will emerge at the end of the day, in which Russia may limit its military activity, but will continue to ensure that Ukraine cannot do what is desired to achieve or join Europe-west- NATO world.*

**KEYWORD:** war, Ukraine, Russia, conflict, NATO's enlargement, European Union, East and West, geopolitics

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## INTRODUCTION

*“In what is ostensibly a piece on the lessons of the ‘Arab Spring’ which Kremlin orthodoxy presents as the result of covert Western campaigns of regime change and he outlines a new age in which wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template...A perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a morass of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war”- (Gerasimov, 2013:8).*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine and Russia people have been living peacefully though, in a separate and independent states for nearly a quarter of a century (Onuch,2015:35-56). There is no doubt that much has been said about the cultural and historical links between these two ‘brotherly’ countries, and also about the crisis between the two countries’ different perspectives on nation building and democratization processes (Jakubanees, Supphellen, and Thorbjørnsen, 2005:55-78; Janmaat, 2000; Laba, 1996; Puglisi, 2003:827-845; Szporluk, 2000). Kiryukhin (2015) noted that national politics in the USSR were basically irresolute to the current situation between Ukraine and Russia. For many years, the practices of ethno-cultural identity were mixed with the ideology of the formation of a special identity and the new ‘Soviet person’. Kiryukhin,(2015:57-65) further noted that in spite of all official pronouncements regarding the new communality of ‘the Soviet people’ having been formed in the USSR, the Soviet government was engaged in the systemic development of national cultures and national intelligentsia in the republics jointly with upholding Russian national-cultural tradition as the principal representative of the Soviet culture.

Kiryukhin (2015:57-65) believe that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, identity among them became a problem as issue of identity turned out to be more important and often discussed than the problem of establishing democratic institutions. It is clearly evident from the discourse prevalent amongst the Ukrainian national intelligentsia since the proclamation of independence, which has been focused on debates about self-determination between the West and the East, national memory and history, religion, and cultural affiliation. While Russian leaders, in the way of an older brother to Ukraine, have constantly labelled Ukraine as the central element of Russia’s ‘near abroad’ (Cameron and Orenstein, 2012; Rywkin, 2003:3-12; Trenin, 2006:87-96), the citizens and their foreign policies favorites have historically on gas, even during the Georgian War, and same time during the EU and NATO) converged and diverged several times over the course of the last period of years (Onuch, 2015:35-56). Ukraine has also not been exception either. Kiryukhin (2015) also claimed that geopolitics has also be labeled as one of the issues since the

proclamation of Ukraine's independence, with a different degree of intensity, always aimed at the consolidation of the homogeneity in culture and language of the dominance of Ukrainian cultural traditions and, at the same time, placing weight on ethno-cultural differences between Ukraine and Russia.

Most notably, since 2014, the Ukrainian government has prioritized closer integration with the NATO and European Union. Owing to this, many steps were taken including the 2019 constitutional amendment which shows that the government was answerable for implementing Ukraine's "strategic course" toward NATO membership. President Zelensky of Ukraine first foreign trip as president was to Brussels, where he reaffirmed Ukraine's "strategic course to achieve full-fledged membership in the EU and NATO as well. Ozili, (2022:1-7) noted that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is being influenced by many factors ranging from internal and external political forces meanwhile, Russia government has claimed severally that the conflict between the two countries are mostly influenced by Western involvement in the internal politics of Ukraine and confrontation claiming that the conflict mostly provoked by NATO's desire to enlarge into the region where Russia has strong interests (Ozili, 2022:1-7). Samokhvalov (2015) believes that the conflict in the EU-Ukraine-Russia is triangular in nature that in turn affected by the combination of choices made by the Ukrainian political class, business elites and larger society in four major dimensions like; internal political activities, economic factors, global politics, and ideological factor. Therefore, Russian government claimed:

that the desire of Ukraine to join NATO as one of its members was unacceptable as it could pose security threat to Russia. President Putin once stated during the NATO summit in Romania in April 2008 that such a move could result in a break-up of Ukraine along regional lines, and he reportedly claim that Ukraine was an artificial country, which included historically Russian regions along with other regions (Dzerkalo tyzhnia, 2008).

There is no doubt that the conflict escalated in early 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of key government facilities in the country's east by pro-Russian separatists. This action resulted into a greater trend mostly from the support for separatists in Moldova to the now apparently emblematic war in Georgia; President Vladimir Putin's strategies regarding the sovereign nations of the former Soviet Union seem to reflect a larger shape of destabilization begun more than a decade ago. With Ukraine now in the throes of violent conflict, and with its effects are reverberating across the globe. This raises the question of where Ukraine and other affected areas in former Soviet republics may be heading to and what the international community can do to stabilize the situation and restore enduring peace is left to be seen.

With that being said, a lot has been written by many scholars, past and present about the root causes of Russia-Ukraine war, the inspirations of the parties to the conflict, and perhaps the solution to

the conflict. However, in spite of these large numbers of research on the conflict, most of the scholars have failed to provide the lingering issues that mostly responsible for the conflict in Ukraine' from the point of view of Russo-Ukrainian relations, and grasped the perspectives of various groups directly involved. Therefore, this article seeks to understand why a vicious conflict took place in Ukraine after nearly two decades of peaceful inter-ethnic and inter-regional relations between the two countries; second, to understand the role of NATO's expansion strategy on the conflict since the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991. Lastly, to understand how the rise of revisionism in Russian foreign policy and geopolitics further escalate the conflict. However, the authors hypothetically conclude that the war was not actually necessary considering the peaceful inter-ethnic and inter-regional relation that has existed between the two countries in the past.

### **Russia-Ukraine Relations and the Significance of the Past for the Present**

Until the beginning of the 20th century, the history of Ukrainian national movement is mostly the history of the struggle of three projects of (Ukrainian) national identity, each of them in its own way shaping the outlines and the principles of the relations that exists between Ukraine and Russia (Kiryukhin, 2015:57-65). Historically, the first development was one of Pan-Slavic identity and within its scope; Ukraine and Russia were parts of the common Slavic world, i.e. special cultural, religious, and national commonality of the people of Eastern Europe, which was also considered, in the long term, as a potential political community. Shortly afterwards, the project of special Ukrainian ethno-cultural identity developed, which was different and opposed to Russian identity, with Ukraine and Russia seen as different national communities (Kiryukhin, 2015:57-65). Therefore, in many ways as, a reaction to the development of Ukrainian ethnic nationalism and under the impact of the development of Russian nationalism, a third project was formed as the project of the 'Little Russian' identity. Within its scope, Ukraine, on a par with Belorussia, was considered to be a part of the All-Russian national project based on the idea of common political history of Russia (Great Russia), Ukraine (Little Russia), including Galicia (Red Russia), and Belorussia (White Russia), all of them originating from the Middle Ages Kievan Rus' and sharing common religion (Orthodox Christian) and language (Old Church Slavonic) (Kiryukhin, 2015:57-65) noted.

During imperial conquest, Russian publicists such as the cleric Innokenty Gizel redefined the Ukrainian lands and their people as part of Russia's own history. They emphasized the existence of a tripartite "all-Russian" people comprised of Great, Little (Ukrainian), and White (Belarusian) Russians, a view promoted in the educational system of the nineteenth-century Russian Empire. Committed to the idea of the "all-Russian" people, imperial elites believed that rival powers were deliberately promoting Ukrainian and Belarusian nationalism as a geopolitical tool for weakening Russia power the theme Putin has long emphasized.

Despite a period of “indigenization (korenizatsiya)” of education, culture, and politics in the 1920s, Ukraine ultimately experienced a high degree of Russification, owing to the persecution of nationalist intellectuals under Stalin, thin linguistic and ethnic boundaries between Russians and Ukrainians, and the opportunities for advancement available to Ukrainians who professed a Russian identity. During the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost (“openness”) provided an opportunity for the mobilization of nationalist movements pushing for the breakup of the Soviet Union, including the People’s Movement (Rukh) of Ukraine. Gorbachev sought to keep Ukraine within a Moscow-centric confederation he hoped would replace the Soviet Union. Russians in Ukraine do not represent such a distinctive national group as other large minorities in other countries. Pogrebinskiy, (2015:85-94) opines that both contemporary Russians and Ukrainians inhabitants of the lands of the former Russian Empire, that is the majority of contemporary Ukraine, originate from the people of common (All-Russian, ‘Orthodox’) identity, where the differences between Great Russians (‘Russians’) and Little Russians (‘Ukrainians’) were rather of regional or sub-ethnic nature. In the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Russian-speaking population started to identify themselves with Ukraine (Ukrainian SSR) “we live in Ukraine, so we are Ukrainian citizens, Ukrainians (CSIS, 2022).

It was particularly facilitated by the linguistic proximity of the Russian and Ukrainian languages, and had led to the fact that despite mixed population (Russian and Ukrainian speaking), there was no division into national communities, as was the case in the Baltic republics, in Transcaucasia, in Central Asia, and in the Russian autonomous republics of Caucasia. Partly because of the total absence of any conflicts between Russians and Ukrainians on the domestic level, the establishment of an independent Ukraine in 1991 was achieved practically seamlessly.

However, the lack of manifestation of the Russian element in Ukraine had its limits, and many Russians, and Ukrainians who identify with Russian culture and language, voted for Ukrainian independence from Russia, but did not support Ukraine’s exit from Russia’s sphere in favor of Western Europe. The type of Ukrainian identity that has developed over years, and which has been shared by Russians and representatives of national minorities can be referred to as a ‘civil identity’. Most importantly, the Ukrainian ‘civil identity’ was not anti-Russian and it presumed sympathies toward Russia and Russian culture, therefore it was acceptable for Russians in Ukraine. Decisively, the devotion to this identity has been shared until recently by the absolute majority of the citizens of the country (Pogrebinskiy, 2015:85-94).

Also, until 2014, centrist Ukrainian and Russian speakers were not anti-Russian and adhered to the Soviet concept of Ukrainians and Russians being closely related, but different ‘brothers.’ They would never accept the Tsarist Russian and White émigré view of Ukrainians as one of three branches of the ‘All-Russian People’ and the non-existence of a Ukrainian state. Consequently,



Putin's rehabilitation of Tsarist Russian and White émigré views, which deny the existence of a Ukrainian people and portray Ukraine as an 'artificial' that Ukrainian nationalism was an artificial creation of Vienna. Putin himself reportedly told President George W. Bush in 2008 that Ukraine 'is not even a country' (Bohm, 2013). The subsequent rejection of Ukrainian identity and the claim that Ukraine's desire to separate itself from Russian influence was the product of "external forces" seem to be not just Russian talking points, but a claim that Putin himself (and, presumably, other high-placed Russian officials) believe. This eventually affected the landscape of Russian nationalism by fragmenting the 'national-democrat' scene and strengthening nostalgic aspirations for the recreation of Soviet great-poweriness, of Russia's imperial mission, and of the Eurasian Union project. Onuch (2015:35-56) believes that despite the crisis between Ukrainians and Russians yet do not generally view the 'other' in a hostile manner and both believe that there should be friendly relations between their countries; they do have very different views on where relations between their two countries actually stand. Onuch (2015:35-56) further noted that Russians and Ukrainians equally distrust the other's political leadership and view the other's country in an unfavourable light. He went further to claim that, Ukrainians and Russians strongly disagree about Russia's involvement in the conflict in the Donbas. Most Ukrainians believe their country is at war with Russia, most Russians view this situation differently as an internal conflict caused by locals needing to defend themselves against the spread of nationalism. These harsh differences should be further analysed and systematically traced, as it is clear that these two populations are receiving very different information, which is framed in a very different manner. The most worrying aspect of this divergence is that it can create the opportunity for radical groups to escalate violence and further divide the two populations.

This identity crisis has significantly exacerbated all these internal contradictions, including those related to the problem of the formation of national Ukrainian identity. Kiryukhin, (2015:57-65) believes that a common political project for Ukraine could be the establishment of a united civil political nation. But the elaboration and realization of such project is hindered by the resistance of the elites (both political and intellectual) who are not ready and, by and large, not capable of proposing and carrying out that project. There is no doubt that the invasion and war with Ukraine have fundamentally altered the Ukrainian-Russian relationship. A pro-Russian 'east' has disappeared, Ukrainians no longer view Russians as their 'brothers,' and Russian soft power in Ukraine has disintegrated. Ukrainian opinion polls show dramatic changes in identity, views of Ukrainian history and relations with Russia.

### **Russo-Ukrainian Conflict and NATO's Enlargement Strategy: The Narratives**

What might seem the most paradoxical and counter-intuitive of allegiances is, in fact, just one illustration of the multiple ideological reversals and realignments that are the continuing aftermath

of the collapse of communism and the ending of the Cold War era sees a new turn of things in in the region. After the Soviet Union (USSR) dissolved in 1991, Ukraine and Russia maintained close ties. In 1994, Ukraine agreed to accede to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear-weapon state, and dismantle the remaining nuclear weapons in Ukraine, left there by the USSR when it dissolved (Vasylenko, 2009). In return, Russia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) agreed to uphold the territorial integrity of Ukraine in the Budapest Memorandum. In 1999, Russia signed the Charter for European Security, which "reaffirmed the inherent right of each and every participating state to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance "In the years after the Soviet Union's collapse, several former Eastern Bloc countries joined NATO, partly in response to regional security threats such as the 1993 Russian constitutional crisis, the War in Abkhazia (1992–1993) and the First Chechen War (1994–1996).

Russian leaders described this expansion as a violation of Western powers' assurances that NATO would not expand eastward, although any such alleged pledges, if real, were made informally, and their nature is disputed( Baker,2022). On 15 May 1992, six post-Soviet states belonging to the Commonwealth of Independent States; Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan signed the Collective Security Treaty as a response to the conclusion of the Warsaw Pact and which Ukraine refused to join. The question of NATO's post-Cold War role had already come up in 1990 during negotiations between Western and Soviet officials over German reunification. Initially, Moscow insisted that a unified Germany within NATO was unacceptable. When it became clear that Western governments would not accept, and Moscow could not block a unified Germany within the Alliance, Moscow pushed for guarantees that NATO forces would not move eastward into the territory of the former German Democratic Republic. Divergently, The Brussels Summit Declaration in 1994 claims:

..our purpose is to protect our member states. Every country that joins NATO undertakes to uphold its principles and policies. This includes the commitment that 'NATO does not seek confrontation and poses no threat to Russia,' as reaffirmed at the Brussels Summit this year. NATO enlargement is not directed against Russia. Every sovereign nation has the right to choose its own security arrangements. This is a fundamental principle of European security, one that Russia has also subscribed to and should respect (NATO Brussels Summit Declaration, 1994).

Nevertheless, the PfP was approved at NATO's Brussels Summit in January 1994. Walker, (2015) claimed that the Alliance also made clear that it expected to take in new members on its eastern borders in the reasonably near future, as stated in its final declaration:

We expect and would welcome NATO expansion that would reach to democratic states to our East, as part of an evolutionary process, taking into account political and security developments in the whole of Europe (NATO Brussels Summit Declaration, 1994).

Walker, (2015) further claimed that at some point, NATO enlargement had become an important partisan issue in Washington, with Republicans pushing the White House to offer membership to Central European countries in short order. Leading Republicans also argued that enlargement was needed to protect democratic governments in Central Europe from Russia intimidation and military pressure. At any rate, by the end of 1994, the Clinton administration had effectively committed to NATO enlargement, even if it left open the timing and extent of the process (Goldgeier, 1999). At the 2008 Bucharest summit, Ukraine and Georgia sought to join NATO and the response of NATO members was divided; Western European countries opposed offering Membership Action Plans (MAP) lest this antagonise Russia, while US president George W. Bush pushed for their admission. NATO ultimately refused to offer Ukraine and Georgia MAPs, but also issued a statement agreeing that "these countries will become members of NATO" (Rutland, 2015:117-122). Putin voiced strong opposition to Georgia and Ukraine's NATO membership bids. On 7 February 2019, the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's parliament, voted to amend the constitution and stated that the country's long-term ambition was to join the European Union (EU) and NATO. The colour revolutions came against the backdrop of the eastern enlargement of the two key Western regional organizations of the European Union and NATO. Putin became convinced that Russia was subject to a deliberate strategy of encirclement and containment by the US (Rutland, 2015:117-122). Walker, (2015) believe that the extent to which NATO was a sore point for the new Russian leadership was highlighted at the end of December, when Russia's pro-Western foreign minister, Andrey Kozyrev, made a startling speech at a CSCE meeting in Stockholm that The New York Times' William Safire would characterize as a 'peek at Cold War 11' (Safire, 1994). Pretending to be an anti-Western successor to himself, Kozyrev complained, inter alia, about:

the strategies of NATO and the WEU (the West European Union, a now defunct military arm of the European Community – EWW), which are drawing up plans to strengthen their military presence in the Baltic and other regions of the territory of the former Soviet Union and to interfere in Bosnia and the internal affairs of Yugoslavia (Rotfield, 2009).

As Kozyrev later explained, his mock speech was intended as a warning about what might happen should the West fail to help Russia economically, isolate it politically, or contain it militarily (Walker, 2015). Russian government claimed that Ukraine's desire and agreement to join a military alliance with NATO poses an existential danger and threat to vulnerable Russia's national security and such desire will undoubtedly expand NATO eastward and bring NATO more closely to Russia's border thereby causing an existential threat to Russia and the Russians. It will also



assist the West to penetrate Russia and weaken or undermine Russia's national security and further exposed them to danger.

D'Anieri, (2015:242-250) noted that there were two categories involved; the defensive and offensive. The defensive view sees Russia, alarmed by the eastward expansion of the European Union and NATO, as reacting to the threat that Ukraine's revolution would lead to the expansion of hostile European powers into territory that had traditionally belonged to Russia, and through which Russia has repeatedly been invaded. 'The United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis and the taproot of the trouble is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West' (Mearsheimer, 2014). Again, D'Anieri, (2015:242-250) noted that 'twenty years of NATO's eastward expansion has caused Russia to feel cornered and believe that the Ukraine crisis was instigated by the West's attempt, some years ago, to smuggle the former Soviet republic into NATO' (van den Heuvel and Cohen, 2014). With this impression, that the Ukrainians, with the moral and financial support of the West, are trying to free themselves from the centuries-old Russian colonial oppression, while Russia resists it in every manner, knowing that as soon as it allow Ukraine to go, the European values will automatically triumph in Ukraine. pro-Russian account for attacking Ukraine is that Ukraine is being controlled by Western forces and that Ukraine has consistently use its military as a machinery to dominate and oppress citizens in pro-independence regions who are generally loyal to Russian government and which has also resulted to genocide against its own people in the region (Ozili,2022:1-7).

Though, many western reporters quoted these claims by the Russia government as false, fabricated and therefore baseless. The pro-Western account of what caused the invasion, according to multiple reports by media outlets including Al Jazeera (2022/2/24) believe that Russia feels threatened that Ukraine requests to be a democratic nation, free from Russian control, and pursue collaboration with the West in politics, security and trade could serve as leeway to joining NATO and the European Union. The pro-Western media claims that Russia rejects Ukraine's decision to embrace Western democracy and alliance because Ukraine's western alliance with the European Union and NATO could creep up the national security of Russia. Therefore, Russia decided to launch a 'special military operation' in Ukraine so that it can change or remove the Ukrainian president and the incumbent government in Kyiv and install a new pro-Russian government in Ukraine who at this point would be loyal and respect Russia decisions or policies. Russia had always opposed NATO enlargement and this came to a head in the case of Georgia and Ukraine in 2005-2008, when enlargement received the enthusiastic support of the US Bush administration. In April 2008, Putin told the NATO-Russia Council at the Bucharest NATO Summit that Ukraine was a 'fragile' and 'artificial' state, warning it would disintegrate if it joined NATO (Kuzio, 2015:103-116). However, NATO don't seem to be Russia's only problem; a democratizing

Ukraine incorporating into Europe within the EU's Eastern Partnership is also unacceptable to Russian government. D'Anieri (2019:447-456) believes that the West's goals of seeking to keep Russia satisfied and Ukraine independent are mutually incompatible. But as The Guardian points out, sympathy for Russia is not limited to the margins of British politics.

Farage's views on the EU's role in the Ukraine are shared by some Tory Eurosceptic MPs. In a Bruges Group film on how the EU has blundered in the Ukraine, John Redwood says, "the EU seems to be flexing its words in a way that Russia finds worrying and provokes Russia into flexing its military muscles". (Wintour and Mason, 2014)

One of the major issues is that President Putin sees it difficult to differentiate between integration on offer in the Eastern Partnership and membership, which is not usually the same. Ukraine Integration into Europe and subsequently joining NATO as one of the members means that Putin will not be able to fulfil his purpose of 'gathering Russian lands' because Ukraine would not be part of the Russian World anymore. Russian political elites believe that 'Russian lands, was erroneously included as part of Ukraine, hence are being prevented from joining the Russian World by Galician Ukrainian nationalists. Russian political leaders have also continued to believe this myth after Zelenskyy's election. With Russian nationalism driving Putin's policies towards Ukraine, it is hard to see how peace and stability in the Donbas can be achieved. Moreover, with Putin in power for more years, the policies he has pursued, however counterproductive they have been to Russian goals, will continue towards Ukraine Osimen, et al, (2022:21-36). As is turned out, NATO enlargement eventually ran up against the countervailing power of a resurgent Russia with a preponderance of hard power along its borders. It did so first in Georgia in 2008, and it did so again in Ukraine in 2014 (Walker, 2015).

It is obvious that the cooperation between these rival parties has been complicated by the fact that Russia is looking at the world through a military-strategic lens, focusing on issues such as NATO enlargement, missile defence, and protection of its hard power assets such as the Sevastopol base Rutland, (2015:117-122). In contrast, the EU is a post-modern entity that builds long-term relationships based on human rights and the free movement of goods and services. Rutland, (2015:117-122) noted that the chances or a possibility for miscommunication was very high. The Western players underestimated the importance of Ukraine to Putin and his willingness to break the rules of the post-1991 international system in order to prevent what he saw as threats to Russia's national interests (Rutland, 2015:117-122). There is also a mismatch between the incremental carrots being offered by Brussels and the big sticks being wielded by Moscow (Wilson, 2014). However, in the months prior to the 2022 invasion, the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO remained remote. Russia claims that the NATO enlargement strategies and west influence in the affairs of east Europe were the major issues influenced its actions to act militarily

against Ukraine. Besides, Russia claimed that it weighed many options to resolve the issue including negotiation or invasion. But with Ukraine consistently refusing to negotiate previously led to the invasion. Russian government further claimed that:

”we chose the least dangerous option which was to invade Ukraine in order to remove the pro-West government in Kyiv, install a new government and sign a peace deal with the newly installed government. The peace deal will include a ban from joining the NATO and the European Union”.

It was claimed by the Russian media that western governments lack integrity, confidence and trust. Russian media further described western governments as people of; hypocrisy, risibility, arrogant foolishness, and people with lack of moral integrity to the point of criminality (Hutchings, 2015:173-185). Russian television finds evidence of these characteristics in events both past and present. At one point in summer 2014, for example, it referred back to US President Woodrow Wilson promoting democracy and self-determination ‘just for export’ while denying rights to African and Native Americans. The presenter claimed that the USA had demanded ‘the right to judge everyone by its own very flexible standards for a hundred years’ (Rossiya, 2014). Such claims undermine the validity of international condemnations of Russian actions in Ukraine by conveying that those doing the condemning have only their own selfish interests at heart but not any real moral values.

Though, it would be totally wrong to explain Russia’s actions and their mediation by pro- Kremlin press and broadcasting outlets as those of an aggressive, expansionist nation determined to extend its sphere of influence into new areas. Rather, they reflect the perception of a threat to what Russia sees as its rightful status as a great power, and to its current regional interests. Therefore, the instinctual anti-western rhetoric that dominates Russia’s public sphere to its inevitable detriment is not as undifferentiated as is often suggested; ultimately, Russia continues to harbour the desire to be seen as a European nation and as part of a continental bulwark against untrammelled American hegemony.

### **Is NATO’s Enlargement only Russia’s Problem? The Geopolitical Narratives**

The Russia-Ukraine war presents a thoughtful contest as to understanding of President Putin’s geopolitical intentions in the east of Europe. Ukraine’s nationalists fought off, and defeated, more Russophile members of the movement who, like Mykhailo Drahomanov, rejected the idea of political separation from Russia as preposterous. Instead, they chose to advance the negative identity of Ukraine as a ‘non-Russia’ par excellence. This was no small feat, which required a good deal of rewriting of history in combination with geopolitical revisionism (Molchanov, 2015:195-210). In the early years of his leadership, Putin was ready to accept these arguments, and worked

hard to improve relations with both the EU and NATO, although he, no less than Boris Yeltsin, insisted on Russia's great power status.

The puzzle to be explained, then, is why relations with both organizations deteriorated so spectacularly, to the point that today outright military conflict is not to be excluded. All sides undoubtedly bear their share of responsibility, but ultimately it was the failure to grasp the realities of the new geopolitics of Europe and the failure to imagine a different future for Europe that has created the new dividing lines. In the end, NATO's existence became justified by the need to manage the security threats provoked by its own enlargement. At the Bucharest NATO Summit in April 2008, Georgia and Ukraine were promised eventual membership, although Membership Action Plans (MAPs) were deferred because of German and French concerns that moving to Russia's borders and encircling the country could provoke a dangerous reaction. From Russia's perspective, there was no security vacuum that needed to be filled; from the West's perspective, who was to deny the 'sovereign choice' of the Central and Eastern European states if they wished to enter the world's most successful multilateral security body. The former Warsaw Pact and Baltic states joined NATO to enhance their security, but the very act of doing so created a security dilemma for Russia that undermined the security of all. This fateful geopolitical paradox, which NATO exists to manage the risks created by its existence provoked a number of conflicts. The Russo-Georgian War of August 2008 acted as the forewarning tremor for the major earthquake that engulfed Europe over Ukraine in 2013-14.

Much of the discussion in the West is centered on the question of whether Russia's actions should be thought of as aggressive or defensive. Both of those views see the motivation as primarily geopolitical (D'Anieri, 2015:242-250). This debate between offensive and defensive, which echoes the debate between 'traditional' and 'revisionist' explanations of the Cold War, is based on an underlying agreement that the conflict is essentially about geopolitics, as whether Ukraine will be part of the East or West, about whether Russia will accept or reject the borders it was left with after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and about whether they are entering into a new cold war (D'Anieri, 2015:242-250).

The Soviet collapse meant that Russia was stripped of half its population, a third of its territory, and all its bloc of ideological allies and client states. In the 1990s, the loss of superpower status combined with economic collapse and an ideological vacuum created a profound identity crisis in Russia (Rutland, 2015:117-122). Yeltsin was humiliated by his dependence on loans from the West, and by NATO's decision to expand the alliance to include former Warsaw Pact countries. Rutland, (2015:117-122) argued that the bombing of Yugoslavia by NATO forces in 1999, in a bid to stop human rights violations in Kosovo, was a turning point in understand this current in Ukraine. It underlined the geopolitical marginalization of Russia, unable to protect Serbia and its

traditional ally. In the 2000s, on the foundation of a growing economy with the rising world oil prices, Vladimir Putin forged a new Russian identity of that of a great power, able to stand up to the depredations of the US, the world's 'sole superpower'(Rutland, 2015:117-122). The idea of Russia as a great power was something which resonated strongly with the Russian public, and which of course had deep roots in Soviet and Russian history (Mankoff, 2011; Trenin, 2006:87-96). From the Atlanticist point of view, this was only natural, Russia was only half the former Soviet Union, and in certain respects a failed economy and polity, so why should it be treated as an equal in geopolitical terms? At the same time, it was only natural that the perceived security vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe should be filled by a defensive alliance, which, by reducing insecurity and risks, would in the end enhance even Russia's security.

Moreover, it is factual that NATO expansion has contributed to, indeed, one can reasonably argue that it has been the primary cause of the dangerous geopolitical struggle for influence in the countries to Russia's West and South, above all Ukraine (Walker, 2015). The Russian political elite is virtually unanimous in viewing NATO as Russia's most serious security threat and a direct challenge to its interests as a Great Power. It likewise views enlargement as an unjust and unnecessary incursion into Russia's rightful sphere of influence, and EU expansion and democracy promotion as stalking horses for NATO and Western hegemony in post-Soviet space (Walter, 2015:123-133). It is clear and obvious that one of the major reasons Russia going into war with Ukraine is to protect its border and to maintain its regional and geopolitical influence in the east of Europe. But it was Ukraine's ambiguous geopolitical position, and the clumsy interventions of competing outside powers pursuing their own self-centred agendas, that pushed Ukraine's log-jammed domestic politics over the brink into violent civil war (Rutland, 2015:117-122).

### **Russo-Ukrainian Conflict: How did the West React to this Scenario?**

Russian invasion of Ukraine received widespread international condemnation from governments and intergovernmental organizations, with reactions including new sanctions imposed on Russia, which triggered widespread economic effects on the Russian and world economies. The constant boil in Ukraine is partly driven by the willingness and ability of the United States and European powers, such as Germany, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom, to support Ukraine and motivate Russia to end its aggression. In the scenario, international financial aid for Ukraine continues to be conditioned on speedy reforms, straining the society's ability to absorb a war and an economic crisis. On the military front, the situation has United States delivering increasing levels of training and other military assistance and NATO continuing to expand cooperation with Ukraine on defense reform. But American and European leaders still demur on stronger measures against Russia over its Ukraine intervention in the hopes of retaining Russian help on other major issues, such as the Iran nuclear talks or an ever-elusive resolution of the war in Syria. Other sovereign



countries of the former Soviet Union and beyond are eyeing the Western response, its attention span, and the strength of its engagement. That, in turn, affects calculations regarding alliances and behavior, such as decisions about diversifying energy sources and trade. Russia's actions have been met with international condemnation. Western sanctions are being imposed on Russia, military assistance is being provided to Ukraine, and discussions are underway between Western allies on collective next steps. The European Union financed and delivered military equipment to Ukraine. The bloc also implemented various economic sanctions, including a ban on Russian aircraft using EU airspace, a SWIFT ban on certain Russian banks, and a ban on certain Russian media outlets. Non-government reactions to the invasion included widespread boycotts of Russia and Belarus in the areas of entertainment, media, business, and sport (Timsit et al, 2022). The West has imposed tough sanctions against Russia, and many companies are withdrawing from the country, pushing it towards a default, emptying its shops and sending the trouble into free-fall. In addition to measures targeted at individuals, Western countries imposed a range of so-called sectorial sanctions. These include; the suspension of preferential economic development loans to Russia by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD); a ban on trading bonds and equity and related brokering services for products whose maturity period exceeds 30 days with some of Russia's largest state controlled banks (including Sber bank and Gazprom bank), three Russian energy companies (including Rosneft, Transneft, and Gazprom Neft, although not Gazprom, has also been subject to US sanctions), and three Russian defence companies (OPK Oboronprom, United Aircraft Corporation, Uralvagonzavod); a ban on loans to five major Russian state-owned banks: Sberbank, VTB, Gazprom Bank, Vneshekonombank (VEB), and Rosselkhozbank; an embargo on arms trade between EU members and Russia; a ban on exports of so-called dual-use items, i.e. civilian industrial goods that can be used as or to produce weaponry or for other military purposes; and a ban on exporting certain energy equipment and providing specific energy-related services to Russia's most technology-intensive oil exploration and extraction projects. According to EU Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders, that EU freezes Russian assets worth of 13.8 billion Dollars since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, and a very large number of it, more than 12 billion USD is coming from five member states (Punch Newspapers, 12/07/22)

Since 2014, the UK, US, EU, and NATO have also assisted Ukraine by providing non-lethal military aid with lethal military sustenance was initially limited, with the US start to sell weapons including Javelin anti-tank missiles since 2018. The Ukrainian government agreed to purchase TB2 combat drones from Turkey in 2019. As Russia built up equipment and military troops on Ukraine's borders in January 2022, the US join other NATO member states to transfer their US-produced weapons to Ukraine. The UK too began to supply Ukraine with NLAW and Javelin anti-tank weapons (Ripley, 2022). Following the invasion by Russian troops, NATO member states,

including Germany, agreed to join force with others and supply weapons, but NATO as an organization could not directly involved. NATO and its member states also decided not to send troops into Ukraine, or to establish a no fly-zone, fearing this would risk a larger-scale war, a decision some experts have labelled as appeasement (Bond, 2022).

Again, on 26 February, Antony Blinken (US Secretary of State) stated that he had authorized \$350 million in lethal military support, including anti-armor and anti-aircraft systems. In addition, EU agreed to purchase €450 million (US\$502 million) in lethal assistance and an additional €50 million (\$56 million) in non-lethal supplies to be supplied to Ukraine, with Poland stand-in as a distributor hub. At the early stage of invasion, NATO member states supplied more than 17,000 anti-tank weapons to Ukraine by mid-March, the number was estimated to be more than 20,000 (Schmitt, 2022). In three tranches agreed in February, March and April 2022, the European Union committed to €1.5 billion to support the capabilities and resilience of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the protection of the Ukrainian civilian population, under the purview of the European Peace Facility line. As of 11 April, Ukraine had been supported with approximately 25,000 anti-air and 60,000 anti-tank weapon systems by the US and its allies. Russia was also reportedly given anti-tank missiles and RPGs from Iran, supplied through undercover networks via Iraq. On 26 April, the US representatives of more than 40 countries met at the Ramstein Air Base to discuss the military support for Ukraine and on 28 April 2022 US materiel (M777 155 mm howitzers, TPQ-36 Fire finder counter fire radars (Ukraine having previously received TPQ-36s), AN/MPQ-64 (Sentinel radars), and AN/TPQ-53 radars) is in the pipeline of ongoing logistical support for Ukraine's anti-artillery capability in the Battle of the Donbas. On the 28, April, US President Biden asked Congress for an additional \$33 billion to assist Ukraine, including \$20 billion to provide weapons to Ukraine. On 5 May, Ukraine's Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal announced that Ukraine had received more than \$12 billion worth of weapons and financial aid from Western countries since the start of Russia's invasion on 24 February. On 10 May, the House passed legislation that would provide \$40 billion in new aid to Ukraine.

In addition, the EU has provided foreign aid to Ukraine, totaling about €13 billion (about \$14.2 billion) in loans and €2 billion (\$2.2 billion) in grants from 2014 to 2022. Furthermore, EU member states provided an additional €1.4 billion (\$1.5 billion) in bilateral assistance. In 2020, the EU announced it would provide more than €190 million (\$205 million) in emergency support to Ukraine to address the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU subsequently provided another €1.2 billion (\$1.3 billion) in loans to help “limit the economic fallout” of the pandemic. Ukraine also has close relations with NATO, which considers the NATO-Ukraine relationship to be “one of the most substantial of NATO’s partnerships. In 2016, NATO endorsed a Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine “to implement security and defense sector reforms according to NATO standards. The CAP includes several trust fund projects “to support capability development and

sustainable capacity-building in key areas. In June 2020, Ukraine became one of NATO's Enhanced Opportunity Partners, a cooperative status currently granted to six of NATO's close strategic partners. NATO members provide training to and conduct joint exercises with the Ukrainian armed forces in a multinational framework. In 2017, Ukraine's parliament voted to make cooperation with NATO a foreign policy priority. Ukraine's 2020 National Security Strategy includes as a priority the development of a special partnership with NATO and the pursuit of NATO membership. In 2021, President Zelensky and other Ukrainian officials called on NATO to grant Ukraine a Membership Action Plan, which they see as a stepping stone to membership.

Although NATO and the EU have taken a strict policy of 'no boots on the ground' in support against the Russian invasion of Ukraine has actively sought volunteers from other countries. On 1 March, Ukraine temporarily lifted visa requirements for foreign volunteers who wished to join the fight against Russian forces. The move came after Zelenskyy created the International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine and called on volunteers to "join the defense of Ukraine, Europe and the world (Abend, 2022). Ukraine's foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba stated that as of 6 March, approximately 20,000 foreign nationals from 52 countries have volunteered to fight. Most of these volunteers joined the newly created International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine (Abend, 2022). The New York Times reported that the United States provided real-time battlefield targeting intelligence to Ukraine that helped Ukrainian forces kill Russian generals and sink the Russian warship Moskva.

## **Conclusion**

The complexities of the conflict in east Ukraine cannot be single handedly explained by attributes of an influence rather, describe in multidimensional approach. But then, there are four main protagonists in the current conflict in Ukraine, they are; Ukraine, Russia, the European Union, and the United States, in roughly descending order of importance. The explanation prevailing in the West is that of a 'bad' Russia pressuring Ukraine to abandon its European dream and consistently undermining the very sovereignty of the Ukrainian state (Molchanov, 2015:195-210). Also, NATO expansion to the East and argue that the West triggered Russia into action with Ukraine. 'Nationalising policies' in Ukraine and the plight of the Russian-speaking minorities have also motivated and invoked on many occasions. Regional alienation and de facto exclusion from the political process in Kiev played a large part in the current conflict in Ukraine. However, had it not been for killing of the pro-Russian demonstrators in Odessa on 2 May 2014, and the shelling and bombing of the Donbas cities during the 'anti-terrorist operation' by the Ukrainian army, the protest would not, perhaps, have transformed into a war.

It is obvious that identity is a given that cannot be changed. An attempt to build a new Ukrainian nation by othering its Russophone components is doomed to backfire at the process. Russia may eventually close its borders with Ukraine, just as Kiev desires, and stop supporting the self-proclaimed Novorossiia republics. Kiev may eventually succeed in bringing the embattled region to heel. But will it succeed in reintegrating Donbas after the devastation caused by the war? Will Donbasites agree to be the second-class citizens in the ethno-nationally streamlined, Russophobic society? At the moment, this seems impossible to predict such an outcome. Conceivably the war against Donbas separatists has solidified Ukraine's political nation; yet it has also made it abundantly clear that the pro-Russian activists do not fit in there. It is entirely possible that Ukraine's ethno-regional split can still be resolved. However, to make it happen, authorities in Kiev need to change their attitude to Russia and the Russians. Chanting 'Suitcase - station - Russia!' will not help. Putin's arguments about foreign enemies promoting Ukrainian is a part of a geopolitical struggle against Russia echo the way many of his predecessors refused to accept the agency of ordinary people seeking autonomy from tsarist or Soviet domination. The salience that Putin and other Russian elites assign to the idea of Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian unity helps explain the origins of the current conflict, notably why Russia was willing to risk a large-scale war on its borders when neither Ukraine nor NATO posed any military threat hence, viewed as unnecessary war by the authors of this paper. It also observed that Russia's ambitions to extend beyond preventing Ukrainian NATO membership and encompass a more detailed aspiration to dominate Ukraine politically, militarily, and economically. It also helps explain Russia's military strategy. Russia seemed to calculate that enough Ukrainians, at least in the eastern part of the country, would accept some form of reintegration into a Russian sphere of influence because of shared cultural, linguistic, religious, and other ties with Russia. Despite pre-war polls showing large numbers of Ukrainians willing to take up arms to defend their country against a Russian invasion, Moscow's wager was not entirely implausible given the recentness of the shift and the persistence of family and other ties across the Russian-Ukrainian border. Nevertheless, Russia's war has become bogged down in no small part because this calculation about Ukrainian identity has proven dramatically wrong. Therefore, whatever happens on the battlefield, Russia is almost certain to fail in its bid to establish lasting control over its neighbor. Considering the threat Ukraine' now posed to Russia, the overlap of domestic, transnational, and geopolitical factors will make the conflict very difficult to resolve. Moreover, ethnicisation of the essentially political and economic differences between Ukraine's regions will makes compromise more difficult to reach too. Though, political mobilization against the 'Russian aggressor' can be, at best, a temporary solution to the problem of civic unity. But, if Russia must feel fully secure with regard to Ukraine, Ukraine needs to be territorially truncated or geopolitically neutralized. If neutralization is not feasible as a strategy, then renewed stability would depend either on the West agreeing in renewed Russian control of Ukraine, or on Russia accepting the loss of Ukraine. It is most likely that a non-

cooperative result will emerge at the end of the day; hence Russia may be left with no option than to limit its military activity, but will continue to ensure that Ukraine cannot do what is desired to achieve or join Europe and NATO world.

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