



Policy Paper

# MANAGING IMPERIAL DECLINE: A NEW EU POLICY TOWARDS RUSSIA

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## 1 Executive summary

On 24th February 2022, Vladimir Putin, who was elected Russia's president in 2000, launched a full-scale invasion (or what he called a 'special military operation') of Ukraine in an escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war that started in 2014. Notwithstanding the brutality of this unprovoked act of military aggression, it is not the first time that Russia has violated and threatened the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbours. On its eastern frontiers, what the European Union (EU) has been confronting is nothing less than the return of the centuries-old force, Russian imperialism.

Expansionism has been central to Russia's understanding of its national identity ever since the Mongol occupation of the Great Eurasian plain between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. The drive to 'gather the Russian lands' under the Muscovite principality in search of natural defences against foreign hostile powers intertwined with the development of Russia's national identity and statehood. Russia's loss of empire - and Ukraine in particular - in 1991 has reawakened the concept of expansionism within Russian identity and the Russian state. It is therefore likely that Russia will remain a threat in the Euro-Atlantic area for the foreseeable future.

The existential challenge facing Ukraine, and the postwar process of European integration, means that the EU can no longer return to a business-as-usual approach towards Russia. Rather, the goal of the EU's Russia policy should be to consolidate a secure and democratically resilient European eastern neighbourhood. As one of the world's strongest normative and economic powers, the EU has the capabilities to address the revival of Russian expansionism in four areas, both in the short- and long-term:

- First, make a commitment to Ukraine's defence and long-term security. This is essential to ending Russia's historical cycle of aggression against its neighbours. If Ukraine were to be subjugated, Russia's neo-imperial ambitions would likely be emboldened.
- Second, consolidate the sovereignty and democratisation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) member states, including Belarus, and support their process of European integration. This is critical to countering Russian influence in the region and building democratic and security resilience.
- Third, emphasise Russia's war against Ukraine as a violation of international law. This will be the key to building the global consensus on Ukraine's right to self-determination and preventing potential aggression in the future.
- Fourth, find a way to support the shift towards a democratic, post-imperial Russia, which has clearly defined national interests that are executed in line with international law and respect the sovereignty of its neighbours.

## 2 Introduction

The European Union (EU) faces a renewed period of East-West confrontation as Russia seeks to overcome the loss of its status as a great power in 1991 when the Soviet Union fell apart. The democratic and economic changes taking place in Russia during the 1990s seemed to promise a new era of warmer Russo-European relations.

But the Soviet collapse not only symbolised the failure of a political ideology in communism. It also destroyed the statehood ('gosudarstvennost') that had defined Russia's self-identity for centuries. Putin has lamented the Soviet Union's dissolution as the demise of what he calls 'historical Russia'<sup>1</sup>. As a declining and neo-revisionist power, Russia is seeking to reassert what it considers to be its vital national interests in its war against Ukraine (2014-).

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-rues-soviet-collapse-demise-historical-russia-2021-12-12/>

Instead of moving towards a new East-West partnership that the end of the Cold War promised, it is likely that Russia will remain an aggressive and unpredictable actor for the foreseeable future, even if Putin falls from power. It has been an objective of the Russian leadership to integrate and dominate the post-Soviet space since the early 1990s<sup>2</sup>. The EU will therefore need to formulate a coordinated policy response that confronts the long-term threat of Russian neo-revisionism.

This paper aims to propose a new EU policy towards Russia in light of this emerging European security situation. The sections that follow will examine Russia's divergence from the EU and the approach Brussels has taken towards an increasingly assertive Moscow.

### 3 Russia's divergence from the EU

When Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, Russia abandoned its belief that it could strike a partnership with the West and started to perceive the US-led security system as an existential threat<sup>3</sup>. EU-Russia relations deteriorated as Putin inaugurated a new phase of Russian foreign policy known as neo-revisionism<sup>4</sup>. Under a neo-revisionist strategy, Russia expressed dissatisfaction with the practices of the post-Cold War order and demanded a greater say in the management of international affairs.

Russia's divergence from the EU can be traced back as early as 2007 when Putin gave a speech at the Munich Security Conference. The Russian president accused the United States of imposing a 'unipolar' international system after the fall of

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<sup>2</sup><https://carnegieendowment.org/1999/05/01/what-are-russian-foreign-policy-objectives-pub-424>

<sup>3</sup><https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/06/14/russia-and-west-in-new-standoff-pub-71250>

<sup>4</sup>Sakwa, R. (2021) *Russian Politics and Society*, Routledge, fifth edition, first published in 1993.

communism in which 'there is one master, one sovereign'<sup>5</sup>. Three years earlier, in 2004, Ukraine moved decisively towards NATO and the EU in the Orange Revolution. The rigged presidential elections in favour of the pro-Russian candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, prompted millions of Ukrainians to mobilise in defence of free elections, which made the subsequent election of the pro-Western candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, possible<sup>6</sup>.

Similar to Yanukovich's collapse in support in 2004, Putin suffered from the first democratic challenge to the centralised system of power he had consolidated in Russia since 2000. In 2011-13, protests erupted in Moscow and other major Russian cities against the fraudulent elections to the State Duma<sup>7</sup>. Meanwhile, socio-economic decline and corruption sparked mass demonstrations against entrenched authoritarian governments across Russia's southern frontiers in the Middle East and North Africa<sup>8</sup>. These turbulent shifts taking place during the second decade of the twenty-first century saw Russian foreign policy become increasingly assertive, with discussions intensifying on how the cultural and geographical boundaries of the Russian nation should be delineated<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup><http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-ukraines-orange-revolution-shaped-twenty-first-century-geopolitics/>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16122524>

<sup>8</sup><https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/01/16/why-the-arab-spring-set-russia-on-the-road-to-confrontation-with-the-west/>

<sup>9</sup>Donaldson, R. H. and Nadkarni, V. (2024) *The Foreign Policy of Russia - Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, Routledge, seventh edition, first published in 1998.

## 4 Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine

The threat of the colour revolutions (2003-05) spreading to Russia itself meant that Putin had to find a new source of legitimacy to sustain his power. The collapse of the Soviet Union - and the loss of Ukraine in particular - struck at the core of Russia's self-identity. Many Russians trace the origins of their nation's statehood back to the ancient orthodox state of Kievan Rus, which was lost to Mongol occupation between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. The destruction of the statehood that had defined Russia's national identity for over a millennium in 1991 gave Putin the opportunity to revive an established Russian paradigm in which empire building and despotic rule are mutually reinforcing<sup>10</sup>.

When Putin announced the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, he weaponised an imperial concept that has shaped Russian national identity over the course of a thousand years - 'the drive to gather the Russian lands'. Putin justified his decision to invade on the claim that Ukraine and Russia share 'the same historical and spiritual space' and Russians and Ukrainians are 'one people', who are 'all descendants of the Ancient Rus'<sup>11</sup>. According to Putin, Ukraine is only an artificial state whose separation from Russia is the result of the Bolsheviks' 'mistake' to grant it the right to secede from the Soviet Union in 1922<sup>12</sup>. The Russian president considers the 'special military operation' as part of his mission to reunify the ancient Rus lands of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.

Putin is not the first Russian leader to deny the existence of Ukraine and its right to independent statehood. In the tsarist era, Ivan III (1440-1505) and his immediate successors used the pretext that their principalities were the guardians of the

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<sup>10</sup>Van Herpen, M. H. (2024) *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism*, Rowman & Littlefield, third edition, first published in 2014.

<sup>11</sup><http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

<sup>12</sup><http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>



Orthodox faith - what many Russians believe to be the true Christian faith as opposed to the Roman Catholicism of Western Europe - as an attempt to justify their territorial expansionism<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, after the Second World War, the Soviet occupation of Central and Eastern Europe was falsely presented in Stalinist propaganda as a 'liberation' from the fascism of Nazi Germany<sup>14</sup>.

This long-standing practice of empire building for the purpose of defending Russia's traditional values and self-identity can be seen in the language Putin uses towards Ukraine today. The Russian president has termed Ukraine's sovereign ambition to accede to NATO as an 'expansion'<sup>15</sup> of the Euro-Atlantic area that poses a threat to Russia's borders and justified his 'special military operation' as a necessary step to 'demilitarise' and 'denazify' Ukraine<sup>16</sup>. In the Kremlin's latest foreign policy concept, Russia is described as a 'distinctive state-civilisation' with a 'unique historical mission,' while citing the United States as the 'main source of threats' to Russian security<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup><https://theconversation.com/how-moscow-has-long-used-the-historic-kyivan-rus-state-to-justify-expansionism-178092>

<sup>14</sup><https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/01/26/norman-davies-auschwitz-and-the-so-called-soviet-liberation-of-poland/>

<sup>15</sup><https://apnews.com/article/europe-russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin-moscow-2a3c3d0bf3834fe2e566f8aca57b57a1>

<sup>16</sup><http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>

<sup>17</sup>[https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/fundamental\\_documents/1860586/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/)

## 5 How has the EU responded to Russia's aggression?

In 2021, Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, presented a joint communication, EU-Russia relations: the way forward<sup>18</sup>. This document was an attempt to respond to Russia's emergence as a strategic challenge following its illegal annexation of Crimea in line with the five guiding principles that were outlined in 2016<sup>19</sup>. Borrell proposed that the EU should 'push back against Russian aggression and limit relations to what was feasible while cooperating with Russia where possible.'

In the 2021 joint communication, it is stated that Russia 'tries to enforce its own geopolitical sphere of influence based mostly on a zero-sum logic.' While noting Russian breaches of international law, the document also says that 'the EU will maintain open channels of communication with Russia' and calls on the Russian government to 'fully implement' the Minsk agreements - the set of accords designed to end the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian war<sup>20</sup>. This reflected a desire felt among EU member states, including Germany, France, and Austria, to maintain engagement with Russia. But the ambiguity this created undermined the EU's ability to confront Russia's neo-revisionism before the launch of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Maintaining East-West economic cooperation has taken precedence over any action that may cut Russian trade and energy off from the rest of Europe

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<sup>18</sup>[https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/6548e038-8cf9-4d79-a1a1-4baeee8d0188\\_en?filename=joint-communication-eu-russia-relations.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/6548e038-8cf9-4d79-a1a1-4baeee8d0188_en?filename=joint-communication-eu-russia-relations.pdf)

<sup>19</sup><https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/five-principles-guiding-the-eu-s-policy-/product-details/20220114DPU32022>

<sup>20</sup><https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/what-are-minsk-agreements-ukraine-conflict-2022-02-21/>

completely<sup>21</sup>. This has meant that the EU's initial policy response remained limited to sanctions, which failed to deter Russia from pursuing its interests in Ukraine. Moreover, Russia found in the Minsk process an opportunity to formalise its claim to the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk people's republics. Russia insisted that the two regions should be granted special status in Ukraine's constitution before any withdrawal of Russian troops<sup>22</sup>. This weaponisation of diplomacy allowed Moscow to place the blame on Kyiv for the continuation of hostilities<sup>23</sup>.

But Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has turned Russo-European relations on its axis. The all-out Russian attack shattered the security order that was built in Europe after the end of the Cold War based on East-West interdependence and galvanised the EU behind Ukraine's fight for national survival. French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have both led profound shifts to how their respective countries perceive Russia. Macron has accelerated French military support for the Ukrainian war effort and called Ukraine's victory 'vital' for European security<sup>24</sup>. Scholz called Russia's invasion a *Zeitenwende* ('historical turning point')<sup>25</sup>, ending decades of postwar German pacifism. The German government has committed €7.1bn of military aid

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<sup>21</sup><https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-keeps-doing-business-with-russia-despite-sanctions-2023-03-29/>

<sup>22</sup><https://ecfr.eu/article/ukraine-russia-and-the-minsk-agreements-a-post-mortem/>

<sup>23</sup><https://www.unian.info/politics/1574147-putin-blames-ukraine-for-refusing-to-fulfil-political-part-of-minsk-agreements.html>

<sup>24</sup><https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-68410219>

<sup>25</sup><https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>

to Ukraine and earmarked €6bn for subsequent years as part of a long-term security pact<sup>26</sup>.

The Weimar Triangle - the format formed of the EU's three major powers (France, Germany, and Poland) - has been revived to help coordinate the EU's response to Russia's neo-revisionist threat. In March 2024, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk secured an agreement from France and Germany to provide immediate assistance to Ukraine so that the security situation 'improves' in a meeting with Macron and Scholz in Berlin<sup>27</sup>. The foreign ministers of the Weimar Triangle have also discussed transforming the format into a new centrepiece for EU defence, with a commitment to 'push jointly for the further development of military capabilities and European armament cooperation'<sup>28</sup>.

There has also been an unprecedented level of unity at a EU level. The EU immediately condemned Russia's military actions and called for an unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops and military equipment from Ukraine and respect for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Since the start of the full-scale invasion, EU leaders have agreed to 13 rounds of sanctions at the time of writing that are designed to weaken Russia's economic base<sup>29</sup>. In the conclusions of the European Council meeting in March 2024, the EU reiterated its determination to continue providing Ukraine with 'political, financial, economic, humanitarian,

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<sup>26</sup><https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/chancellor-zelensky-security-agreement-2260300>

<sup>27</sup><https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/weimar-triangle-summit-in-berlin>

<sup>28</sup><https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/germany/the-weimar-triangle/article/meeting-of-the-weimar-triangle-countries-joint-statement-by-foreign-ministers>

<sup>29</sup>[https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/eu-sanctions-against-russia-following-invasion-ukraine\\_en](https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/eu-sanctions-against-russia-following-invasion-ukraine_en)

military, and diplomatic support for as long as it takes and as intensely as needed<sup>30</sup>.

## 6 What policy should the EU pursue towards Russia?

### 6.1 Defending Ukraine: why a Ukrainian victory is critical for transatlantic security

Enabling Ukraine to have the essential capabilities to repel Russian military aggression should be the primary goal of a new EU policy towards Russia. This means preventing Russia from making strategic gains in its full-scale invasion. Ukraine is not only fighting to defend itself as an independent country, but also to counter any further Russian neo-imperial ambitions in Europe. In a sign of what he considers to be Russia's sphere of influence, Putin has demanded NATO to seek consent from Moscow on military deployment in the former communist states that joined the Alliance in 1997<sup>31</sup>. The abandonment of Ukraine would effectively constitute an unequivocal signal to Russia that it has the right to hold sway over its neighbourhood.

The EU should commit itself to the defence of Ukraine and its long-term security. Here, Estonia has set a strong example of leadership. In January, the Baltic state allocated 0.25% of its GDP towards military aid to Ukraine to last through to 2027 but stated that its effectiveness would be judged on whether other European countries follow suit<sup>32</sup>. Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president, has called on the EU to provide incentives for the European defence industry to increase production ahead of the publication of the EU's defence industrial

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<sup>30</sup><https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/70880/euco-conclusions-2122032024.pdf>

<sup>31</sup><https://www.ft.com/content/493da5ea-6ef2-42cc-8be1-c725030cf839>

<sup>32</sup><https://news.err.ee/1609222386/estonia-s-0-25-percent-gdp-aid-to-ukraine-proposal-needs-support-of-western-states>



strategy<sup>33</sup>. The introduction of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in 2017 offers a strong framework for EU member states to pool their collective defence resources for strategic purposes<sup>34</sup>.

In addition to enhanced defence capabilities, a credible pathway is needed for Ukraine's accession to the EU. European integration will enable Ukraine to have the political and economic capacity to withstand possible future attacks and intimidation from Russia. Russia's full-scale invasion has renewed the geo-strategic importance of EU enlargement, but curbing systemic corruption while at the same time fighting Russian aggression remains a challenge for Ukraine<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, the EU will have to carry out internal reforms to absorb Ukraine as the fifth largest and poorest EU member state<sup>36</sup>. An incremental accession process that integrates Ukraine gradually into the EU may offer a way forward to balance the geopolitical necessity of EU enlargement with the requirement for reform.

## 6.2 Building security and democratic resilience: the European eastern neighbourhood

Future EU policy towards Russia cannot focus solely on its war against Ukraine. It must also look to build security and democratic resilience across the whole European eastern neighbourhood. In order to counter Russian influence, the EU should intensify its political and economic support for the EaP countries (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia). This is another key step towards securing fundamental social and political change in Russia. The successful

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<sup>33</sup>[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_5364](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5364)

<sup>34</sup><https://www.pesco.europa.eu/about/>

<sup>35</sup><https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-eu-accession-process-faces-bureaucratic-and-political-hurdles/>

<sup>36</sup><https://www.brookings.edu/articles/want-ukraine-in-the-eu-youll-have-to-reform-the-eu-too/>

European integration in the region would contribute towards dispelling the Russian narrative that there can be no alternative to authoritarianism for maintaining regional stability in the post-Soviet space.

### 6.2.1 Moldova

The European Council agreed to open negotiations on Moldova's EU accession alongside Ukraine in December 2023. This move has helped consolidate Moldova's EU path despite its deeply entrenched ideological and ethnic divisions<sup>37</sup>. But the political and economic challenges Moldova faces as a result of Russia's invasion require deeper support from the EU. The sharp rises in energy prices sparked mass protests against the pro-European government and tensions in Transnistria, which Russia tried to use as a platform to instigate an insurrection through its proxies<sup>38</sup>. Russia has also mobilised funds in an effort to undermine Moldova's constitutional order<sup>39</sup>. Targeted strategic EU investment and political support could help Moldova withstand Russia's destabilisation campaigns and strengthen the resilience of the Moldovan democratic process.

### 6.2.2 Georgia

In Georgia, the EU has also made assurances over its commitment to enlargement. Georgia was granted EU candidate status in December 2023 with the condition to meet the European Commission's nine steps<sup>40</sup>, a key milestone on its path towards EU membership. Russian influence has been strong in Georgia since the start of the full-scale invasion. The Georgian government refused to align with Western

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<sup>37</sup><https://cepa.org/article/moldovas-president-maia-sandu-a-real-friend-of-the-west/>

<sup>38</sup><https://www.ft.com/content/1e317be3-1837-45da-beef-be0347937fd9>

<sup>39</sup><https://www.euronews.com/2024/04/12/eu-candidate-moldova-takes-action-to-prevent-russian-influence-in-referendum>

<sup>40</sup>[https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/2023-communication-eu-enlargement-policy-extract-about-georgia\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/2023-communication-eu-enlargement-policy-extract-about-georgia_en)

sanctions on Russia<sup>41</sup>. Abkhazia, the Russian-occupied breakaway region of Georgia, agreed to the establishment of a permanent Russian naval base on the Black Sea coast<sup>42</sup>. With Georgia vulnerable to slipping back into Russia's orbit, the EU should look to capitalise on the momentum towards European integration by intensifying engagement with the Georgian government and the opposition.

### 6.2.3 Armenia and Azerbaijan

The EU has a crucial role to play as a mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan after Azerbaijani forces seized control of the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. Armenia's defeat in the long-standing conflict means that it no longer sees Russia as a reliable security partner, which means Yerevan is likely to turn to alternative partners for support<sup>43</sup>. The EU should look to formalise its relationship with Turkey on the Armenia-Azerbaijan normalisation process and find a permanent solution to the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Deterring Azerbaijan from launching a fresh assault is key to weakening Russia's ability to act as a spoiler in the region.

### 6.2.4 Belarus

A new EU policy towards Russia cannot afford to ignore the geostrategic importance of Belarus. Russia has used Belarusian military infrastructure and territory to launch its operations against Ukraine. The successful European integration of Belarus is therefore essential to building stability across the entire European eastern neighbourhood. The EU should consider pursuing an active policy towards Belarus to counter Russian influence and consolidate its post-Soviet democratisation. The EU's dialogue with Belarus has been instrumental

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<sup>41</sup><https://eurasianet.org/georgia-says-it-wont-join-international-sanctions-against-russia>

<sup>42</sup><https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-plans-naval-base-black-sea-coast-breakaway-georgian-region-izvestiya-2023-10-05/>

<sup>43</sup><https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/91121>

in developing Belarusian civil society<sup>44</sup>. A mechanism to support victims of state oppression and a large-scale financial assistance programme<sup>45</sup> have been suggested as areas where the EU could expand its support for the Belarusian population.

### 6.3 Holding Russia to account: reform of the postwar order and the role of the Global South

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine exposed the failure of the postwar multilateral system based upon the United Nations Charter to deter an act of military aggression against a sovereign country and find a way to put an end to that violation. Meanwhile, there has been growing disillusionment within the Global South in the norms and practices of the postwar order. 15 African countries, including South Africa, abstained from the UN General Assembly resolution calling on Russia to "immediately, completely, and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine"<sup>46</sup>.

The division within the UN allows Russia to escape accountability for its illegal invasion of Ukraine, which only heightens the risk of potential aggression in the future. The United States, the EU, other European states, as well as Ukrainian and international NGOs have been pushing for Russia to be held to account in the International Criminal Court (ICC) under the crime of aggression<sup>47</sup>. However, these efforts are being hampered by the muted condemnation of the full-scale assault

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<sup>44</sup><https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/belarus-parliamentarians-and-democratic-forces-hold-dialogue-in-helsinki-on-the-country-s-future>

<sup>45</sup><https://ecfr.eu/article/glass-half-full-the-eus-policy-on-belarus/>

<sup>46</sup><https://www.theafricareport.com/287819/un-vote-on-russian-pullout-in-ukraine-shows-divisions-within-africa-bloc/>

<sup>47</sup><https://ecfr.eu/article/a-tribunal-like-no-other-prosecuting-russias-crime-of-aggression-in-ukraine/>

across the Global South. Countries critical of Western policies, such as those from the Arab world, still view Russia's actions as similar to the US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq<sup>48</sup>.

Russia has pursued a no-limits partnership with China<sup>49</sup>, which has consistently blamed the West and NATO for provoking the Russian assault on Ukraine<sup>50</sup>. But conflating China with the neo-expansionism of Russia risks transforming its war of aggression against Ukraine into a new 'Cold War' between democracy and autocracy. This fails to confront Putin's false narrative that Russia is waging a defensive war in Ukraine against an existential threat from the West<sup>51</sup>. China has reiterated its commitment to the UN Charter and the principle that all states are sovereign<sup>52</sup>. The EU should therefore emphasise that Russia's assault on Ukraine is a violation of international law. This is essential to building a global consensus on Ukraine's right to self-determination in the emerging multipolar world order.

#### 6.4 'De-imperialising' Russia: supporting the shift towards a democratic and post-imperial Russia

The EU should prepare for what comes after a potential Ukrainian victory and what consequences defeat may have for Russia. A Russian loss in Ukraine alone would not be sufficient to build sustainable peace and security in Europe. In the long-term, the EU will have to find a way to support the shift towards a democratic,

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<sup>48</sup><https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/uncategorized/the-arab-world-and-the-ukraine-conflict-the-quest-for-nonalignment/>

<sup>49</sup><https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-russia-relationship-xi-putin-taiwan-ukraine>

<sup>50</sup><https://www.dw.com/en/why-china-thinks-the-west-is-to-blame-for-russias-war-in-ukraine/a-61119517>

<sup>51</sup><https://theconversation.com/deep-rooted-russian-fear-of-the-west-has-fuelled-putins-invasion-of-ukraine-178351>

<sup>52</sup>[https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/zwbd\\_665378/202304/t20230427\\_11067533.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/202304/t20230427_11067533.html)



post-imperial Russia. EU policy should therefore formulate a positive vision for Russia as a state within a new European security order that has clearly defined national interests and respect for the sovereignty of its neighbours.

The false narrative that the West poses an existential threat to Russia has helped entrench its 'fortress' mentality<sup>53</sup>, which reinforces its system of authoritarian rule. If the EU maintains its policy of isolation towards Russia after the war ends, there is a risk that Russia will remain hostile and aggressive on the EU's eastern frontiers. To avoid this outcome, the EU could state the premise that a different future is possible for the Russian people and their country's place within Europe. There are historical precedents that the EU can draw from. European integration made the reconciliation between France and Germany possible after the Second World War. As a normative power, the EU is well-placed to advance a similar process between Russia and Ukraine.

## 7 Conclusion

It is likely that Russia will remain the most significant threat to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area for the foreseeable future, even if there is a change of leadership in the Kremlin. Russia began to reassert what it considers to be its vital national interests long before Putin came to power<sup>54</sup>. The collapse of the Soviet Union may have symbolised the failure of communism, but it has reawakened an expansionist concept that has driven Russian foreign policy for centuries - 'the drive to gather the Russian lands'.

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<sup>53</sup><https://theconversation.com/how-the-image-of-a-besieged-and-victimized-russia-came-to-be-so-ingrained-in-the-countrys-psyche-180480>

<sup>54</sup><https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/20/russia-s-global-ambitions-in-perspective-pub-78067>

This paper tries to provide a framework for EU policy towards Russia in this emerging European security situation. As one of the world's key normative and economic centres, the EU has the capabilities to confront Russian neo-revisionism in both the short- and long-term:

1. Make a commitment to the defence of Ukraine and its long-term security. This is key to ending Russia's historical cycle of aggression against its neighbours. If Ukraine were to be subjugated, Russia's neo-imperial ambitions would likely be emboldened.
2. Extend focus beyond Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine to build security and democratic resilience in the European eastern neighbourhood as a whole. Russia's ability to compromise the sovereignty and democratisation of the EaP countries undermine their security. The EU should intensify its support (political and economic) for the region to build its security and democratic resilience.
3. Emphasise Russia's violations of international law instead of purely casting its full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a fight between autocracy and democracy. This will be key to building a global consensus on Ukraine's right to self-determination and preventing potential aggression in the future.
4. Ukraine's potential victory over Russia alone would not be enough to build lasting peace and security in Europe. In the long-term, a shift will have to be made towards a democratic, post-imperial Russia, which has clearly defined national interests that are executed in line with international law and respect the sovereignty of its neighbours.

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