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# Ukraine Defends Its Freedom—And That of Russia

**W**ar in Europe once again! Not a war that simply “broke out,” not a military event that “developed” into war through gradual escalation. No. A war of aggression, in which a nation, until then considered civilized, militarily invaded another, much smaller nation, breaking all rules of law to impose its will upon it. Even more: this was done to eliminate it from the political map as an independent, sovereign state with borders secured by international law.

Called a “special military operation” by the aggressor and initially planned as a swift invasion due to a misjudgment of the circumstances, it is—thanks to the unexpectedly strong will of the besieged to defend itself, the efficiency of the U.S.-trained military leadership newly appointed last summer by President Zelensky, as well as the serious material and leadership deficiencies of the Russian military apparatus that have come to light—a tough, brutal, and destructive annihilation campaign with more than three million refugees, and counting. Its outcome is uncertain, but it will certainly leave behind material and spiritual wreckage on both sides, albeit for very different reasons.

## What Side Are We On?

After the initial shock of waking up from the dream world in which there was never sup-

posed to be war in the West again (especially the European West) and after everyone has sufficiently rubbed their eyes, there is now a growing need to understand. That is, there is a growing need to understand how all this became possible and to understand who committed what errors—although we do not even know yet how this imbalanced war will end.

There are numerous and diverse, even diametrically contradictory, narratives to explain this war. Certainly, one must think in a nuanced and realistic way. However, a decision about which narrative we want to accept is ultimately possible only by taking into account principles of political morality. For although we are dealing everywhere in the world with people, including politicians, who make mistakes, and that good and evil can be found on all sides, such a decision is of a more fundamental, ultimately political-moral and legal-ethical, nature. Where do we belong? Which is the world that we defend and in which we also want to enable other countries such as Ukraine—and ultimately Russia—to participate? And this because we consider it to be the better and more humane world, primarily for ethical reasons.

Is it the Western world with its ideals of freedom, the rule of law, democratic participation, and checks on its rulers? With its civil-political and economic liberty, its free and open economic and cultural exchange between neighboring nations, with all of this ultimately

sprouting from the soil of a European tradition of natural law and from the Enlightenment-liberal resistance to despotism and tyranny? Even if the West has not always lived up to these ideals, and even if their realization, like everything human, always remains imperfect, these ideals have by and large become a reality during the past two centuries and have brought us freedom and prosperity in a historically unprecedented way.

Or are we to take the side of the Eastern-Eurasian model, based on autocratic rule, nationalistic self-mythification (which has also existed and still exists in isolated cases in the West), violence and suppression of freedom, and disregard for the will of its citizens (or subjects) to lead a life of their own choosing? This, together with the associated poverty of the broad, mainly non-urban population, has been for centuries the “model,” but above all the reality, of Russia. Their present leader Vladimir Putin, on the pretext of the lie that he had to save the Ukrainian people from a Nazi threat with a “special military operation,” which in reality is nothing other than a brutal war of aggression, has invaded a peaceful neighboring nation and is trying to bring it to its knees.

### Russian Disinformation and Propaganda: The Alleged (Shared) Guilt of the West

However, there are many voices claiming that the blame for Russian aggression ultimately lies with the West, which purportedly failed to take into account Russia’s legitimate security needs and provoked and frightened Russia through NATO’s eastward expansion. The culprits, they say, are the USA’s threatening rhetoric and its aid in the military buildup in Ukraine since 2014 —as if this were not a consequence of the annexations of Crimea and (de facto) the two Donbass regions. Moreover, of

course, they blame the EU itself, which gave Ukraine hopes of joining.

Even if Western politicians are no saints, whoever seriously advocates such narratives—and unfortunately there are quite a few—is a victim of the Russian propaganda and disinformation machine, which also includes the Russian state broadcaster “Russia Today,” now RT (in German: RT DE). RT is directly financed by the Kremlin, but until recently was widely talked about in Europe. Putin, a former KGB and then FSB man, knows how to play this keyboard brilliantly.

Although the disinformation concerning earlier alleged “promises” by the West to not expand NATO eastward has long been refuted—Mikhail Gorbachev himself, after spreading it for a long time, finally denied it in 2014—Russian propaganda seems to have left its mark on Western journalists, politicians, and intellectuals. In many minds, the idea, stemming from Russian propaganda, has taken root that Russia is indeed afraid of a potentially aggressive NATO and aggressive West, and that the latter failed to address Russia’s security concerns after the collapse of the Soviet Union by integrating and contractually securing Russia—the argument states that they indeed acted directly against such a security need by expanding NATO to the East.

But the opposite is true, as the Swiss *Weltwoche* journalist Urs Gehrigger has argued, firmly correcting his own boss, Roger Köppel. The latter, for his part, has been spreading the Russian narrative for months—in writing and on his podcast “Weltwoche Daily,” even defaming the Ukrainian government as “ethno-nationalist.” He even allowed himself to be interviewed by RT DE, praising Putin as “Russia’s stabilizer,” downplaying the Russian troop buildup on the Ukrainian border in January 2022, and deriding the Western media and President Biden as “Putin demonizers.” Finally, Köppel even had RT DE employees

defend Putin's point of view in his newspaper, calling the Russian propaganda channel "Russia's television network against simplemindedness" and a "refreshing counterpoint." The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* therefore called him "Putin's mouthpiece."

In his article, "Sorry, Roger Köppel, du liegst falsch" ("Sorry, Roger Köppel, you're wrong"), Urs Gehriger showed his boss with what determination the West had tried since 1990 "to respect Russia as a new partner and to integrate it into a peaceful Europe." Among other things, he recalled the following:

- The 1990 "Paris Charter," under which Russia was made a substantial co-sponsor of a new peace order based on the rule of law and freedom of expression.
- The Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances of 1994, in which Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan renounced the nuclear weapons that had been stationed in their territory since Soviet times and handed them over to Russia's custody. "At that time, Ukraine had the third largest nuclear arsenal in the world. In return, Russia—as well as the U.S. and Britain—gave the three states binding assurances that they would respect their sovereignty and 'existing borders.'"
- At the same time, the inclusion of Russia in the "Partnership for Peace," "with contractual concessions to Moscow. The overriding goal was to overcome mutual distrust and threat, and to create a common security and stability space."
- The 1997 "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation," which enshrined "refraining from the threat or use of force against each other as well as against any other state, its sovereignty, territorial integrity, or political independence." Also stipulated in the treaty were

"the inviolability of borders and peoples' right of self-determination."

- Attempts to integrate Russia economically and politically: Admission to the Council of Europe in 1996; Russia's expansion of the G-7 into the G-8, even though Russia was an "economic lightweight" compared to the other members. And in 2011, Russia was admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO).

To this should be added the Charter for European Security (the "Istanbul Document"): the final document of the 1999 OSCE Summit Conference, in which participating States, including Russia and Ukraine, recognize the inherent right of each State "freely to choose its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance, or to modify them as they evolve," but not "at the expense of the security of other States" (No. 8). Mention should also be made of the "Partnership and Cooperation Agreement" (PCA) between the EU and Russia (and other former Eastern bloc states, including Ukraine).

Of course, there are voices—such as Yale historian and Cold War history specialist John Lewis Gaddis—who argued in the late 1990s that NATO should have been abolished after 1989, that it was an anti-Warsaw Pact alliance rendered unnecessary by the Soviet dissolution. But history after 1990 gives us an idea of what could have happened if NATO had been dissolved without replacement. A replacement by integrating all former Eastern bloc countries, including Russia, into the "Partnership for Peace" could have indeed—and it would have been gratifying—made NATO superfluous. That was the plan. After everything that happened, this was mere wishful thinking and would have been highly dangerous. This, of course, was first and foremost how Moscow's former Eastern European vassals saw it, and U.S. President Clinton followed their view—contrary to the Pentagon's opinion.

## Security in the Western Sense and “Security” in the Russian Sense

After all, Russia, as will be discussed, began to violate these agreements and treaties early on, and certainly not because it felt threatened by NATO. And here lies the basic problem: Although for the West security is based on the law and on adherence to treaties, for an autocratic ruling system like that of Russia, which is not based on the rule of law, “security” is whatever serves its interests.

This is precisely the keyboard on which Putin plays: if the law or contractual obligations stand in the way of these interests, then it is said that Russian “security interests” are not respected. This is the only reason why NATO or its eastward expansion is perceived by Russia as a threat to its “security.” In reality, this conceals a semantic trick: Russia ultimately means something different by the words it uses than how they are understood in the West.

This, in turn, is an expression of a deep-seated and irreconcilable conflict of values: the conflict between a civilization based on freedom and law, for which the law and the rule of law—regardless of who is currently ruling—is a guarantee of security, and, on the other hand, a civilization based on despotism, violence, and the rule of autocrats with personal charisma. To speak the language of Max Weber, this is more or less the difference between “legal” and “charismatic” rule. At this level, ultimately no compromises are possible; only diplomatic coexistence secured by weapons and a corresponding competition of systems is a long-term option here. In this respect, the Cold War period, even if we do not wish it back, was a “successful” period for the West, because it finally decided this competition in its favor.

Russia’s duplicity, which was transparent to former Warsaw Pact states (made wise from suffering harm) and which was then to

become a system again under Putin, led to the quite rational desire of these states (Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and even Romania) to come under the protective shield of NATO. This did not violate any of Russia’s security interests, but it did meet the security needs of the Eastern European states formerly oppressed by the Russian-dominated Soviet Union. And it shows that NATO had by no means become superfluous.

## NATO Expansion to the East—But with Concessions

What triggered distrust of the “new” Russia was the Russian military action in Abkhazia (1992/93) and the First Chechen War (1994-96), in which Russia acted very aggressively. NATO hesitated for a long time, but then admitted Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to the alliance in 1997. And again in 2004, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined NATO, that is, after the Second Chechen War of 1999—which was already waged under Putin and was even more cruel. And following Russia’s victory the former Soviet republic was again subjugated to Russia after enormous destruction. The then Prime Minister Putin had gained such popularity in Russia through his war in Chechnya that he was finally elected president, an office that, it could be guessed even then, he would not easily relinquish and would increasingly develop into a personal autocracy. And that is exactly what happened.

However, out of consideration for Russia, NATO imposed restrictions on its eastward expansion and made concessions: it refrained from stationing nuclear weapons and severely limited the deployment of troops (although it reserved the right to increase their numbers if necessary). The treaty was institutionally secured by the NATO-Russia Council. However,

clouds soon appeared in the sky of concord, namely when NATO noticed that the Russian diplomats present at the regular meetings of the NATO-Russia Council were undercover intelligence agents, which led to conflicts, expulsions, and destroyed trust.

The new President Putin integrated the corrupt oligarchs into his system of rule and had the unwilling ones, such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the extremely successful head of the Yukos corporation and a supporter of the liberal political forces, thrown into prison for ten years. However, Putin himself probably had close ties to some oligarchs before that. As Khodorkovsky admitted in a 2017 [interview](#) with “Profil” about his relationship with Putin, they knew “that there were people around him who stole money. But we thought Putin was merely using corruption to secure his power. I had no idea that he himself was one of the thieves. I realized that only when I studied the Panama Papers.” Meanwhile, with the help of frontmen, Putin had built up a vast personal fortune, which alone was motivation for him to not relinquish power.

Regardless of how it went down, together with the oligarchs, whom he arguably rivaled in corruption, Putin “stabilized” Russia, but at the expense of the freedom of its citizens and—as would soon become apparent—at the expense of economic freedom and therefore prosperity. Because of Putin’s destruction of private enterprise, which went hand in hand with his personal enrichment, the country entered a downward economic spiral in which it remains trapped to this day—economic sanctions may now deal the death blow to the Russian economy. The result is an autocratic regime that flouts all the principles of the European Peace Order to which Russia once committed itself—this was already blatant as early as 2014, but since February 24, 2022, Russia has been in total defiance of it and of all associated consequences.

## Putin’s Imperial Dream of a “Reunification” of Russia

It became increasingly clear during the last decade that the master of the Kremlin did not want to accept the loss of the former Soviet republics and thus it was also clear to former Warsaw Pact nations that there was an increasing threat. Against this background, Putin’s complaint about Russian security interests being allegedly violated and about an aggressive NATO policy that frightens Russia turns out to be merely a pretext to legitimize his actions, especially to his own people.

These goals are abundantly documented, along with Putin’s imperial ideology and the narrative of a Russia that includes Belarus and Ukraine. They testify to the continuity of [Russian foreign policy](#) since tsarist times. As early as 1994, Putin said at the 101<sup>st</sup> Bergedorfer Gesprächskreises [Bergedorf Discussion Group] of the [Körber-Stiftung](#) [Körber Foundation] in St. Petersburg (Putin was first deputy mayor of this city at the time) that Russia had “voluntarily ceded huge territories to the former republics of the Soviet Union in the interest of general security and peace in Europe, including territories that historically have always belonged to Russia” and that one could now “simply not afford—if only in the interest of security in Europe—that these people should be arbitrarily abandoned to their fate” (“[Protokoll](#)”, p. 38).

Note what Putin already understood by the “security of Europe” at that time: not to “arbitrarily abandon to their fate” the people “in the territories that historically have always belonged to Russia...”!

Andrei A. Kokoshin, Russia’s then first deputy defense minister, who was also present at that meeting, reiterated Putin’s point. (Kokoshin became a professor at Moscow’s Lomonosov State University and dean of its Faculty of World Politics in 2003.) It is worth reading the

following excerpt from one of his contributions to the discussion at the 1994 meeting:

“Mr. Putin has rightly said that the West must be more open to these processes. Russia has indeed voluntarily relinquished many territories, without any compensation. Therefore, the pendulum of public opinion may swing to the other side. This should not be interpreted as a rebirth of any great power ideas. There are technological links that cannot be understood in purely economic terms. They link Russia with Belarus and Ukraine, but there are also ties with Lithuania and Latvia that are now largely destroyed. Whether or not they will be restored is another question. There is no social default here. In any case, this is an important factor influencing the current processes of reintegration. (...)”

Russia will not try to bring anyone back by force; but the Russians will make sure that human rights are respected in the neighboring countries. As far as reintegration is concerned, there is not so much in Russia as in the surrounding countries, including Ukraine, a desire to reunite with Russia. These aspirations may take a direction similar to the development in Germany when all forecasts of analysts and politicians were turned upside down by the power of a mass movement.” (“Protokoll” p. 42)

This may still have sounded harmless in 1994; there was an indeed—psychologically understandable—discrimination against Russians outside Russia, for example in the Baltic countries, which had previously been partially Russified by the Soviets. But there is also a hidden threat to be heard here, when in this context there is blatant talk of a “desire for reunification with Russia” similar to that in Germany! This is astonishing: the myth of a “divided Russia” is celebrated!

Putin’s statement in an October 17, 2011 interview with three Russian television channels is even better known. Putin spoke plainly: “The Soviet Union has collapsed. But of what did the Soviet Union consist if not Russia? It was just called something else.” Another well-known statement by Putin sounds almost

harmless: The collapse of the Soviet Union was “a national tragedy of enormous proportions.”

It is clear why Putin spoke of a “national tragedy”: He saw an injustice in the collapse of the Soviet Union and its disintegration into individual, independent and sovereign republics. And it was against Russia—and, therefore, a “national tragedy.” After all, the Soviet Union—was actually Russia! This thinking has always been highly dangerous because it not only turned the historical truth upside down, but it amounted to a direct attack on the legal foundations of the European peace order.

Such statements, which can be heard again and again, and which today are incessantly drummed into the Russian population by the state media along with the alleged threat from the West, naturally frightened the Baltic states in particular. However, this must have also caused concern among the Western-oriented forces in the Ukrainian population, even among the native Russian speakers, including the current President Volodymyr Zelensky, all of whom have been turning away from Russia for some time with a clear and, as a result of the Russian invasion, now probably overwhelming majority.

One can therefore understand the traditionally clear Western orientation of the Baltic states, which fell prey to the Soviet Union after World War II, and Ukraine’s increasing desire, in view of Moscow’s aggression, to orient itself toward the West as a liberal constitutional state and democracy—not only ideologically but also in terms of security policy—and to come under NATO’s protective umbrella. In contrast to the Eastern European states, the West has simply not perceived the irredentist undertones and thus Putin’s idea of “security” and “justice” clearly enough.

But Putin’s war against Ukraine will not only serve to strengthen the latter’s West-oriented desire. For whatever may happen in the

coming months, Ukraine will forever be lost to Russia because of the February 24<sup>th</sup> invasion. Even the Russian population there, which increasingly and since the beginning of the war has certainly felt Ukrainian, is turning away from Russia. A permanent Russian occupation of Ukraine—if Russia will be able to do so militarily at all—will be tolerated neither by the population nor by the West, and it will lead to collapse of Russia’s economy and thus also to Putin’s rule, if this does not happen before then—and one can only hope—as a result of military defeat or internal opposition.

### The Big Mistake: The Refusal to Allow Ukraine to Join NATO

We know today: all this did not need to happen. But in 2008 the West refused to allow Ukraine to join NATO—more precisely: Russia friends France (under President Sarkozy) and Germany (under Chancellor Angela Merkel and her then Foreign Minister and now President Steinmeier) vetoed Ukraine’s admission. Ironically, one could almost say “Once again, it was Germany that was complicit in a war in Europe, and paradoxically in alliance with France! The European friend of Russia, Germany—France was wiser and more independent—let itself be driven into Russian dependence by the seduction of propaganda and the sound of Moscow’s bells and is therefore now one of Russia’s most important sources of financing for this new intra-European war.”

We recall the standing ovation for Putin’s speech—in perfect German—before the Bundestag in 2001; the opportunism of Merkel’s “energy turnaround,” just to avoid losing the elections to the Greens; the economic convenience thanks to cheap natural gas from Russia, and this with the Nord Stream 2 pipeline even at the expense of Ukraine, which, as a previous transit country, was thereby deprived of a security pledge against Russia! Germany should

now be expected to make the necessary sacrifices to be able to do without Russian natural gas as quickly as possible. To prevent political upheaval, the resulting, price-driving and prosperity-reducing supply bottlenecks would have to be cushioned by a pan-European distribution system, as suggested by Austrian economist Gabriel Felbermayr, director of the Austrian Institute of Economic Research (WIFO) in Vienna, in the March 6, 2022, [BTO podcast](#) (German). That would indeed be German and European solidarity with Ukraine.

*Si vis pacem para bellum*—if you want peace, then prepare for war. This old wisdom, practiced successfully from time immemorial, has been criminally disregarded not only by Germany, but by all of Europe. Climate protection may be important, as are equality policies of all kinds, and why not? As are many other things. But in the midst of all the busyness and as a result of the constant expansion of the welfare state into a “hammock and watering can,” politicians forgot the elephant in the room: Russia is suffering from “imperial phantom pain” (Herfried Münkler) and is continuing not only to mourn imperial and hegemonic dreams but is also increasingly pursuing them actively and aggressively.

This was a capital mistake of the West. Yet this mistake has nothing to do with the alleged guilt—or shared guilt—in the current war, that somehow Russia’s security interests were disregarded. On the contrary, the West is partly to blame (if such blame must be sought), because in 2008 it did not pay attention to Ukraine’s security interests and thus refused to admit Ukraine—despite its internal instability and corruption—to NATO. The blame therefore lies above all not with the U.S., which is now once again taking a constant beating, but with France and Germany. This needs to be stated clearly.

Would Ukraine’s admission into NATO have led to war in 2008? In fact, that is unthinkable.

Putin would have suffered a painful blow, and he would have howled. But he would not have dared to go to war (at that time), and afterwards it would have been too late. Moreover, Ukraine would probably have developed more favorably under NATO's protective umbrella, although of course it is all impossible to know. Hypothetical history is pure speculation. Therefore, let us stick to the facts.

In any case, one fact is that a Western-oriented and therefore democratic, liberal, constitutional, and economically successful Ukraine on Russia's doorstep—even if there was still a long way to go to achieve this, even without a Russian invasion—is a nightmare for Putin. It would be a direct threat to his power base, eroding it and robbing it of legitimacy. That is why he had to defame the Ukrainian government as run by Nazis to legitimize its overthrow. But Ukraine wants to go West; this is not, as Russian propaganda claims, a strategy of the West to hurt Russia's interests. However, it does in fact threaten Putin's interests, namely, his hold on power. But only those who believe Russian propaganda can speak here of a "shared guilt" of a West that allegedly did not respect Russian security interests, or that even humiliated Russia after 1989, just as the victorious powers of World War I humiliated Germany in the Peace of Versailles.

All this is nonsense. What is true is that Putin does not want a Western-oriented, liberal, democratic, and constitutional Ukraine on his doorstep, but one that comes "home to the empire." For this purpose, after having miscalculated and thought that the Ukrainians would welcome the Russians with open arms as their liberators, he is now apparently ready to destroy the lives of countless members of this Ukrainian "brother nation," their cities, and the prosperity they have achieved so far.

## Putin's History Lesson: Fake Reasons for War and Russia's real "Security Interests."

Today we can see more clearly—even if we could have known earlier—that Ukraine's fears of Putin's Russia were justified. His [article](#) published on the Kremlin's website, also in Ukrainian (!) and English, dated July 12, 2021, and titled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," clarifies what has been going on in Putin's mind for a long time. This can also allow us to understand that his officially posited reasons for war—security concerns, liberation of Ukraine from the Nazis, and preservation of the Donbass population from genocide—were only pretexts to conceal the real reason for war: "Ukraine belongs to us." It is, like Belarus, a historical part of Russia, Kiev is not "Ukrainian" at all but Russian, because since the 10th century—the Kievan "Rus"—it is the cradle of Russian culture. An independent Ukrainian state was an artificial product created by Lenin as a constituent republic of the Soviet Union, which was actually Russia. Yes, Ukrainians and Russians are "parts of one people," as Putin's article says.

Since a NATO whose territory would directly touch the border of Russia (which would then finally be reunited with Ukraine) could then probably be declared a "security problem" again by the latter, a buffer zone would have to be ensured from Russia's point of view. Historically, Russia always regarded the eastern parts of Poland as such a buffer zone, and now the Baltic States would probably be added to it. This was clearly seen by Otto von Habsburg, who [wrote](#) in 2006: "In the period from Stalin to Putin, Russian imperialism has repeatedly set itself the goal of reconquering Ukraine, annexing it to Russia, and using it as a starting point for further large-scale operations against Poland, or rather the other parts of Europe."



Put briefly, everything that contradicts this narrative, this myth, this ideal of a Greater Russia as it was in the time of the tsars, during which the inhabitants of Ukraine were called “Little Russians”—originally, however, only, as the Eastern Europe expert and professor at the University of Vienna, Andreas Kappeler, explains in his book *Ungleiche Brüder* (“Unequal Brothers”), because the seat of the Orthodox patriarch, was a short (“little”) distance, the one from Moscow was “great”.—anything that contradicts the idea that the inhabitants of today’s Russia and Ukraine are “parts of a single people,” is detrimental to Russia’s “security interests” and is therefore declared a threat by Putin.

If the West were to respect Russian security interests understood in this way and even now cede Ukraine to Russia based on threats of war, this would be tantamount to violating all the treaty ties on which the European peace order was built after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It would mean the end of treaty compliance, the rule of law, and the validity of international law in Europe. It was therefore impossible for the West to respond to Russia’s demands for a guarantee of neutrality and non-alignment for Ukraine. It would have been precisely the disastrous mistake that had already been made once in Munich in 1938.

### Weren’t George Kennan and Henry Kissinger Right after All?

Those who still propagate the thesis—for example, with reference to [George Kennan](#) or [Henry Kissinger](#)—that the West has not taken Russia’s security interests into account with the eastward expansion of NATO are (at this time) making themselves Moscow’s mouthpiece. Intellectual caving to Russian or Soviet propaganda and disinformation has happened again and again in the past, not only before the

Second World War, but also during the Cold War, when the Soviet disinformation machinery was running at full speed. Vladimir Putin comes from this apparatus. He knows how it works—and he knows how to unsettle and divide the West.

But today’s Russia is no longer the Soviet Union of Kennan’s and Kissinger’s time, ideologically oriented toward communist “world revolution,” nor is it the military equal of the United States. Russia is economically a dwarf state with—despite its 144 million inhabitants, its enormous wealth of raw materials, its size and geopolitically privileged position—an economic output on the scale of Spain, which is one third the size in terms of population and one thirty-fourth its size in terms of land area! And Russia’s autocratic president is a violent but quite strategy-oriented dreamer who grieves Russia’s past as the dominator of a union of now independent Soviet republics and as the hegemon of Eastern Bloc countries who were tied to this former Russia by the Warsaw Pact.

After all, to Kissinger’s credit—even if it is never mentioned by those who refer to him today—in his [2014 article](#), among the four principles on which he thinks a *modus vivendi* between Russia and Ukraine should be established, in addition to the demand “Ukraine should not join NATO,” he adds three additional principles: “Ukraine should have the right to choose freely its economic and political associations, including with Europe”; “Ukraine should be free to create any government compatible with the expressed will of its people”; and finally, it was “incompatible with the rules of the existing world order for Russia to annex Crimea.” Therefore, sovereignty over the peninsula should be returned to Ukraine and free elections should be held there to strengthen Crimea’s autonomy, so that the status of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet in Sebastopol would remain clear.

Henry Kissinger’s policy recommendations have rarely been successful in the past. That will be the case this time as well. Not only will Putin never voluntarily concede renewed Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea, but also the first two principles are probably insurmountable sticking points. For that is precisely what Russia does not want under any circumstances. Turning a liberal-democratic and constitutional Ukraine toward the West and even toward the EU is incomparably more dangerous for Putin’s rule than its membership in what French President Macron calls a “brain-dead” NATO, from which—as Putin knows full well—no threat to Russia emanates. But a Ukraine on its own doorstep, turned toward the EU, economically successful and creating prosperity for all classes of people, would undermine all of Putin’s promises to his own people and erode his power base. NATO alone would stand in the way of any attempt to prevent this westward path for Ukraine—as Russia is trying to do right now.

### How to End the War? Dangers and Opportunities

Of course, because of Putin’s threat to use nuclear weapons (the credibility of which is difficult to assess) direct involvement of the West, NATO, but even the U.S. alone in this war is to be avoided. According to the general assessment so far, it would be the beginning of World War III—even if the consensus is beginning to crumble. Regardless, it would be not only cowardly but also short-sighted to let Ukraine go it alone and thus become a sitting duck for Russia. It is ultimately the decision of the Ukrainian people and their elected government whether they want to fight back and defend their independence with weapons supplied to them by the West, even at the cost of human lives and great destruction. They undoubtedly have the moral right to do so, and

we in the West should not deny them that right just because all of us are so wealth-saturated that we have trouble comprehending that.

And this decision to defend themselves at great sacrifice has, to all appearances, been made by the Ukrainians—look at how they oppose the aggressor under the leadership of their courageous president. This is the decision to value the ideas, and for a nation indispensable spiritual and morally relevant goods, such as freedom, independence, self-determination, self-respect, resistance to violence and injustice, which are higher than material goods, even one’s own life. As I said, no one may impose such decisions on others or compel them to do so. But a people may impose them on itself—and that is apparently what the Ukrainians are doing, as we see every day. And we should admire them for it, indeed, we should be grateful to them! Because in doing so, they are ultimately defending Europe.

Admittedly, there may come a point when the hour of diplomacy strikes, and in which compromises, often painful ones, must be made to avoid further destruction and bloodshed—and if we reach that point, we must seize the opportunity. President Zelenskyy knows this and has signaled a willingness to do so. After all, even the high spiritual goods must be weighed against other, less high but more fundamental ones—life, health, and the like. A people can reach the end of its strength and capacities in its struggle to defend itself, and then even a democratically elected president must not force it to make further sacrifices.

However, right now, no one knows whether the Russians, faced with their own military exhaustion or the threat of ignominious defeat, are willing to compromise: and by compromise we mean, perhaps, Ukraine remaining neutral—but, crucially, without its demilitarization and without the installation of a government by Russia’s grace. Unfortunately, the latter is precisely what Russia’s “special

military operation” is designed to do: to demilitarize and install a puppet government that pleases Russia. And, again right now, there is unfortunately much to suggest that Putin has switched his military strategy to the “Grozny and Aleppo” concept after a swift Russian invasion was prevented by the courageous struggle of the Ukrainians. In the Chechen capital Grozny and Syrian Aleppo, anyone can see how far Putin is capable of going. So it remains questionable whether a compromise solution will ever be possible. After all, no Ukrainian will want to agree to a Ukrainian capitulation, that is, to degrade himself to being a citizen of Moscow’s satellite state.

To fail to support Ukraine in its defense struggle would be both unjust and—as I said—short-sighted “realpolitik.” For precisely because of its “need for security,” a Russia dominated by Putin will by no means necessarily stop at the borders of a demilitarized Ukraine that is controlled by Russia both politically and militarily. “L’appétit vient en mangeant”—“appetite comes with eating”—as the French proverb aptly says. Therefore, as far as possible, Russia’s appetite must not be whetted even further. Only then will security interests be duly taken into account—namely, those of the free, Eastern European states, whose security interests are ultimately those of the entire West.

And this raises the question of whether the Ukraine war will perhaps be internationalized after all, that is, whether NATO or the U.S. will intervene in some direct way, because it is assumed that not only is there a threat of the complete destruction of Ukraine, but as an effect of the resulting, extremely unstable situation, European security itself could also be at risk. The fact that the U.S. is currently putting pressure on China and demanding a guarantee from it to refrain from supporting Russia could be a harbinger of a NATO plan to intervene in the war under American leadership.

In doing so, President Biden would also be making amends before the eyes of history for his grave mistake of waiting far too long to deliver arms to Ukraine. And if China keeps quiet, then disciplining Russia and possibly destroying much of its army would not lead to a new world war, but to a new chance for a more peaceful world—unless Putin goes crazy and detonates a nuclear bomb. No one can be sure whether he would be capable of doing this, and if so, whether anyone in Russia would then prevent him from doing so.

### Thinking about the Russian People, Too

But the Russian people must also be given a prospect for the future. As the Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov explained in an [interview](#) with Austrian Public TV’s (ORF) Moscow correspondent, for the time being, the vast majority of Russians (especially the less educated rural population) support Putin and his current war, but they are victims of state propaganda that they cannot see through and against which they are hardly able to defend themselves. But that could change in a few months. Russian army personnel, many of whom are young and inexperienced, are also victims of Putin’s war. Thousands of them have already been killed and a large number injured. That, too, is a tragedy.

Moreover, less visible than the streams of refugees from Ukraine are those much smaller and quite differently motivated streams of people fleeing Russia towards Europe. In the past weeks hundreds of thousands have turned their backs on Russia, some of them wanting to do so forever. These are often people studying or working in the West, even Russia’s best and brightest. Many of them decide to leave the country on the “Allegro Express,” the now fully booked high-speed train from St. Petersburg to Helsinki, before it is too late and



the borders are closed in the old Soviet manner. Among them are many Finns working in Russia. Russians often have no visa and only a Sputnik vaccination, which is not recognized in Europe. Something must be done about this.

These are people who no longer see a future in Russia and who are afraid of the imminent state terror, which wants to suppress by force all opinions contradicting the official state narrative. They are also people who are turning their backs on their country for moral reasons, or reasons of conscience. And there could be more and more of them, as more realize the extent of the catastrophe for their country into which their president has maneuvered them—so long as it is still possible to emigrate safely at all.

Therefore, the sooner the Russian offensive and, with it, Putin's rule, comes to an end through Ukrainian resistance, the better for Russia and its people as well. Ukraine is therefore fighting not only for its own independence and freedom, but also for a future of Russia in freedom and under the rule of law. How this will proceed, where and when it will end, no one can know. But only if the West remains true to its ideals and principles will peace and the community of law be preserved in Europe. And only in this way will there be hope for a Russia that lives in freedom and peace with its neighbors and shares in their prosperity. ■

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Martin Rhonheimer, born 1950 in Zurich, was Professor of Ethics and Political Philosophy from 1990 to 2020 at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome. He remains associated with the university as a visiting professor. He is co-founder and president of the Austrian Institute of Economics and Social Philosophy and lives in Vienna.

He studied history, philosophy and political science in Zurich and theology in Rome. In 1977, he died his doctorate with Hermann Lübbe at the University of Zurich. From 1972-1978, he was assistant to Hermann Lübbe at the Philosophical Seminar of the University of Zurich. 1981/82 research assistant to Otfried Höffe at the University of Freiburg, Switzerland. Research fellow (habilitation project) of the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, Cologne. Since 1982 collaboration with Wolfgang Kluxen, Bonn.

In 1983 he was ordained priest in Rome by Pope John Paul II (incardination in the personal prelature Opus Dei). Since 1990 he has been Professor of Ethics and Political Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Pontifical University of Santa Croce in Rome (since 2015 without teaching obligations).

He is a member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts, corresponding member of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, member of the Friedrich A. von Hayek Society (Berlin) and a founding member of the Lord Acton Circle.

Numerous publications in professional journals and anthologies, mainly in the fields of ethics and political philosophy as well as economic and social philosophy, including several books, some of which have been translated into various languages. Currently, his work focuses on economic and social-philosophical issues, in particular the study of the Austrian School of Economics and its philosophical, ethical, political social implications; the tradition of the “Social Market Economy”, the development of Christian social teaching, especially Catholic Social Doctrine, and the critical examination of the idea and reality of the welfare state as well as related political-philosophical and ethical issues, in particular those referring to the theory of justice.

Last books:

[Christentum und säkularer Staat. Geschichte – Gegenwart – Zukunft \(Mit einem Vorwort von Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde\)](#), Herder, Freiburg i. Br. 2012,

[Homo sapiens: die Krone der Schöpfung. Herausforderungen der Evolutionstheorie und die Antwort der Philosophie](#), Springer VS, Wiesbaden 2016.

[The Common Good of Constitutional Democracy. Essays in Political Philosophy and on Catholic Social Doctrine](#), Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 2013.

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