Towards a New Iron Curtain

Edited by
Renata Gravina

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Towards a New Iron Curtain

Where the Future European Security Order Goes?

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Renata Gravina

TOWARDS A NEW IRON CURTAIN

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**"The authors' positions correspond to their personal convictions"*

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The Context

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict marks the start of a new era of competition between the West and Russia.

Under a first perspective, this proves that the world order emerged at the end of the First Cold War has ceased to exist. The return of war to Europe, as an act of invasion and conquest, scores a watershed for the history of the continent. Nevertheless, while the *First* Cold War was fought in a climate of fear over the nuclear threat, as well as underpinning a new confidence in the progress and social development resources that each of the two worlds (namely, the *capitalist* and the *communist*) attributed to itself; the *Second* Cold War presents itself under the sign of uncertainty, in line with the particularly intense moment of disorder that is currently characterising the end of globalisation. Unipolarism has been under threat for years[1],

1 J.J. Andersson, C. S. Cramer (2023), 'Multilateralism', Euiss Yearbook of European Security, 52-65

but the Pax Americana has suffered some setbacks, which recently revealed a kind of red line in the psychological war between Russia and Ukraine[2].

Interviewed by Der Spiegel about the conflict, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger answered that:

'The war in Ukraine is on one level a war about the balance of power. But on another level, it has aspects of a civil war, and it combines a classically European type of international problem with a totally global one. When this war is over, the issue will be whether Russia achieves a coherent relationship with Europe - which it has always sought- or whether it will become an outpost of Asia at the border of Europe'[3].

The U.S. administration provided weapons to Kiev, as well as defense systems, munitions, and intelligence to avert Ukraine's collapse. This, to prevent a vertical escalation in the intensity of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (namely, a nuclear war), and/or a horizontal escalation in its geographic scope (or a direct NATO-Russia war). The White House and the National Security Council pursued a cautious policy of escalation management, as a necessary step to mediate between the State Department and the Pentagon currents within the Federal apparatus. Furthermore, a strategic defeat of

The Russian Ukrainian conflict marks the start of a new era of competition between the West and Russia

2 S. Plokhyi (2023), The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History (New York: W. W. Norton & Company)

3 Interview with Henry Kissinger: 'There Is No Good Historical Example' for War in Ukraine' (2022), Spiegel International, 15 July, https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-henry-kissinger-for-war-in-ukraine-there-is-no-good-historical-example-a-64b77d41-5b60-497e-8d2f-9041a73b1892

Russia would inevitably result in the dissolution of the Russian Federation and the creation of a geopolitical black hole, characterised by chaos and destabilisation across the Eurasian landmass.

Under a second standpoint, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict revealed fundamental differences in how Europe understands security and increasing friction in values. These problems suggest an emergent *clash of Europes* that pits the relatively liberal vision of the Western region against a more conservative *Russian Europe*. In the 1990s, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were drawn to the European Union (EU) as a liberal *voluntary empire,* and were eager to join it; but at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a significant number of these countries began to exhibit Eurosceptic tendencies, considering the EU as a *free economic* rather than a *geopolitical space*[4]. The challenge facing the European Union and, in particular, the European Defence Union, is considerable[5]: the fear for the resurgent Russia pushes states to call for close links to Atlantic defense, rather than European defense – a political issue considered to be a long way off. The notable publication *The End of History*[6] seems to herald the beginning of a different and uncertain historical process; what is considered as the *New Iron Curtain* (NIC) assumes a renewed asset of the bipolar opposition separating two worldviews, and a clash of civilisations between East and West – which, once again, ploughs the terrain of historical differentiation between different ideas of *order*[7]. Though highly criticised (particularly after his death)[8], the influential opinion of Henry Kissinger provided a key insight into Russian policy when he stated that 'Russia must be dealt with by closing its military options'[9].

4 T. Hayashi, H. Fukuda (eds) (2007), Regions in Central and Eastern Europe, Past and Present (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University)

5 A. Mattelaer, (2022), 'Rethinking Nuclear Deterrence: A European Perspective', CSDS Policy Brief, 13

6 F. Fukuyama (1992), The End of History (New York: Free Press). The thesis on the victory of the liberal order was called into question by the philosopher himself after more than thirty years. See F. Fukuyama (2022), Liberalism and Its Discontents (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

7 D. Lake, L. Martin, T. Risse (2021), 'Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization', International Organization, 75, 2, 225-257, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/abs/challenges-to-the-liberal-order-reflections-on-international-organization/2FE0E2621F702D1DD02929526703AED3

8 B. Rhodes (2023), 'Henry Kissinger, the Hypocrite', The New York Times, 30 November, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/opinion/henry-kissinger-the-hypocrite.html

9 World Chaos and World Order: Conversations With Henry Kissinger (2016), The Atlantic, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/ar-

The factors

The Russian special military operation began on 24 February 2022 with the official primary purpose of restoring justice and historical truth[10]. The process began in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea and the start of the Donbass hybrid war, and the ultimate goals of affirming Russian-Ukrainian ethnic unity and regaining Russian imperial space. Since the announcement of the partial mobilisation, Putin made it clear that the territorial integrity of Russia has been threatened[11], and that all means would be used to defend the Russian homeland: in any event of aggression against the Russian Federation, the military doctrine envisages the use of nuclear weapons.

the Russian Ukrainian conflict revealed fundamental differences in how Europe understands security and increasing friction in values

The entire international and European defense network appears to be highly exposed (also intertwining the Ukrainian conflict with the conflict in the Middle East), and amidst the factors and events that have triggered a new iron barrier we can *identify*[12]:

- 1. The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014 (anticipating the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine).
- 2. The process of NATO enlargement: Russia perceived the NATO expansion to include

chive/2016/11/kissinger-order-and-chaos/506876/

10 .V. Putin (2021), Stattya Volodimira Putina «Pro istorichnu ednist rosiyan ta ukraïntsiv», Kremlin, 12 July, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66182

11 V.V. Putin (2023), Poslaniye Prezidenta Federalnomu Sobraniyu, 21 February, Kremlin, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565

12 M. Bergmann, (2022), 'Transforming European Defense', Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

countries in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states as a direct threat to its sphere of influence; this resulted in a heightened state of military preparedness on both sides.

- 3. The military build-up: both NATO and Russia have augmented their military presence in Eastern Europe. This encompasses troop deployments, military exercises, and the establishment of new bases.
- 4. The use of cyber-attacks and hybrid warfare tactics: Russia has been accused of perpetrating cyber-attacks and hybrid warfare tactics against Western countries. Actions included interferences with electoral processes and dissemination of disinformation.
- 5. Sanctions and economic measures have been employed as instruments of pressure. In response to the aforementioned actions perpetrated by Russia, the West imposed several economic sanctions targeting key sectors of the Russian economy. In response to these sanctions, Russia has taken countermeasures.
- 6. Diplomatic tensions: diplomatic relations between Russia and Western countries have deteriorated, with the expulsion of diplomats and the closure of consulates becoming increasingly common.
- 7. Support for Ukraine: Western countries increased their support for Ukraine, providing military aid, financial assistance, and political support. The latter is aimed at strengthening Ukrainian defense capabilities and at deterring further Russian aggression.

The book

A dystopian future (which seems similar to the one described by Orwell in his book '1984') will undoubtedly be dominated by technological control and will see the hegemony of illiberal powers. The current bipolar divide is less (physically) fortified, but characterised by heightened military tensions, economic sanctions, and ideological divisions between Russia and Western-aligned nations. The United States and European countries have taken a decisive action by increasing military aid and financial assistance to nations at risk of Russian aggression, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and the Baltic states. This support is designed to reinforce these countries' defense and deter further Russian

expansionism. The New Iron Curtain (NIC) stretches from the Arctic to the Black Sea and through Eastern Europe. The NIC underlines the lasting impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on European stability and international relations[13].

The journey of the TNIC (Towards a New Iron Curtain) volume commenced within the context of the future of Europe, and the question of a potential new iron curtain. The acronym 'Towards a New Iron Curtain' is intended to delineate the historical, political, institutional, and economic position assumed – and to be assumed – by certain countries from 2022 to the present. TNIC charts some of Russia's relations with Poland, the Czech Republic, Finland, the Western Balkans, and Turkey, providing a concise overview of how Central and Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and the Turkish Middle East have responded to the Russian threat, from historical to contemporary contexts[14].

As for the Polish case: in the view of the author Miłosz Hodun the Iron Curtain has never been perceived as having fallen, from the perspective of Warsaw. From the perspective of partitioned Poland, the fear of Russia and the perception of danger have simply 'moved eastwards', and this perception is likely to remain for an extended period of time.

As for the Czech case: the author Šarka Šhoup affirms that, historically, the positioning of Czech Republic has been characterised by a notable degree of erraticism. In the aftermath of the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the public opinion was partially divided. The Czech government is expected to 'continue to maintain its position as a reliable partner within the EU and NATO' and to 'fulfil its commitments to support Ukraine'. However, internal pressure is creating a dilemma for the future.

As for the Finnish case: in recent times, Finland demonstrated a growing apprehension on the perceived threat posed by Russia, evidenced by its ultimate decision to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in

13 M. L. Grant (2022), 'The World Order in Crisis', Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development, 21, 124–33

14 F. Sixsmith, M. Daniel (2024), Putin and the Return of History : How the Kremlin Rekindled the Cold War. (London: Bloomsbury Continuum)

2023. Nevertheless, as the author Mikko Majander has observed, the Finnish government's anti-Russian sentiment and distrust of Putin's authoritarian approach have not entirely erased the sense of unfulfilled potential on both sides.

As for the Western Balkans: as the author Jasmina Ibrahimpašić notes, the process towards the access to the EU and NATO has been stagnant until the Russian invasion of Ukraine; however, it accelerated since then. NATO and the EU still represent aspirations for stability, economic growth, and security in the post-Yugoslav space. Nevertheless, Russian interferences in the Yugoslav context complicates the creation of an Iron Curtain.

As for the Turkish case: as the author Elif Menderes points out, the multilateral engagement of Türkiye is designed to establish the country as a mediator and a stabilising force in its region. This inclination is to be achieved by encouraging a cooperative approach to security, as opposed to a confrontational one. The intention of Türkiye is to enhance its regional influence and economic integration, which serves to complicate the narrative of a New Iron Curtain[15].

To conclude

According to Professor Stefan Hedlund, on a less likely scenario of a European 'bloc of deterrence forms', the 'Baltic-Nordic-Polish bloc would be joined by Romania, another staunch supporter of Ukraine that by 2030 will host the largest NATO base in Europe. Bolstered by support from the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, with the latter adding a nuclear component, this grouping would wield sufficient military strength to offer effective deterrence against Russian aggression, and sufficient political resolve to ensure that deterrence is credible.

Such concerted action by this group might inspire other European

15 The volume is in a way in line with the ELF work dedicated to Russian influence in Europe after 2022. See F. Cappelletti, M. Hodun (eds.) (2023), Putin's Europe (Bruxelles-Warsaw: European Liberal Forum- Projekt Polska) https://repozytorium.umk.pl/bitstream/handle/item/3708/Narracje.pdf

countries to follow their example, resulting in a united Europe that is firm in maintaining support for Ukraine and sanctions on Russia until the war is over. However, the undertaking could be laden with controversy: Facing Kremlin cheerleaders making vociferous accusations of Russophobia, it could incite demands that sanctions be lifted and relations with Russia normalized'[16].

On a most likely scenario in which, instead, the pro-Russia bloc prevails, 'the Kremlin could be proven right in its belief that Western support for Ukraine will crumble and that a pro-Russian bloc of countries will force Ukraine into a negotiated end to the war – on Russian terms. Hungary and Slovakia could spearhead this push, while Germany and France, burdened by domestic pressures, might capitulate passively to Kremlin demands for negotiations.

The crucial dynamic at play involves the rising influence of political parties on the extreme right and left that are united in their support for Russia. In Germany, opinion polls for the next Bundestag election, expected in September 2025, show major gains for parties that openly favor normalizing relations with Russia. And following its latest elections, France is already politically gridlocked and may be looking at Marine Le Pen winning the presidency in 2027. There is plenty of evidence of Russia lending active support to such parties'[17].

16 S. Hedlung (2024), 'Europe's New Iron Curtain', gisreports, 17 September, https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/new-iron-curtain/

17 Id.

Chapter 1

Curtain that Has Never Fallen

Miłosz Hodun

Abstract: When most of the West was celebrating the fall of the Iron Curtain, the people of Central and Eastern Europe, freed from Moscow's oppression, were aware that this was not the end of their centuries-long struggle with Russia. Polish leaders of all political persuasions have warned against treating Russia as a normal partner and have been preparing (for more than a decade) for a confrontation with their large eastern neighbour. For the Poles, the Iron Curtain still exists and relations with Russia have never been seen as peaceful and respectful. This position is the result of hundreds of years of shared history, reflected in Polish textbooks, high and mass culture, but also in the attitude of post-Soviet Russian leaders towards Poland and the Polish people. Vladimir Putin has created asymmetrical relations, treating Poland from a position of superiority and using fear as the main strategy in bilateral relations. In addition, Russia launched hybrid operations against Poland in the form of disinformation campaigns and destabilising actions on the Polish border with Belarus.

Keywords: *Russian Polish relations, Russian propaganda, Polish Iron Curtain*

Over three decades ago, when most of the countries in the West celebrated the fall of the Iron Curtain, people in Central and Eastern Europe, free from Moscow's oppressions, were aware that it was not the end of their centuries-long struggle with Russia. Polish leaders, regardless of their political coloration, have been warning against treating Russia as a normal partner, preparing itself (for over ten years now) for confrontation with the big neighbour on the East. For Polish people, the Iron Curtain still endures nowadays, and relations with Russia have never been seen as peaceful and respectful. This position results from hundreds of years of shared history reflected in Polish textbooks, high and mass culture, but also from the attitude towards Poland and Polish people of postSoviet leaders of Russia. The latter, in particular Vladimir Putin, created asymmetrical relations, treating Poland from the position of superiority and using fear as the main strategy in bilateral relations. What is more, Russia launched hybrid operations against Poland, in form of disinformation campaigns and destabilising actions at the Polish border with Belarus.

For Polish people, the Iron Curtain still endures nowadays, and relations with Russia have never been seen as peaceful and respectful

Fortunately, Polish political elites are united in the pro-Western views. They also reacted with one voice on the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Historical controversies between Warsaw and Kyiv were put aside, and Poland fully supported Ukrainian military efforts against Russia and its Euro-Atlantic ambitions. Only small groups on

the margins of public life sided with Moscow, but their role should not be underestimated as they became a transmission belt between the Russian propaganda and Polish society.

Seen from Warsaw, the Iron Curtain has never fallen. It has moved Eastwards, and it will remain there for long time. Poland continues to convince all its partners to accept such vision of Europe and prepare the continent for what it may bring.

History and identity

Polish identity is organically connected with an idea of being a country and a nation between two empires. Two empires which through the centuries tried to expand at the expanse of what was between them. Two empires which saw the land and people between merely as an object of their actions, not an independent and causative actor. The narrative that every Pole hears during all years of formal education can be summarised with the following words: *We are in a geopolitical trap, it is not possible to be a country between Russia and Germany.*

However, it can certainly no longer be said that these two neighbours are seen the same way. Polish relation with Germany has been complicated, but recent decades of coexistence in Europe resulted in strategic partnership and incremental friendship. Poles, even in difficult times, perceived Germans as representatives of culture that builds, that is modern, and pushes things forward. Despite the turbulent and tragic history, which in common understanding starts in 972[1], continues through the struggle between Polish monarchs and the Teutonic Order, then with the division of Poland, and culminates with World War II and the Holocaust, the last 80 years (in particular, the period after the democratic transition) were constructive in bilateral relations. It took a lot of effort, good will of societies, perseverance, and foresight of elites on both sides of the Oder, but Poland sees Germany as an ally, and words of current MFA Radosław Sikorski 'I fear German power less than German

1 In the Battle of Cedynia, an army of Mieszko I of Poland defeated forces of Hodo I of Lusatia.

inaction' symbolise the transformation of the relation.

Russia is in a totally different place. Communal and living memory of Poles regarding conflicts with Russia does not reach as far in the past as in the case of Germany, but it is built upon the general idea that in the last 500 years there was not even a century without a war with the eastern neighbour[2]. In general, modern Poland build its identity on the everlasting love of freedom (noble democracy, insurrections, resistance, etc.) and strong anti-communism. In such story, Russia as an occupier and oppressor until 1989 took the place of the worst enemy.

Unlike Germany, historically the Russian state never attempted to deal with Poland in an honest and forward looking way. Moreover, Russia has never surrendered its sense of superiority vis-à-vis Poland, and had a lot of difficulty in accepting the path Poland took after 1989: independent and pro-Western.

Fantasies and opinions

This historical background and common experience of the 1990s and 2000s reflected in mutual opinions of Poles on Russians, but also and Russians on Poles. Throughout the 1990s – the decade of hope – there was a persistent positive trend in Poland: an increase in declared sympathy, and a decrease in dislike. This was especially observed, respectively in 2002, when Vladimir Putin came to Poland on an well-perceived official visit; and in 2003, when Polish-Russian relations began to deteriorate as Poland supported the Rose Revolution in Georgia[3]. Many Russian acts were seen as political and against Poland (e.g., 73% of Poles evaluated the embargo on Polish food this way)[4]. This chain of

2 The most settled in the memory are the devastating times of the partition of Poland with persecution of the nation, fights against its culture and consolidation of economic backwardness. It was followed by the experience of the World War I and the struggle of young, reborn Polish state against the communism (1919-202). Finally, Soviet attack on Poland in October 1939, described as "a knife in the back", and the mass executions of nearly 22.000 defenseless Polish officers and intelligentsia in 1944 – together with other Stalinist crimes - remain among founding myths of the modern Polish nation. More than that, stories about cruelties of the Red Army fixed the image of Russia as the outermost civilization.

3 Then other diving events followed: the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, establishment of the new national holiday to celebrate the liberation of Moscow from Polish occupation of 1612 (2005), 60th anniversary celebration of the end of World War II with overlooking the role of Poland, the initiation of the North Stream and Russian embargo on Polish food.

4 'Co myślimy o rosyjskim embargo?' (2017), Interia, 15 December, https://biznes.interia.pl/gospodarka/news-co-myslimy-o-rosyjskim-embargu,nId,3521026

events resulted with setback in relation and their perception by the society. Since 2006, there was relative lack of controversies, and in 2010, first time ever, the Polish-Russian relations reached positive numbers in CBOS survey, despite the fact Poles believed that Russia would be trying to get its influence in Central and Eastern Europe back, and does not care about full reconciliation with Poland[5].

A lot has changed in 2010, after the plane crash in Smoleńsk (*read more in the next section*). After a short warming in relations, when majority (71%) of Poles believed in *detenté* and solving of difficult issues from the past (in particular the Katyń massacre)[6], the positive feelings started quickly decreasing. The year 2014 was pivotal, as the Polish public opinion was divided almost half-half regarding the question if friendly relations with Russia were possible[7]. Later on, it went only worse. In 2012, 43% of Poles believed Russia has bad intentions toward Poland, and in 2014 this number went up to 71%.

In recent years, even the distinction between *Russia* and *Russians* has changed. Poles regard Russia as an aggressive country, an unpredictable threat. The growing public support for Putin and his agenda resulted, to the eyes of the Poles, that ordinary Russians are not a repressed society, but supporters of authoritarianism/totalitarian and aggressive agenda. Old stereotypes resurrected. Russians are personification of the 'the poor and underdeveloped *civilisationally* backward "East"'[8]. Poles see Russians are deceitful and militarist-minded, associated with increased crime and mess[9]. Currently, Poles feel closer cultural proximity with Germans than with Russians (last among all neighbours)[10].

5 CBOS (2014), Polacy o stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich i polskiej polityce wschodniej, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K_077_14.PDF

6 Katyn massacre was a mass execution of Polish military officers by the Soviet Union during World War II. It is a common name for the execution of almost 22.000 people: Polish prisoners of war in Katyn, Kharkov, Kalinin (Tver) and also other Polish prisoners, which took place in the spring of 1940 in different places of the Soviet Ukraine and Belarus republics based on the decision of the Soviet authorities.

7 CBOS (2014), id.

8 J. Załęcki (2017), 'Postawy Polaków wobec Rosjan i Ukraińców w kontekście współczesnych konfliktów politycznych', Roczniki Nauk Społecznych, 9(45), 2.

9 Id.

10 Bankier.pl (2020, September 14). Polacy uważają, że Niemcy są im bliżsi niż Rosjanie. Raport CPRDiP. https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Polacy-uwazaja-ze-Niemcy-sa-im-blizsi-niz-Rosjanie-Raport-CPRDiP-7961314.html

In the last thirty years, there were moments when Poles started to believe in the good will of Russia, and improvement of bilateral relations. These moments, however, were brief and always ended with the return to the state of distrust. Polish fantasies about the repetition of the German conciliation scenario and being treated as peers with recognition of subjectivity and respect were unfulfilled. As of 2024, 76% of Poles do not like Russians[11], 97% has negative opinion about Russia[12], and 59% believes Russia may attack NATO in next 3-8 years[13]. There is no indication these numbers could change anytime soon.

For the full picture, it is important to say that neither Russians consider Poland as a friend and partner. According to a 2020 study, a bad attitude towards Russia is attributed to Polish authorities (61%; 78% in case of Russians over 55 years old); 33% of respondents believe that Poland is a democratic country, but 26% consider Poland an authoritarian state[14]. In Russian media, Poland is very often treated as a direct representative of the West, the European Union, and NATO, which is an attempt to interfere with the international order and status quo. Poland, as a country lying on the Russia-EU line, is supposed to be deliberately obstructing Moscow's cooperation with Brussels. In the context of historical politics, the Russian message emphasises Poland's territorial claims against Ukraine, accusing it of destroying Soviet monuments. Poles and Polish rulers are often described as ungrateful, and Poland as one of the most Russophobic, xenophobic, and hostile countries[15]. After February 2022, in the Russian information space Poland was depicted as a dangerous, warmongering state, with an agenda fostering the escalation of the war

11 J. Nabiałek (2024), 'Polacy nie lubią Rosjan i Romów' Forsal, 11 March, https://forsal.pl/gospodarka/demografia/artykuly/9455352,polacy-nie-lubia-rosjan-i-romow-a-jakie-narodowosci-darza-sympatia-.html

12 B. Kicka (2024), 'Badanie mówi jasno. Polacy mają bardzo negatywny stosunek do Rosjan.', o2.pl, 4 July, https://www.o2.pl/informacje/badanie-mowi-jasno-polacy-maja-bardzo-negatywny-stosunek-do-rosjan-7045482153954016a

13 PAP (2024, May 14). Rosja zaatakuje państwa NATO? Oto co uważają Polacy. Sondaż. https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/rosja-zaatakuje-panstwa-nato-oto-co-uwazaja-polacy-sondaz

14 Additionally, most Russians (71%) believe that the two countries should develop cultural and social cooperation. Half of them believe that this cooperation should not be subject to any restrictions, as this is the best way to learn about the neighbors' perspective. The other half believes that the two countries should cooperate to a limited extent, as such cooperation could be used by Poland to the detriment of Russia's interests." - reads the summary of the entire report. Onet.pl (2020,January 17). Jak Rosjanie postrzegają Polskę i Polaków? Znaczącą rolę odgrywa różnica pokoleniowa. https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/rosjanie-na-temat-polski-i-polakow-oraz-stosunkow-rosyjsko-polskich-raport/89myl93

15 M. Tyburski (2023), 'Russian Disinformation War Against Poland After the Invasion of Ukraine', Warsaw Institute, 27 October, https://warsawinstitute.org/russian-disinformation-war-against-poland-after-the-invasion-of-ukraine/ Website of the Republic of Poland (2022, May 6). Disinformation campaign against Poland. https://www.gov.pl/web/special-services/the-lies-of-russian-propaganda

in Ukraine into World War III – by dragging NATO into conflict. Propaganda channels portrayed Poles as a nation characterised by strong Russophobia, and fascist attitudes[16],[17].

Russia and politics. Before and after Smoleńsk

Polish political parties reflect the social attitudes on Russia. It can be stated that all democratic, main stream parties have been Russia-sceptic, and currently are anti-Russian. In the past, temporarily changes in approach, embracement of a *business as usual* model in bilateral relations, and search for constructive solutions were derivates of Russian-friendly attitude and periods of Russia-optimism in the West (e.g., the American reset).

Topics related to Russia have been present in Polish election campaigns, often as a reaction on current political and economic circumstances. It is difficult to say, however, that parties had clear vision of Polish-Russian relations and a strategy on how to manage them; it was often reduced to slogans[18].

Russia became one of the fundamental topics of Polish elections campaigns after the Smoleńsk plane crash (2010). If there is one single event which influenced Polish-Russian relations the last 35 years, it would be – with no doubts – this one. It caused the death of the Polish president Lech Kaczyński and 95 others, including the First Lady of Poland, the last President-in-exile, deputy Marshals of the Polish Parliament, 18 Member of the Parliament (MPs), and commanding officers of all Polish Armed Forces. Official Polish investigation has shown that the crew was ill-equipped to safely land in difficult weather conditions. Nevertheless, according to conspiracy theories spread by

16 A. Kozłowskii et al. (2023), 'Poland as depicted in Russian Federation's official communication in the first months of the war in Ukraine', Casimir Pulaski Foundation, 24 January, https://pulaski.pl/en/poland-as-depicted-in-russian-federations-official-communication-in-the-first-months-of-the-war-in-ukraine-february-24th-july-2022-2/

17 Fake Hunter (n.d.). "They behave as if it was their territory" - the perception of the Polish people in Russian propaganda. https://fake-hunter.pap.pl/en/node/47

18 R. Lisiakiewicz (2016), 'Polityka wobec Rosji w kampaniach wyborczych głównych sił politycznych w Polsce w 2015 roku', in Kułakowska, M., Borowiec, P., Ścigaj, P. Oblicza kampanii wyborczych 2015. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. https://ruj.uj.edu.pl/server/api/core/bitstreams/789d5b18-266b-4626-ab36-adc68f3d5b32/content

leaders of the right wing populist Law and Justice party (PiS), the air disaster was actually an attack, and Putin was responsible for it. PiS used the disaster to create a martyrological political narration to polarise the society and help the party leader Jarosław Kaczyński win the election[19]. Kaczyński, who lost in the crash his twin brother, labelled Russia as its personal enemy and made Russia the key enemy of the Polish state.

The story of the 'Lech Kaczyński's assassination in Smoleńsk by Russia' became evocative and mobilised the electorate. PiS created a political semi-religion considering Russia to play the devil's part. The main prophet of this cult became former defense minister Antoni Macierewicz[20], who tried to prove against all facts and common sense that there was a TNT explosion onboard the presidential plane.[21] Kaczyński, Macierewicz, and all their associates argued that everything Putin did, he did it in cooperation with Donald Tusk, Prime Minister at the time. In the right-wing narrative, Tusk was co-responsible for the death of 95 people and should be eliminated from the political life. Although the Smoleńsk conspiracy theory was replaced by the PiS's main campaign narratives including, among others, homophobia, Germanophobia, and Euroscepticism, it still exists on the edges of the PiS universe, and won't be forgotten anytime soon by the general public. Still in 2022, Jarosław Kaczyński remained that 'Polish government of the time [of the crash] adopted a course of covering up the matter, building upon it some macabre reconciliation with Russia' adding that he has 'no doubt that it was an attack' and the 'decision must have been taken at the highest level of the Kremlin'[22].

Stance on Russia has divided Polish politics and Polish society for over a decade, being responsible for one of the most extreme polarisations observed in Europe. Both sides of the conflict use terms as *Russian*

19 M. Hodun (ed.) (2022), Beyond Flat Earth (Brussels: European Liberal Forum)

20 Read more on C. Davis (2017), 'Polish minister accused of having links with pro-Kremlin far-right groups', The Guardian, 12 July, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/12/polish-minister-accused-of-having-links-with-pro-kremlin-far-right-groups

21 Read more on A. Chapman (2019), 'The air disaster that haunts Polish politics', Politico, 10 April, https://www.politico.eu/article/the-air-disaster-that-haunts-polish-politics/

22 D. Tilles (2022), ''Kaczyński: Smolensk crash "was attack decided at highest level of Kremlin', Notes from Poland, 4 April, https://notes-frompoland.com/2022/04/04/kaczynski-smolensk-crash-was-attack-decided-at-highest-level-of-kremlin/

footcloth or Moscow's henchman as one of the most common verbal offences. This narrative is important for PiS, but Tusk's Civic Platform (PO) and its allies accuse PiS equally strongly for being Russian agents. 'PiS in its actions was a 95% pro-Russian party, and quite radically so. It introduced laws in Poland modelled on Russian laws, introduced Putin's ideas and even directly imported Russian propaganda and adopted its theses'[23], wrote Tomasz Piątek, a journalist who describes Russian influences in the Polish populist right. Piątek is convinced that the abovementioned Antoni Macierewicz is Russia's biggest asset in Polish politics.

As a result, voters are confused. 18% believes that PO pursues policies good for Russia, 27,3% believe that PiS does that[24]; 31% considers PO as the most pro-Russian party, 23% considers PiS as such, instead. Rhetorically, both parties of the current democratic government (PO-TD-Left) and PiS are anti-Russian, and prove it in the most obvious policies and political stands[25]. The problem with PiS, is that for 8 years it was destroying institutions of the state, including the army and special services, undermining democracy and social trust, weakening the EU... and all this helped Russia to make Polish society vulnerable towards Russian cognitive war[26].

Pro-Russian forces exist beyond the dichotomist conflict between the current and the previous government. Only one is represented in the Parliament, namely, the Confederation, which is not a party but a block of far-right and extreme right parties and movements[27]. MPs from Confederation have clear anti-Ukrainian agenda, and voted against supporting Ukrainian refugees in Poland[28]. The most visible example of

23 Rp.pl (2024, May 15). Tomasz Piątek: PiS to partia prorosyjska. Kierownictwo wie, co robi. To ludzie sprawni i sprytni. https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art40357231-tomasz-piatek-pis-to-partia-prorosyjska-kierownictwo-wie-co-robi-to-ludzie-sprawni-i-sprytni

24 Rp.pl (2024, May 25). Sondaż: Która polska partia prowadzi politykę korzystną z punktu widzenia Rosji? https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art40458181-sondaz-ktora-polska-partia-prowadzi-polityke-korzystna-z-punktu-widzenia-rosji

25 Compare Political Capital (2024), 'MEPs from Central Europe: A bulwark against authoritarianism.', https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article_read=1&article_id=3377

26 A. Bryc and A. Domańska (2024), 'Russia in the trenches of cognitive warfare', New Eastern Europe, 9 September, https://neweasterneurope.eu/2024/09/09/russia-in-the-trenches-of-cognitive-warfare/

27 New Hope, National Movement, Confederation of the Polish Crown, Real Europe Movement – Europa Christi.

28 J. Theus (2024), 'Konfederacja prowadzi antyukraińską narrację w Sejmie. Rząd chce przedłużenia pomocy dla uchodźców', OKO.press, 8 February, https://oko.press/na-zywo/dzien-na-zywo-najwazniejsze-informacje/rzad-chce-przedluzenia-pomocy-dla-ukraincow-kon-

pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian politicians is a newly elected MEP, known for his anti-Semitic and monarchist views, Grzegorz Braun. Braun has connections with Russian propagandists and spies[29], but there are many others[30]. For instance, MP Roman Fritz participated in the far-right conference in Prague organised by Petr Bystron, who was sponsored by Kremlin[31]. Recently, three MEPs from Confederation joined the clearly pro-Russian group in the EP, Europe of Sovereign Nations[32]. Ursula von der Leyen listed the Confederation among 'Putin's friends'.[33]

There are also marginal parties which are more openly pro-Russian. An example is the KORWiN party, named after its leader Janusz Korwin-Mikke. Korwin-Mikke is a veteran of Polish politics, former MEP and MP, excluded from Confederation for his views on paedophilia. He is known for his admiration for Putin, his visit in Crimea in 2014[34], and regular appearances in Sputnik. Self-declared pro-Putinist parties and organisations can be found only on the margins of Polish politics and public life. None of them enjoy popular support and all are commonly labelled as anti-democratic and extreme. The most well-known party is the Change, led by Mateusz Piskorski (arrested for spying). Or rather it would have been known, as the court had refused to register it. Piskorski

federacja-prowadzi-antyukrainska-narracje-w-sejmie; A. Mierzyńska (2023), 'Zobacz prawdziwą twarz Konfederacji. Wróciły antyukraińskie i antyunijne hasła', OKO.press, 12 October, https://oko.press/konfederacja-antyukrainskie-antyunijne-hasla

29 G. Rzeczkowski (2023), 'Braun i kontakty z ludźmi rosyjskiego wywiadu. "Ta działalność powinna zostać prześwietlona",.Newsweek Polska, 16 December, https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/polityka/grzegorz-braun-i-kontakty-z-ludzmi-rosyjskich-sluzb-to-trzeba-przeswietlic/rsjwl73

30 D. Sitnicka (2022), 'W imię Jego Ekscelencji Władimira Putina. Przygody Konfederacji z antyukraińską propagandą', OKO.press, 2 May, https://oko.press/w-imie-putina-przygody-konfederacji-z-antyukrainska-propaganda
D. Wantuch (2023), '"Moja postawa jest trochę prorosyjska". Kandydatka Konfederacji nie lubi uchodźców, ale lubi Putina', Wyborcza.pl, 10 October, https://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/7,44425,30279325,moja-postawa-jest-troche-prorosyjska-kandydatka-konfederacji.html
Wprost (2023, November 12). Tajemnicze wyjazdy do Rosji współpracowników Grzegorza Brauna. Za wszystko płacił Kreml. https://www.wprost.pl/kraj/11477281/tajemnicze-wyjazdy-do-rosji-wspolpracownikow-grzegorza-brauna-za-wszystko-placil-kreml.html

31 Wp.pl (2024, April 10). Wpływ Kremla w Europie. Pada polskie nazwisko. https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/wplyw-kremla-w-europie-pada-nazwisko-posla-konfederacji-7015350896929600a
Some candidates of Confederation were connected to the so called "środowiska kresowe", e.g. Lilija Moszeczkowa (EP elections 2019), who supported Russian "separatist" republics in Donbas. A. Mierzy
ska (2023), 'Gdzie naprawdę mogą być rosyjskie wpływy w Polsce? Wskazujemy 10 obszarów!', Archiwum Osiatyńskiego, 31 May, https://archiwumosiatynskiego.pl/wpis-w-debacie/gdzie-naprawde-moga-byc-rosyjskie-wplywy-w-polsce-wskazujemy-10-obszarow-lista-oko-press-cz-i/

32 J.B. Chastand (2024), 'New far-right group in EU Parliament aligns with Kremlin', Le Monde, 18 July, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/07/18/new-far-right-group-in-eu-parliament-aligns-with-kremlin_6688356_4.html

33 S. Michalopulos (2024), 'Von der Leyen launches election campaign in Athens vowing to 'fight back' Putin's EU friends', Euractive. 7 April, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/von-der-leyen-launches-election-campaign-in-athens-vowing-to-fight-back-putins-eu-friends/

34 Accompanied by Lilija Moszeczkowa who is connected with the pro-Kremlin Night Wolves bikers' club (see fn 31).

leads a pro-Russian think tank, the European Center of Geopolitical Analyses. In 2023, a new party, the Secure Poland, was created by Leszek Sykulski. Sykulski, who has links to Russian geopolitician and creator of information warfare concept Alexander Dugin, is the founder the Polish Anti-War Movement, the largest organisation advocating for the cessation of Polish support to Kyiv. He became particularly famous in 2022, when he interviewed Russian ambassador to Poland, giving him space to repeat Putin's propaganda. Sykulski wants the 'multivecor policy', 'normalization' of Polish relations with Russia and Belarus, and access to BRICS[35]. Other pro-Russian groupings are Bracia Kamraci, created by ultra-nationalistic and xenophobic pato-streamers; and the Front, launched by former PiS MPs[36]. Also political NGOs like Obóz Wielkiej Polski, Związek Słowiański, Ruch Suwerenności Narodu, or Falanga can be added to this list[37]. They are all very small and their popularity is not even measured by research institutes, but still play an important role to strengthen the influence of Russia in Poland, and are used as a platform for Russian expansion.

Propaganda and disinformation

Kremlin does a lot to be present in Poland, as well as to influence public debate and decisions taken on every level of the government. It treats Poland as a fundamental battleground in Europe, aiming at the political destabilisation of the country and at the deterioration of its position in European and international relations. The main tool used in Kremlin's hostile activities is disinformation, but also elements of hybrid warfare, which uses the illegal migration route to destabilise the NATO eastern border[38].

35 M. Mazzini (2024), 'How the Polish anti-war movements entered mainstream politics?', Balkan Insight, 1 February, https://balkaninsight.com/2024/02/01/how-the-polish-anti-war-movements-message-entered-mainstream-politics/

36 A. Mierzyńska (2023), 'Nowa partia prorosyjska w Polsce. Sykulski: tak dla Rosji, nie dla NATO', OKO.press, 6 November, https://oko.press/partia-prorosyjska-w-polsce-sykulski;
P. Gluchowski (2023), '"Putin nie ma powodów, by nas atakować, chyba że sami je damy" Sykulski, Pitoń, Braun... - kim są liderzy "ruchu antywojennego"?', Gazeta Wyborcza, 10 March, https://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,29513972,putin-nie-ma-powodow-by-nas-atakowac-chyba-ze-sami-je-damy.html

37 An influential organization with ties to Russia is Ordo Iuris. It is an ultra-catholic think tank behind recent anti-abortion, anti-LGBTQI and anti-sexuality education campaigns in Poland, with close links to PiS. They have links to Agenda Europe and Project Europe, sponsored, among others, by Russian oligarchs. They also take part in the World Congress of Families, connected to the oligarch Constantin Malofiyev. The landscape should complemented by pro-Russian media outlets, like Myśl Polska, regularly quoted by RIA, but also Sputnik Polska, xportal.pl.

Russian propaganda in Poland is tailor-made, and different from the one used in other countries of the region. Its messages are based on comprehensive analysis of the Polish infosphere, taking into account local realities of life, elements from the history, and Polish society's preferences and resentments. Polish authorities stress that Russia stepped up its ongoing, repeated propaganda and disinformation efforts that involve, among others: smearing Warsaw on the international arena; undermining Poland's relations with neighbouring countries and partners; destabilising Poland's military cooperation within NATO; stirring up hostilities between Poland and the U.S.; ridiculing and downgrading the Polish Armed Forces; labelling Poland as being steeped in anti-Russian sentiment; blaming Poland for the decline in the relations between Russia and the West. The following narratives used in Poland are listed: whitewashing Russia's past, accusing the prewar Polish government and society of anti-Semitism and collaborationism; accusing the contemporary Polish society of lack of respect for the burial sites of the Soviet soldiers[39]. Russia used also existing antivaxxer, anti-5G narratives.

Kremlin does a lot to be present in Poland, as well as to influence public debate and decisions taken on every level of the government

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion

38 Spokesman for the Minister Coordinator of Special Services (2022, August 9). A hybrid attack on Poland. Website of the Republic of Poland. https://www.gov.pl/web/special-services/a-hybrid-attack-on-poland

39 Spokesperson for Poland's Minister-Special Services Coordinator (n.d.). Disinformation against Poland in 2020 – special services' view. Website of the Republic of Poland. https://www.gov.pl/web/sluzby-specjalne/disinformation-against-poland-in-2020—special-services-view

on Ukraine, an intense Russian propaganda war against Poland in cyberspace has been waged. Thousands of social media accounts have shifted from anti-vaccine narratives to anti-Ukrainian content[40]. In 24 hours only (1-2 March 2022), Poland became an object of 120,000 disinformation attacks. Fabricated materials are created to obscure the real picture of the war, to present Kremlin as a peace-maker. In order to arouse anxiety among Poles, Russia spread the message that Poland's participation in the war is inevitable. 'Russia cares about polarisation, inflaming internal tensions, creating chaos, because a divided society is easier to manipulate. This, in turn, allows it to pursue its interests, among which we can mention, for example, strengthening the position of pro-Kremlin actors on the Polish political scene'[41], portal cyberdefense24.pl stressed. The Kremlin's information manipulation continues to affect people's perception of diverse topics, including the war in Ukraine. Surveys show that there is a higher degree of agreement with the theses of Russian propaganda (50-60%) among young people (18-34), for whom social media is mostly the main source of obtaining information about the world[42].

Poland and Ukraine

Finally, the moment of the stiffening and institutionalisation of the Polish anti-Russian sentiment arrived on 24 February 2022. When Russian troops started a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Poland was in the avant-garde of suggesting anti-Russian solutions. Polish governments, both Morawiecki's and Tusk's, supported sanctions and demanded their broadest scope possible, showed support to Ukraine's membership in NATO, and campaigned in favour of possibly strong military and economic assistance for Kyiv. Not only Poland took steps against Russian diplomats, but also symbolic actions like renaming Kaliningrad into

40 M. Zadroga (2023), 'The disinformation landscape in Poland', EU Desinfo Lab, 4 December, https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/disinformation-landscape-in-poland/

41 Polskie Radio (2024, March 4). Polacy celem rosyjskiej dezinformacji. "Rosji zależy na wywołaniu chaosu". https://www.polskieradio.pl/399/7977/artykul/3349484,polacy-celem-rosyjskiej-dezinformacji-rosji-zalezy-na-wywolaniu-chaosu

42 VoxCheck Team (2024, September 11). Russian disinformation in Poland: policy brief within Kremlin Watchers Movement project. Vox Ukraine. https://voxukraine.org/en/russian-disinformation-in-poland-policy-brief-within-kremlin-watchers-movement-project

Królewiec[43], declaring Russia as a terrorist state, and removing some of the Soviet monuments from public spaces. Poland lived its moment of a bitter-sweet glory on the international stage, as it could repeat over and over again *We told you so!*. The fact that the Polish perspective on Russia was finally listened and adopted by many partners in the West, brought satisfaction, but also hope for better preparation against the threat posed by Putin.

What is interesting, the wave of solidarity with Ukraine, symbolised by the unprecedented humanitarian intervention by Polish people in the first months after February 2022, was not something predictable – bearing in mind difficult relations between Warsaw and Kyiv. From one side, Polish elites supported Ukraine, since the country became independent in its Euro-Atlantic ambitions. For years, Poland was proudly calling itself the ambassador of Ukraine in Europe. Also on the social level, links between two countries were strong. Poland invested a lot in cultural diplomacy in Ukraine, and has influenced Ukraine's cultural and political development more than any other country besides Russia. Millions of Ukrainians found new home and employment in Poland before 2022.

A saying goes *There can be no free Poland without a free Ukraine*, nor a free Ukraine without a free Poland. The accession of Crimea

There can be no free Poland without a free Ukraine, nor a free Ukraine without a free Poland

43 D. Tilles (2023), 'Poland recommends Russia's Kaliningrad be called Królewiec', Notes from Poland, 10 May, https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/05/10/poland-recommends-russias-kaliningrad-be-called-krolewiec/

raised interest in the Giedroyć doctrine (named after Jerzy Giedroyć, the founder and editor in chief of the Polish-émigré magazine *Kultura*), present in the Polish thinking since its creation in the 1970s. The doctrine was born out of intellectuals' attempts to reconcile the strategic goal of Polish nationalism – preservation of Polish sovereignty and prevention of Russian dominance – with the desire to mend broken relations between Poland and its neighbours; it urged reconciliation among Central and Eastern European countries. In a simplified version, the doctrine states that Polish independence relies on the independence of countries between Poland and Russia, and that's why Poland must support all its Eastern neighbours. In other words, Poland's freedom depended on Ukraine's.[44] The doctrine has shaped policies of all Polish MFAs after 1989.

The main obstacle of Polish-Ukrainian relations was the historical policy: the topic of the Volhynia massacre, unknown to the general public in Ukraine, became a moot point between historians, and gave political fuel to some politicians. The Volhynian massacre consisted in anti-Polish ethnic cleansings conducted by Ukrainian nationalists from the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (UPA), which culminated in the summer of 1943. The massacres were exceptionally brutal and affected primarily women and children. The actions resulted in about 100,000 deaths[45]. Victims' associations are complaining that the exhumation of Polish victims in Volhynia is being blocked by Ukrainian authorities. For its part, Ukraine rejects use of the term 'genocide' for the massacre[46]. The topic of Volhynia occupies disproportionally too much space in the public debate in Poland, with repercussions for the whole society and official cooperation between state authorities. In Poland, right-wing leaning politicians from different parties have been using the topic to win

44 W. Konończuk (2018), 'Why Poland needs a post-Giedroyc doctrine towards Ukraine', New Eastern Europe, 22 March, https://neweasterneurope.eu/2018/03/22/poland-needs-post-giedroyc-doctrine-towards-ukraine/

45 Only 5% of Ukrainian respondents agreed that it was ethnic cleaning carried out on the orders of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army; 9% described it as "the murder of Poles carried out by some UPA units against the orders of the UPA leadership". 27% sees it as a reciprocal war between the Polish and Ukrainian underground armies that resulted in both Polish and Ukrainian civilian deaths; 9% saw it as reciprocal murder of Polish and Ukrainian peasants and 8% as an action by the Polish underground against Ukrainians, who had to defend themselves. B. Koschalka (2022), 'Three quarters of Ukrainians have a better opinion of Poles since Russian invasion', Notes from Poland, 25 March

46 Additionally, Stepan Bandera, the leader of the radical wing of the organization politically responsible for the UPA, remains a point of controversy. In Poland, he is considered the epitome of evil; in Ukraine, he is honored as a hero in the fight against the Red Army.

votes, undermining bilateral relations[47].

Leaving aside debatable history, the Russian aggression ended up uniting Poland and Ukraine. Polish support for Ukraine, and Ukrainian refugees and immigrants, were a consequence of the unification against a common enemy. Poles saw in Ukrainians themselves fighting against the force which also jeopardises their freedom. This was a common experience of the Polish which could not have been ignored by the political class. Not only PiS and the current ruling coalition (KO-TD-Left) occupied pro-Ukrainian and anti-Russian positions, but even the far-right block (with exception of some individuals) sided with them. It seems like the war in Ukraine has definitively re-confirmed almost the whole Polish political spectrum that Russia is a threat, and the place of Poland is in the West. It became evident even for right wing populists that there is no alternative for the European Union, and Poland's security and prosperity depends on the level of integration with other democratic countries on the continent and beyond.

Acknowledgement and action

From the Polish perspective, in 1989 the Iron Curtain did not fall but it moved Eastwards. The barrier between Poland and the West disappeared and two important processes started as a result of the consensus among political actors: genuine reconciliation with Germany and integration with the West. As a result of both, Poland joined NATO and the EU, and became one of the countries actively shaping the future of Europe. At the same time, the Iron Curtain changed its positions. After a decade of hope that it may disappear, it actually landed between Poland and Russia, or more generally speaking – between Russia and the EU/NATO Eastern Flank together with Ukraine.

From the Polish point of view, Russia has not taken any efforts to get the Curtain fallen. It has not committed to a serious dialogue about the past

47 Most recently, the deputy prime minister Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz (PSL) said: Let me state clearly: Ukraine will not join the European Union if the Volhynia issue is not resolved". A. Krzysztoszek (2024), 'Quarrel over WWII massacre rekindles bad blood between Poland and Ukraine', Euractive, 4 September, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/quarrel-over-wwii-massacre-rekindles-bad-blood-between-poland-and-ukraine/

and the future, it has never accepted the loss of Poland from its sphere of influence, and it has never treated Poland as a peer in international relations. Contrarily, Russia – especially when it adopted Putinism as its national idea[48] – tried to shape relations with Poland from a position of strength, built its politics vis-à-vis Poland on fear and intimidation, and played historical traumas of the Polish society. Unfortunately for the Kremlin, Poles remained true to their feelings and were not intimidated by the big neighbour. The brutal events started on 24 February 2022 led to reconciliation with Ukraine and cemented the idea that only the insurmountable Iron Curtain, on the border with Russia, guarantees Europe's security and prosperity. According to the Polish narrative, by accepting Putinism in its most violent form Russia checked out of Europe and must face its consequences.

Last two years have taught Poles that the real threat from East demands real actions: symbolic measures and manifestations of hard feelings are not enough. Acknowledging that the Iron Curtain still exists requires readiness for protection of values, and life style constitutive to the society on our side thereof. Of course, this means investments in defense, modernisation of military forces, better coordination of allies, and building resilience against new forms of aggression, e.g., hybrid war and cognitive war. But it also means investments in democracy, rule of law and human rights, fundaments of our world which differentiate us from Russia. Poland must rebuild its justice system, strengthen state institutions and free media, reform school curricula, and reflect on how to increase levels of social trust. Urgently, Poland and the whole EU must do whatever necessary to support Ukraine in its effort to stop Putin's criminal regime. Only Ukraine's success in the war can stop moving the Iron Curtain closer to Poland.

48 Read more on S. Medvedev (2023), War made in Russia (Cambridge: Polity).

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Chapter 2

Enemies for Eternity: The Czech-Russian Relationship

Šárka Shoup

Abstract: The reaction of the Czech Republic to the Ukrainian invasion reveals a double standard in attitudes towards refugees. Before the invasion, Czech-Russian relations were marked by economic ties and shared history. For the Czech Republic, the invasion generated strong initial support for Ukraine and its refugees, similar to other EU countries. However, as the conflict continues, public sentiment has shifted, mirroring past anti-refugee sentiment from the 2015 migration crisis, now exacerbated by misinformation and economic tensions. Despite early solidarity and successful integration efforts, problems persist with the attitude of Czech citizens towards foreign policy and migration.

Keywords: *Czech republic, Russia, Ukraine, migration, disinformation*

Introduction

The Czech Republic and the United States were

the first two countries to appear on the Russian List of Enemy Countries in May 2021. So what makes the Czech Republic a thorn in Vladimir Putin's side?

Czechoslovakia was the first country ever to negotiate the withdrawal of Soviet troops from its land. Czech foreign policy was strongly determined to try for a return to Europe, clearly oriented towards the European Union. Russia was perceived as a primary constituent of the turmoil in the East that will be explicated. At the time, the main proponent for the western orientation of the Czech Republic was President Václav Havel. The President was evidently pro-European and pro-Atlantic, but he never explicitly exhibited anti-Russian sentiments, only warning against them.

What are the changes that Czech-Russian relations have undergone since 1989? What are the current sentiments regarding the potential New Iron Curtain? How are Czech society and the Czech people reacting to the Russian invasion of Ukraine? And why does the Czech Republic still continue to import most of its oil from Russia? All this will be contained in the following article entitled Enmity for Eternity: Czech-Russian relationship.

Memories of malevolence

Perhaps it was also the experience of the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968, that contributed to the fact that Czechoslovakia tried to break free from the power structures of the former Eastern bloc as quickly as possible in the 1990s. Artist David Černý expressed this symbolically when, in 1991, he painted a Soviet tank pink overnight, serving as a monument to the liberation of Prague by the Red Army. This act provoked an official outcry from the Soviet government. As political geographer Michael Romancov reminds us, Czechoslovakia was the very first state that was able to negotiate the withdrawal of Soviet troops from its territory. In total, there were more than 70,000 soldiers.

Given that Russia had a multitude of internal complications in the 1990s, it was all the easier for Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic since 1993,

to pursue its own foreign political interests. The Czechs officially confirmed their return to Europe by joining NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004. Both of these steps still belong to the era of President Václav Havel, who had also perceived the integration of the Czech Republic into Western structures as further protection against any potential threats from Russia. Around the same time, however, the relationship dynamics between Russia and Central Europe began to change.

When the Czech Republic became a member of the EU in 2004, it marked a key moment of renewed Russian interest in Czechia. To Russia, it was inconceivable that the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and others were intellectually switching to *the other side*.

And at the same time, Václav Klaus becoming the Czech president was another momentous occasion in Czech history. Václav Klaus was not accepted in the West in the same way as former president Václav Havel. Klaus and the then president Miloš Zeman contributed to the fact that the Czech Republic had, to some extent, stopped perceiving Russia as a potential security risk and focused more on trade and energy cooperation. Zeman maintained his pro-Russian stance even after 2014. 'In addition to questioning Russia's participation in the war in Donbass, in addition to recommending Ukraine to recognize Crimea as Russian territory, in many other cases he opposed the prevailing Western point of view. This concerned, for example, the case surrounding the poisoning of Sergei Skripal[1] with the novichok substance, when Zeman, among other things, declared that novichok was also produced in the Czech Republic. This deepened his conflict with the Czech intelligence community'[2]. In the Vrbětice case, Zeman again declared that the explosion of the ammunition warehouse had several investigative narratives and that was the end of it. It was only the Russian invasion of

1 In March 2018, Sergei Skripal and his daughter were poisoned with the nerve agent novichok in Salisbury, leading to international allegations against the Russian Federation and a subsequent series of diplomatic expulsions and sanctions. The investigation identified two Russian citizens, allegedly GRU officers, as suspects, and Russia has denied its involvement despite likely approval of the attack. BBC News. (2018, March 6). Russian spy poisoning: What we know so far. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43315636

2 Český rozhlas. (2023, April 3). (Ne)přátelství na věčné časy: česko-ruské vztahy od roku 1989. https://cesky.radio.cz/nepratelstvi-na-vecne-casy-cesko-ruske-vztahy-od-roku-1989-8797665

Ukraine in February 2022 that made Zeman reconsider his attitude towards Russia. According to Michael Romantsov, Zeman changed his rhetoric only because he was aware that if he didn't do it, his political career would end[3].

Timeless tension: have we ever fit together?

A statue of Marshal Ivan Koněv stood on Interbrigády Square in Prague until 2020. This statue was only just built in 1980, and it was supposed to stand as a memorial to Stalin's favourite general. The hope was that when the soldiers were to go to the International Hotel, they would pass by this square, filling them with love and admiration. Despite being Stalin's favourite, he of course would never see it. So what purpose did it truly serve?

The statue itself was no marvel from an artistic or historical point of view. It was built in not in 1945 or in 1947, but during the so-called normalisation period of the 1980s. This means that even at that time it had a slightly different meaning than it might have had if it had been built just after the Second World War. Understandably, Russian historiography tries to portray the statue as a monument to the grateful citizens of Prague, having been built by the liberator Marshal Koněv. However, the reality is that it was built much too late for any real admiration. Nothing like this would ever

When the Czech Republic became a member of the EU in 2004, it marked a key moment of renewed Russian interest in Czechia

3 Id.

have been possible under Stalin, as he was afraid that the creed of his own personality might be overshadowed by others. Under Khrushchev, the Soviet Union had other priorities, and only late Brezhnevism would begin to revive the spirit of the Second World War, or the Great Patriotic War. Moreover, such monuments were built for political reasons and for intimidation. After all, this is how it worked in the times of Tsarist Russia. The Russian Empire always built an Orthodox cathedral whenever it conquered an area. But after 1945, of course, cathedrals were never built, the regime being the way it was; instead, Herculean monuments began to be erected. Something to keep in mind, is that Czechoslovakia was among the minority of countries in the post-Soviet space where nothing was named after Stalin. There were cities named after Stalin in Hungary, Poland, and Germany, but our nomenclature was corrupted only once, with Gottwald. Koněv's monument in Prague expressed the deeply intertwined past of Czechoslovakia, especially Prague, to the Soviet bloc. Even so, Koněv's monument was not removed immediately after the Velvet Revolution, but the efforts to remove it began to intensify only around 2015, i.e. shortly after Russia began to act very aggressively in eastern Ukraine. This was the defining moment where the Czech public and government needed to decide, once and for all, how they were to define themselves in relation to their convoluted history with the Soviets. From 2014 until 2020 (the year it was removed), every year was marked by increasing tensions between the two countries; every single time the statue was vandalised, after the first time in 2015, the mayor of Prague 6 began to be more and more sympathetic to the vandalisers. It reached a point where it was happening twice a year, during the times of May and August – for obvious reasons – and, eventually, despite threats from the Russian Embassy and the Russian government itself, the statue came down, alongside a street in Prague 3 named after Koněv. Some may just view this monument as a piece of metal that symbolised something that occurred in the past, that the Czech people are not justified to remove it for the sake of diplomatic tensions. But what about the threats that the Russians made, over the removal of that hunk of metal? That speaks volumes.

At the same time, a promenade named after the murdered Russian journalist Anna Politkovska was created in the nearby Stromovka Park.

Moreover, in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the street adjacent to the Russian embassy was renamed Ukrainian Heroes Street. Perhaps it was the experience of the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968, that contributed to the fact that Czechoslovakia tried to break free from the power structures of the former Eastern Bloc as soon as in the nineties. The artist David Černý expressed this symbolically in 1991, when he painted a Soviet tank pink overnight, serving as a monument to the liberation of Prague by the Red Army. This act provoked an official protest to the Soviet government, but it was in that same year that Czechoslovakia became the first country to negotiate for the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from its territory.

A key change occurred when Václav Klaus became president. In the West, he was not accepted in the same way as Václav Havel was. Klaus consciously and programmatically turned towards Russia, and this manifested in different ways. One such way, was the fact that during Putin's visit to Prague in 2006, he offered the Russian president a meeting in Russian language. At the time, Putin acknowledged this act as an honour; however, it is likely that Putin may have actually understood it as a form of submission. Even Klaus, let alone any other Czech president who also spoke to Putin in Russian – Zeman – would never be able to speak at the level of a Russian native. This unevenness in the playing field of communication, as well as giving the linguistic advantage to a foreign entity not necessarily aligned with our interests can be only called in one way: a mistake.

A few years later in 2009, negotiations took place between then Czech Foreign Minister Karl Schwarzenberg and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov. This action illustrates perfectly the way Russia envisions Central Europe. Karel Schwarzenberg spoke on how the Czech Republic, from Central Europe, have been observing happenings in Eastern Europe. Lavrov cut him off, saying that the Czech Republic is not a Central, but an Eastern Europe country. As Schwarzenberg defined it and Lavrov *corrected* it, Lavrov clarified that he did not mean it in a confrontational way, that he was only reporting on the Czech Republic as part of Eastern Europe, because that is how it is given in the nomenclature of the United Nations Organization. While it may be objectively true, it shows clearly

where the Russians are placing the Czech Republic in their global operating theatre. Unfortunately, Klaus and Zeman did everything to make this subjective definition seem like a reality from Moscow's point of view. According to Romantsov, both contributed to the fact that the Czech Republic, to some extent, stopped perceiving Russia as a potential security risk, opting instead to focus more on trade and energy cooperation. Zeman maintained his pro-Russian stance even during the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine[4].

In relation to Zeman, we can define his actions as a very specific and unusual form of pragmatism. A pragmatism that was supposed to consist in the Czech Republic using Russia as a business partner for some investments, or rather for investments by Czech companies in Russia – of which no need to be afraid. Miloš Zeman enjoyed discrediting anyone and everyone, who pointed to the danger that Russia poses; whether for the fact that Russia is becoming more and more aggressive, or that the war is not accidental and will continue. Despite these apprehensive voices of concern, the dependence that the Czech Republic had on Russian fossil resources continued to deepen. This strange, toxic addiction has deep historical roots. During the Soviet era, gas pipelines were built regardless of interests of the individual states. The Soviet Union had its totalitarian attitude, that we would all be one nation together, and that there would be no need for this energy security, or of any other form of self-reliance. If oil pipelines covered the land, so that gas from the Soviet Union could reach into Germany, why should we complain?

And so in 1997, it became possible for the Czech Republic to negotiate supplies of natural gas from Norway, which was able to cover roughly a quarter of Czech consumption. But this 20-year contract was not extended in 2017 for economic reasons, and the Czech Republic was forced to rely once again on the historically politicised purgatory of Russian gas, lasting until the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In December 2021, Russian gas accounted for 58% of imports to the Czech Republic,

4 Id.

but in the first half of 2023 this share was reduced to zero thanks to supply diversification and savings. As of July 2023, gas reserves reached a record 3,050.9 million m^3 (88% of capacity), with the Czech Republic now relying on supplies from Norway and LNG from the Netherlands and Belgium[5]. The situation of oil, however, is much more complicated.

Why has the Czech Republic continued to import the majority of its oil from Russia?

In response to the military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Europe imposed a number of sanctions on Russia, including on the import of Russian oil. Nevertheless, the Czech Republic, together with Slovakia and Hungary, negotiated an exception so that it could continue to take Russian oil through the Družba pipeline. The Czech Republic took full advantage of this, when last year the share of Russian oil in total imports was approximately 58%. Compared to 2022, the share of Russian oil paradoxically increased by two percentage points. New research from the Center for the Study of Democracy and the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air shows that the Czech Republic has spent more than five times what it spends on Ukrainian aid on Russian oil[6]. This was made possible due to a EU exemption for landlocked countries to find new oil routes that did not include Russia. The largest benefiter of this was ORLEN Unipetrol, a Polish company. The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs is defending itself by saying it cannot control the decisions of private businesses, whereas ORLEN argues that it was complying with 'all applicable domestic and international laws and regulations' and that '90 percent of the oil processed at ORLEN Group refineries comes from outside Russia'[7]. Regardless, CSD Director Martin Vladimirov affirms that the Czech Republic can certainly end this reliance on Russian oil, through its own healthy reserves and by taking advantage of the Trans-Alpine and Adria pipelines, in Italy and Slovakia, respectively. The sole

5 Ministerstvo průmyslu a obchodu České republiky (2023), Dovoz plynu do České republiky klesl v prvním pololetí roku 2023 na nulu. Zásoby zůstávají rekordní. https://www.mpo.gov.cz/cz/rozcestnik/pro-media/tiskove-zpravy/dovoz-plynu-do-ceske-republiky-klesl-v-prvnim-pololeti-roku-2023-na-nulu--zasoby-zustavaji-rekordni--275666/

6 POLITICO (2024), 'Czech industry profiting from Russian oil sanctions loophole, research reveals', 14 October, https://www.politico.eu/article/czech-industry-russia-oil-ukraine-fuel-surplus-aid-sanctions/

7 Id.

operator of the Družba pipeline in Czechia, Mero, have this as the Czech only option even in 2024. However, Mero also owns the west-to-east flowing IKL pipeline, and they claim that the situation will be changing soon[8]. This will happen due to an increase in the capacity of the Italian TAL pipeline, which is followed by the German IKL pipeline that leads into to the Czech Republic. The expansion of the capacity of this system, known as the TAL-PLUS project, is supposed to bring the Czech Republic roughly 4 million extra tons of oil per year from 2025. Thanks to this, the Czech Republic may finally get rid of dependence on Russian oil delivered via the Družba. A statement from XTB analyst Jiří Tyleček: 'After the new capacity of the TAL pipeline is put into operation in 2025, I expect that the majority of supplies will be taken over by the countries that are already supplying oil to this pipeline - that is, primarily Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, the USA, Iraq... But there are approximately twenty countries in total. So I don't think that the now dominant Russia should be replaced by another dominant player. There will be more countries with a lower share and it will depend on the market situation'[9].

While that's enough for gas and oil, we must not forget the area of nuclear energy, a sector of which the Czech Republic's infamous former president Miloš Zeman was a strong pro-Russian advocate. Zeman pushed for an extension of the Dukovany nuclear power plant that followed the Hungarian model, which become the largest ever energy deal in Central Europe, with Russia. He wanted the contract to be awarded to Russia without a tendering process, but fortunately this did not happen, as it was at this time the Vrbětice incident transpired.[10]

Vrbětice and Skripal cases

In 2014, two huge explosions at military-owned ammunition warehouses occurred in Vrbětice. These tragedies lead to the deaths of two Czech

8 Novinky.cz (2024), 'Dominantním dovozcem ropy do ČR je Rusko. Od příštího roku se to ale změní', 25 April, https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/ekonomika-dominantnim-dovozcem-ropy-do-cr-je-rusko-od-pristiho-roku-se-to-ale-zmeni-40469042

9 Id.

10 Id.

civilians, and forced the evacuation of 100 civilians in Vrbětice. After the first explosion, the area was not safely clear for 15 days. After the second explosion, double the amount of tonnes of explosives were set off, and over 400 civilians needed to be evacuated from the surrounding area. This whole incident resulted in an investigation that lasted from 2014 to April of 2024: at first, no conclusions were reached due lack of evidence, and technology for interpreting the evidence not being available. The only thing that mattered initially was the clean-up, which lasted a full six years, and costed an estimated 1 billion CZK. But it was only due to a different scandal surrounding the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, that two agents were discovered. These two men were responsible for the poisoning, and after investigation they were also found guilty of involvement with the explosion. They had been in the warehouses before, and visited them as potential arms-buyers. Eventually, the Czech authorities managed to track down some evidence, that probably led to the owner of the ammunition warehouse, who allowed the agents to carry out the attacks. It is highly likely that the explosions were related to the ongoing war in the Donbass at the time, since the ammunition stocks that were stored in Vrbětice were to be transported to Ukraine and could have been used, both in the context of the ongoing conflict in the Donbass, or shortly afterwards in the current war. Recently, the prosecution against the two agents has been postponed, as there is no current way to retrieve the men, having already escaped to Russia. To no one's surprise, Russia is not allowing their extradition to Czechia for prosecution.

The relatively hard stance that the Czech government took, contrasted strongly with the position of Zeman, president at the time, who continued to strongly support Russian views as much as he had been since he took office in 2013. In addition to questioning Russia's participation in the war in Donbass, he recommended Ukraine to recognize Crimea as Russian territory. This is only one instance of him directly contradicting the Western benefit to the delight of Russia. In the case of the Skrypal poisoning, he declared that novichok was also produced in the Czech Republic, which threw doubt onto the Russian involvement in the attempted assassination of both a British agent and his daughter. Zeman also stated that when it came to the Vrbětice

incident, he held the view that the results were inconclusive and the Russians could not be held accountable, due to lack of evidence to support one side. According to him, blaming Russia would be a result of 'hysteria' and 'speculation.'[11]

Unfortunately for the Czech Republic, the case was not over and still incurred repercussions. Three years ago, when the Czech security forces revealed that Russian secret agents of the GRU were behind the explosions in the ammunition depots in Vrbětice, the government of Andrej Babiš decided to reduce the number of diplomats at the Russian embassy. It was oversized for decades, and the intelligence services repeatedly pointed out that the Russians could conduct business or conduct covert operations from there. Since then, both countries have had seven diplomats and 25 administrative staff allowed on their territory.[12],[13] Following this event, the Czech Republic, together with the United States of America, were included in the list of countries that Russia considers as enemies.[14]

The Czech Republic and Russia hardly granted visas to each other ever since the invasion of Ukraine, so it is clear they are diplomatically and economically trying to starve each other. However, Prague is starting to lose this fight. After this summer, the Czech Republic will have only two diplomats in Moscow. 'We don't give each other visas. And we now have several people there who naturally have to replace each other after four to five years', a diplomatic source familiar with these details told Deník N.[15]

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs naturally sees this as a heavily negative attitude that Russia is exhibiting towards Czech diplomats. 'It is proof that

11 Radio Prague International (2021), 'Czech president causes outrage as he questions Russian involvement in Vrbětice explosion', 26 April, https://english.radio.cz/czech-president-causes-outrage-he-questions-russian-involvement-vrbetice-8715886

12 N. Deník (2024), 'Češi prohrávají diplomatickou hru s Ruskem. Ambasáda v Moskvě bude téměř prázdná', 30 May, https://denikn.cz/1438831/cesi-prohravaji-diplomatickou-hru-s-ruskem-ambasada-v-moskve-bude-temer-prazdna/

13 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2021), 'Czechs confirm Russian involvement in blasts at ammunition depots in 2014', 29 April, https://www.rferl.org/a/czech-police-vrbetice-blasts-russia-gru-ammunition-depots/32925105.html

14 Policie České republiky (2021), Ukončení prověřování výbuchu municních skladů ve Vrběticích, 15 December, https://www.policie.cz/clanek/ukonceni-proverovani-vybuchu-municnich-skladu-ve-vrbeticich.aspx

15 N. Deník, ibid.

the harsh approach of Czech diplomacy towards Russian imperialism is a thorn in the side of the Putin regime. It is also proof of why it is important to have an ambassador in Moscow. Any other approach would be a win for Russia', the ministry's spokeswoman Mariana Wernerová responded.[16]

Another problem is that in general, no one really is applying for jobs in Russia, and the few that apply are immediately rejected. We may be worse off than the Russians, but from September the situation started to become even worse, with only two diplomats in Moscow – one of them will be promoted to chargé d'affaires, and the current consul being the second. This can make the work at the embassy considerably more complicated.

'The bigger picture shows that Russia is putting obstacles in the way of normal diplomats, including not granting them visas. It is a reflection of the current extremely tense relations between Russia and the Czech Republic' says Michael Žantovský, the former ambassador to the USA and advisor to President Petr Pavel. 'However, the question is what the Czech diplomats will have to manage in Moscow now. At least they will have those options. A diplomat normally interacts with the government officials of the country where he works, visits various businesses, schools, local government and so on. I'm afraid that our diplomats can't do it completely freely right now' adds Žantovský[17]. In such a situation, it is extremely important to clarify the expectations placed on the embassy in Moscow, and right now that seems to be impossible.

At the beginning of May, the government recalled Ambassador Vítězslav Pivoňka. Pivoňka had not been in Moscow for more than a year, but nominally remained the head of the Czech mission in Russia. The Russian ambassador in Prague continues to remain. 'Minister Lipavský insisted that he must appeal, even though we don't have a replacement. So the government dismissed him, and now we are worse off than the Russians. We extended (at the beginning of the year) the visa for Ambassador

16 Id.

17 Id.

Zmejevski, but we are now in a weaker position' describes an unnamed source[18]. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister Petr Fiala (ODS) have long been unable to agree with the president on Pivoňek's successor, or on whether the Czech Republic should have him in Moscow as soon as possible. 'It should be noted that for such a step it is necessary to write a request to President Putin. And it would take place in parallel with the fact that we condemn the aggression led by him in Ukraine, and to a certain extent it would call into question everything that we do to support Ukraine', said President Petr Pavel[19].

Earlier this week, however, the Czech Foreign Ministry announced that Daniel Koštoval will now serve as the country's ambassador to Russia. This agreement, or Russian approval of the ambassador, has already occurred and Koštoval is slated to take office and begin his work early next year. Despite debates about whether or not the Czech Republic needed to maintain a diplomatic presence in Russia during these heightened tensions and the ongoing war in Ukraine, in March of this year president Pavel said that it was important to do so for Czech representation in Russia, as many other countries are also doing. Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský supported this idea and further cemented Czechia's western alliances, saying that 'Key countries that are strategic allies of Czechia – such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Poland, and the United States – have ambassadors in Russia. I wish the ambassador much strength in this challenging mission to advance Czech interests'[20]. The appointment of Koštoval is significant and strategic, considering his ample experience in various diplomacy and security positions and his previous postings at Czech embassies in Washington, D.C. and in Moscow. Perhaps this new chapter in Czech-Russian relations will allow for more open and diplomatic solutions to these tensions.

18 Id.

19 Id.

20 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (2024), 'New Czech Ambassador to Head to Moscow'. 15 October, https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/en/issues_and_press/press_releases/new_czech_ambassador_to_head_to_moscow.html

Czech society's double standard to the Ukrainian invasion

As of February 2022, the attitude of the Czech public towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine is relatively uniform. If you look for it, you will find political parties that will exhibited Pro-Russian rhetoric. Fortunately, these parties – namely, Svoboda and Direct Democracy – are in the minority. Overall, based on a public opinion poll, roughly 80% of people see Russia as the clear perpetrator of the invasion[21]. Support for Ukraine is still apparent and unmistakable, but a certain weariness is building. Emotions are already high, and people cannot exist in such a state like for long before tensions build. Despite most people agree that Russia invaded Ukraine unjustly, more and more demonstrations against the actions of the Czech government towards Ukraine are happening. And while it is rare to find demonstrations in support of the Russian invasion, these manifestations do not demand for a cease-fire, but rather for Czechia to stop supplying arms to Ukraine. In the eyes of the public, pulling out of Ukraine is what peace truly is; whether or not Ukraine is unjustly invaded does not seem to matter.

Another relevant topic of anti-government demonstrations are the refugees from Ukraine, of whom there are currently approximately 350,000 in the Czech Republic, while the Czech population is ten million. While in 2015 the majority of Czechs tended to sympathise to anti-refugee sentiments, in February 2022 we found ourselves in a very different situation. Support for Ukraine climbed over 90%. Two years later, disinformation groups and anti-government factions are using similar narratives to the ones in 2015: they spout xenophobic and racist ideologies, claiming that the refugees are taking our jobs, committing crimes, or that they are not really refugees because they own a cell phone.

In the hearts of the Czech people who perceive that there is a problem with the Ukrainians coming in, we find a subjective feeling of injustice. They feel like they are owed something, and like the government is giving

21 STEM (2024), 'Češi nepolevují v podpoře uprchlíků z Ukrajiny', 15 January, https://www.stem.cz/cesi-nepolevuji-v-podpore-uprchliku-z-ukrajiny/

away their rights and their tax dollars to people who are simply newcomers. It doesn't matter whether it's Rome, Syria, or Ukraine. To them, all that matters is that the newcomers are being helped, wishing that the money could be spent for them instead. Disinformation and other forms of false or misleading media play a role in spreading such sentiment, although the proliferation of pro-Russian disinformation in the Czech environment is most likely overestimated. The main goal isn't to spread lies about Russia, claiming that it is a utopia on earth, but rather to undermine trust in true media and in the democratic system in general. When we define disinformation like this, then their campaigns are unfortunately somewhat successful in the Czech Republic. [22]

Looking at the attitude of people aged 18-29, we see that while they also want a quick end to the war, they also want to support Ukraine in their attempt to regain what is rightfully theirs. This comes both from the new January data of the STEM research institute, and from long-term monitoring of trends in the area[23].

But it would be foolish to say that the entire world isn't growing tired. After more than two years of fighting, Western support for Ukraine is not as strong as it previously was, while more and more European politicians declare their reluctance to continuing it. In many cases voters appreciate this recognition. 'It is always going to be difficult for Ukraine to fight against a country so much larger than it, has more resources, and is just dishonest', says journalist Musayeva, when describing the developments in the war. 'Russia has the second largest army in the world. It's challenging'. At the very least, maybe the Ukrainian government should take a different attitude. 'If I were a politician, I would probably change my tactics and maybe even my vocabulary, and not blame the Western world. Because I know it's hard even for the Western world and Western society. I would probably be more polite compared to what our politicians said and say', she says in relation to Ukrainian officials, especially President Volodymyr Zelensky[24]. 'However, as Ukraine's goal,

22 Český rozhlas (2023), '(Ne)přátelství na věčné časy: česko-ruské vztahy od roku 1989', 3 April, https://cesky.radio.cz/nepratelstvi-na-vecne-casy-cesko-ruske-vztahy-od-roku-1989-8797665

23 STEM, ibid.

they also want to see the punishment of Russia, and want to force it to pay for all of their crimes', added Musayeva. She believes that the main goal of the entire civilised world should be nothing, except to force Russia to pay for all of the unjust and terrible atrocities that it perpetuated, and continues to carry out in Ukraine. Russia cannot be a nuclear state. It cannot be a threat to the civilized world', she explains: 'Otherwise, Russia will do the same elsewhere and anywhere. Russia must pay. For the first time in history. Russia did not pay for the deportation of the Crimean Tatars. Russia did not pay for the famine. Russia did not pay for the Prague Spring in 1968. Russia did not pay for their actions in Chechnya and many other place'[25].

Since February 2022, roughly 900,000 Ukrainian refugees have passed through into the Czech Republic. Of these, less than 400,000 have even found a temporary home[26]. In contrast, during the so-called European migration crisis of 2015, the Czech Republic accepted almost no refugees from the Near and the Middle East. Where did the resistant anti-refugee sentiment go, suddenly replaced by relative friendliness and openness? Hopefully, as the Ukrainians have stayed in Czech Republic and started to positively impact on the Czech economy, everyone will start to see that having a less rigorous migration policy, in the subsequent future.

Before February 2022, roughly 200,000 Ukrainians lived in the Czech Republic. This was one of the main reasons driving the significant amount of people fleeing from the Russian invasion to head directly to the Czech Republic. Currently, the Czech Republic counts about 360,000 people living with temporary protection provided specifically for Ukrainians, mainly women with children. This is more than just a blip, as our country only used to accepting less than 2,000 refugees per year as asylum seekers because of the restrictions in place. Of those 2,000

24 Český rozhlas, (2023), 'Rusko musí zaplatit za Ukrajinu i další zločiny, poprvé v historii zdůrazňuje', 3 April, https://plus.rozhlas.cz/rusko-musi-zaplatit-za-ukrajinu-i-dalsi-zlociny-poprve-v-historii-zduraznuje-9277007

25 Id.

26 Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky (2023), ‚V České republice je aktuálně 325 tisíc uprchlíků z Ukrajiny', 1 April, https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/v-ceske-republice-je-aktualne-325-tisic-uprchliku-z-ukrajiny.aspx

refugees, only a lucky few hundred were granted actual asylum[27].

In the first couple of months following the Russian invasion, the support and reception for fleeing Ukrainian refugees was extremely high, all in all walks of society. Following a great wave of solidarity and sympathy, we saw a manifestation of both positive attitudes and actions. Czechs have collected around 6 billion crowns among themselves since the beginning of the war. About 5 billion went to humanitarian aid and 1 billion to arms, ammunition, and defensive structure. Czech citizens did various good deeds on their own, for example, they gave computers to Ukrainian mothers with children so that they could make video calls with the fathers, forced to remain in Ukraine under various circumstances. Or a young Czech man who drove his camper to Ukraine, leaving it at the disposal of the Ukrainian army[28]. Czech society was able to quickly pull together and be supportive beyond the expectations, especially at the beginning. Czechs were able to identify with Ukrainians culturally, due to their own historical experience with the Soviet invasion in 1968. Support for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees remains relatively strong and stable in the Czech Republic, despite two years having elapsed since the start.

However, public support does not automatically imply a well-managed aid system or smooth integration of refugees from Ukraine. During the first months, non-profit-organisations (NGOs) were shouldering the majority of the work. The state's system was not ready when the Ukrainians arrived.

The main reception in Prague was at the largest railway station, and was coordinated by non-profit organisations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Prague municipality, and the fire department. Eventually, despite shortcomings the Czech Republic started out with, with the help of NGOs the state was able to ensure decent living conditions for the vast majority of refugees, and every basic need was quickly met (i.e., a

27 Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky. (n.d.). Čtvrtletní zprávy o situaci v oblasti migrace. https://www.mvcr.cz/migrace/clanek/ctvrtletni-zpravy-o-situaci-v-oblasti-migrace.aspx

28 Český rozhlas (2023), 'Dvojí metr: český přístup k uprchlíkům', 15 May, https://cesky.radio.cz/dvoji-metr-cesky-pristup-k-uprchlikum-8812381

registration system, a system of granting temporary protection permits, the payment of humanitarian benefits, the introduction of refugees into health insurance, and the entry into the labour market). At this moment, 72% of the working-abled refugees are already involved in the field of employment.[29]

Over 70% of the people already live in rented housing, and the majority of children in their compulsory school age were involved in the education stream: there was never a need to build segregated homogenous schools purely for Ukrainian children.[30]

However, the state's ongoing support is still urgently needed; in fact, it is impossible for voluntary and non-profit organisations to bear everything – as they have much less power and reach, both due to budget or manpower. Unfortunately, the state's support for Ukrainian refugees has been decreasing, ranging from humanitarian benefits to financial support for solidarity households hosting refugees. The Czech state is now upping the pressure on refugees to move into regular rental housing. According to the latest data from February 2024, up to 57% of Ukrainian refugees live below the poverty line. 'This is the main barrier that prevents successful integration', warns Marije Jelínková, an expert on migration from the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University[31]. Integration is only successful if migrants can participate in what is normal in society. When there is poverty, need to resort to food banks for children support, rentals unbearable with salaries, what can we expect from them? It becomes very hard to be truly involved in any society, which would be ideal for both ourselves and the refugees. It should be added that as a result of double-digit inflation in 2022 and 2023, the real incomes of most Czech households dropped[32], and at the same time the number of people at risk of poverty has increased throughout society: of course, all this has an effect on public attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees, as

29 Id.

30 České noviny (2024), 'Průzkum: Většina ukrajinských uprchlíků v ČR má práci a bydlení si platí sama', 15 January, https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/2479342

31 Český rozhlas (2023), 'Dvojí metr: český přístup k uprchlíkům', ibid.

32 Ministerstvo financí České republiky (2023), 'Macroeconomic forecast - April 2023', April, https://www.mfcr.cz/en/fiscal-policy/macroeconomic-analysis/macroeconomic-forecast/2023/macroeconomic-forecast-april-2023-50911

sociologist Jaromír Mazák emphasises[33]. We need to be working in a way that helps the Ukrainians, not only because of our responsibility as citizens of Czechia, but also if we want our entire culture to move away from hatred and malice in any form.

'For a small part of the Czech public, refugees are real competition, specifically in the labour market or the housing market. Due to the fact that Ukrainians often work in jobs that are relatively low-skilled and still are underqualified for them, the competition and resulting hatred is often from people who are less financially secure themselves. We see this competitive relationship turning into social conflict in the employment offices, which have themselves understaffed, and are currently at the limit of their capacities', warns journalist Apolléna Rychlíková[34]. Ukrainian refugees pay more to the Czech state budget than what is left of it. In the first three months of the year, the state collected 3 billion CZK from taxes from working refugees, while paying them 3.5 billion CZK in the background, while refugees contributed a total of 6.4 billion CZK to the state coffers.[35] When Czechs who need to be at the employment offices for a given reason (though typically housing benefits), they get the feeling that more attention is being paid towards Ukrainians. This feeling might become reality, as sometimes their housing benefits may actually be delayed.

'Back in the 1990s, Czech society's approach to refugees was very welcoming', Martin Rozumka recalls[36]. The Czech political representation and most of the public were ready to help. At that time, no one cared whether they were Christians or Muslims. We see the example of helping refugees from the Balkans, as that reception did not arouse any major sort of problems. In 2015, the Syrian crisis changed everything: because politicians discovered some issues, they began to play the xenophobic chord, and this scared a large amount of citizens. While

33 Český rozhlas (2023), 'Dvojí metr: český přístup k uprchlíkům', 15 May, ibid.

34 Český rozhlas (2023), 'Dvojí metr: český přístup k uprchlíkům', 15 May, ibid.

35 Česká televize. (2024), 'Ukrajinští uprchlíci do státní kasy přispějí víc, než kolik z ní dostanou', 15 January, https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/clanek/domaci/ukrajinsti-uprchlici-do-statni-kasy-prispeji-vic-nez-kolik-z-ni-dostanou-348443

36 Český rozhlas (2023), 'Dvojí metr: český přístup k uprchlíkům', 15 May, ibid.

these politicians were only looking for continued support, they came in as saviours to those citizens fighting back the migrants. This led to an unnecessary amount of detainment, and border patrol. Apparently, all the populus needed to change their vote to certain politicians, was for the latter to scream the word migration! in our faces.

The Czech reaction to the so-called European migration crisis around 2015 was very intense. Apolléna Rychlíková emphasizes that the media also contributed significantly to the distorted image of refugees. 'Back then, in 2015-2016, we were used to newspaper headlines with a giant photo of a black-skinned person with an angry look on a daily basis. Actually, it doesn't matter where the photo came from, it may have been from a photo bank, for example from the war in the Congo. It just had nothing to do with refugees'. According to migration expert Marija Jelínková, the media portrayed migrants as hordes standing in front of Europe's borders. And right away there was a label of danger that completely exceeded the need to protect someone fleeing war[37]. The arrival of refugees was presented in the media as more of a security and administrative problem, rather than a human rights issue. Related to this, the refugees themselves and their stories received very little space in the Czech media, in contrast to security experts and politicians. Milan Chovanec, Minister of the Interior for the ČSSD at the time, spoke often on the subject of asylum and migration. He took a very hard stance towards asylum seekers and was also a strong opponent of mandatory quotas for the redistribution of refugees within the European Union. 'There is a difference between a refugee and an economic migrant, and there is a difference in the concept of whether you want to comply with European law or not. I am convinced that 95% of the Czech population is ready to provide support to a mother with three children who is fleeing the war in order to protect her for a short time', said Chovanec in 2017[38].

Since 2015, anti-refugee voices have glaringly prevailed in the Czech public space. In such conditions, it is no easy feat to publicly speak out in

37 Český rozhlas (2023), 'Dvojí metr: český přístup k uprchlíkům', 15 May, ibid.

38 Český rozhlas (2023), 'Dvojí metr: český přístup k uprchlíkům', 15 May, ibid.

support of the acceptance of refugees, and draw attention to violations. Not many speakers had the courage and boldness to mention those who needed help, and even less people had the courage to enter the political fray to create something worthwhile. As a result, new policies are unfairly prejudiced against newcomers.

Many migrants became disgusted with the Czech Republic because of the great contempt experienced, and stated they would prefer to leave the country again. At that time, the Czech Republic was unable to fulfil even basic international agreements and regularly decided not to respect them. From today's point of view, this is unimaginable for Ukrainian refugees. The current Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, one of the greatest supporters of Ukraine and of the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees, once (and in 2015) had a completely different attitude to the issue of asylum and migration, Apolléna Rychlíková reports. Today he might not like to hear it, but as former chairman of the ODS and leader of the largest opposition party, he went to Hungary to visit Viktor Orbán, walking together near barbed wire – and he wasn't alone.[39] It was not a question of some extreme right wing, instead it was the entire democratic system (including the democratic left and the radical left) that jumped on this anti-refugee narrative. This split society into a conservative and liberal battle. To this day, this division is a certain type of dividing line, both in society and in politics, and there is little being done to change this.

Current Geopolitical Relations with the Rest of Europe

It has been made abundantly clear that the Czech Republic and Russia do not have strong ties at the moment. The same can be said for the European Union's relationship with Russia. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, known collectively as the Baltic States, have joined Poland in sharing concerns about their borders with Russia and Belarus. They have urged the EU to help establish a defensive line given their vulnerability, but reaching consensus among all member states is bound to be complicated, especially with states such as Germany being so anti-

39 Český rozhlas (2023), 'Dvojí metr: český přístup k uprchlíkům', 15 May, ibid.

provocation and escalation. This sentiment is also shared by the NATO superpower of the United States. Therefore, these countries have begun securing their borders, amplifying military defense and becoming more energy independent on their own[40]. Finland's buildup and upkeep of its own military and extensive artillery supply is also a crucial player, given its border with Russia further north. These states are the leaders in the percentage of GDP spent on aid to Ukraine, which the Czech Republic has strongly supported, especially through supplying artillery shells and humanitarian support. However, fellow EU member Hungary has not taken part in this support at all, maintaining a strong pro-Russian stance, even allowing workers from Russia and Belarus into the Schengen area without proper screening via its new National Card. As this conflict continues, the Czech Republic is all but certainly allying with the Baltic-Polish-Nordic bloc, with additional support from Romania, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. All of these countries are bound together by their strong anti-Russian views, but a course of action is exceedingly difficult to determine given the divisions within Europe that impact the EU and NATO so heavily. The pro-Russia bloc of Hungary and Slovakia, and possible indirect compliance from Germany and France, could prove to

Conclusion

The Czech Republic has undoubtedly experienced a wave of solidarity towards Ukrainian refugees that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This motion of support was certainly fuelled by the shared historical experience, which for the Czechs is the Soviet aggression in 1968, inextricably linking the two of them. Over time, however, it can be observed that due to ongoing economic pressures and active disinformation campaigns, Czech citizens have become sceptical of refugees. The spread of disinformation, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, has generally contributed to the polarisation of the population, which significantly complicates not only the integration of refugees in the Czech Republic and undermines trust in democratic

40 Stefan Hedlund (2024), 'Geopolitical Intelligence Services', Europe's new Iron Curtain, 17 September, https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/new-iron-curtain/

institutions and media, but also affects the broader public perception of the war in Ukraine and other foreign policy. It is understandable that misleading narratives contribute to public dissatisfaction, especially in the face of economic challenges.

However, it remains uncertain whether, under internal pressure, the Czech government will reconsider its stance towards the aggressor. It is more likely that the government will continue to maintain its position as a reliable partner within the EU and NATO, and will continue to fulfil its commitments to support Ukraine. Nonetheless, it is evident that internal pressure is creating a dilemma. As of September, the number of diplomats at the Czech embassy in Russia is expected to be reduced to nearly a minimum. Additionally, while the Russian ambassador remained in Prague, the Czech Republic is slated to send a new ambassador to Moscow early next year after the position being vacant since May of this year. Therefore, these two countries are experiencing a significant diplomatic rift, and it is likely that this will continue to be the case in various spheres in the near future.

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Chapter 3

Finland and the Fear of Spheres of Influence

Mikko Majander

Abstract: Not surprisingly, the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 also marked a turning point in Finnish-Russian relations. Such an unprovoked attack immediately evoked memories of the Winter War of 1939-1940, when the Finns had to face the numerically superior Soviet Red Army. Even the images and propaganda produced by Putin's machinery sounded very familiar to Finnish ears from Stalin's time. Throughout history, the area that is now Finland has been a geopolitical frontier. Western and Eastern civilisations have clashed and continue to do so. Moreover, Russia's behaviour towards its neighbours in other parts of the world makes Finns wonder and worry whether something similar could happen on their long border.

Keywords: *Finnish-Russian relations, Finnish geopolitical frontier*

Throughout history, the area that forms today's Finland has been, in geopolitical terms, a borderland. Western and eastern civilisations

have clashed there, and they still do[1]. Furthermore, Russia's behaviour elsewhere towards its neighbours makes the Finns wonder and worry whether something similar could happen at their long border.

Throughout history, the area that forms today's Finland has been, in geopolitical terms, a borderland

Against this background, it is no surprise that the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed also for Finnish–Russian relations. Such an unprovoked attack raised immediately reminiscences of the Winter War of 1939–1940 in which the Finns had to face the Soviet Red Army, superior in numbers. Even the set ups and propaganda Putin's machinery produced, sounded very familiar to Finnish ears from Stalin's times[2].

Both military operations proved counterproductive to Moscow's objectives in Finland. In 1941, the Finnish armed forces joined the German attack to Soviet Russia with an aim to conquer back the territories lost in the Winter War. In 2022–2023 Finland joined NATO, thus expanding the military alliance eastward to the Russian border, producing the result that Putin expressly had tried to prohibit.

However, Finland's geopolitical position up in the north has not been without advantages when compared to Central and Eastern Europe south of the Gulf of Finland. Already the tsars saw it appropriate to treat the Finns leniently

1 S. Huntington (1996), The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (New York: Simon & Schuster).

2 'Ukraine war boosts interest in Finnish history', YLE News, 1 April 2022, https://yle.fi/a/3-12384347. On similarities, see also M. Majander (2022), 'Soitellen sotaan 1939 ja 2022', Kanava, 50(3), 42–44.

while the Poles were rebelling against the Russian empire in the nineteenth century[3].

In the Second World War, the Finnish front was a sideshow. In late summer of 1944, Stalin decided to conclude peace with Finland without forcing capitulation while at the same time he let Hitler's army destroy the Polish uprising and level Warsaw. It was more important for the Red Army to rush towards Berlin, not Helsinki. After the war, the Soviet Union could be satisfied with a minimum of its security demands in the north-western corner of its borders[4].

Expanding the view from strategy and security, Finland's geopolitical position in-between has also opened possibilities for progress and prosperity. While holding on to western culture and identity in economy, the Finns have taken advantage of their access to eastern markets, for example, first creating and later modernising their industry.

The other side of the coin is that the great successes and upheavals in Russia have always affected in some way also Finland. It did so when the two emperors Alexander I and Napoleon agreed in 1807 in Tilsit, as well as when Stalin beat Hitler, not to speak about the disintegration of the empire in 1917–1920 and 1989–1991. Putin's war in Ukraine is just the most recent challenge in a long history.

Russian Ruler on Helsinki Senate Square

In the heart of Helsinki, on Senate Square between the Government Palace, the main building of the university, and the Cathedral, stands a statue of Emperor Alexander II. The tourists visiting the city often wonder how it is possible that a Russian tsar occupies such a place on Finland's main political scene.

A look around in the surrounding districts makes one notice that, actually, the historic centre of Helsinki, built in the nineteenth century, looks like a small Saint Petersburg. Something that the American movie

3 J. Paasivirta (1981), Finland and Europe: International Crises in the Period of Autonomy, 1808–1914 (London: Hurst).

4 K. Rentola (2023), How Finland Survived Stalin: From Winter War to Cold War (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).

makers – from Warren Beatty's 'Reds' (1981) to Michael Apted's 'Gorky Park' (1983) – took advantage of during the Cold War, when filming in Leningrad or Moscow was beyond possibilities[5].

Russia had conquered Finnish lands in a war against Sweden in 1808–1809. The easiest way to incorporate the new territory to the vast empire was to make it a separate political unit, the Grand Duchy of Finland, without compromising the autocratic rule. The tsars made Helsinki the capital and wanted it to look worthy of their might[6].

For the Finns, even more important than monumental buildings was that the Finnish society could hold on to its old cultural traditions, such as the Lutheran church and legal customs, deeply rooted during the centuries as part of the Swedish kingdom. Furthermore, the nation building of Finland was given huge boost as the new Grand Duchy got state institutions of its own, from the Senate and legislative assembly to central bureaucracies and customs services[7].

Paradoxically, Finnish nationalism, also in the form of use and development of Finnish language, was encouraged under the Russian rule in the hope to distance Finland from

Finnish nationalism, also in the form of use and development of Finnish language, was encouraged under the Russian rule in the hope to distance Finland from Sweden

5 O. Heiskanen (2008), Tehtävä Suomessa: Kotimaamme ulkomaisissa elokuvissa (Helsinki: Teos); S. Paasonen (2015), 'Heavy skies and a cold Soviet feel: Helsinki as a Cold War cinematic body double', Journal of Scandinavian Cinema, 5(1), 5–18.

6 See Paasivirta, id.; M. Klinge (2012), Pääkaupunki: Helsinki ja Suomen valtio 1808–1863 (Helsinki: Otava).

7 O. Jussila (1999), 'Finland as a Grand Duchy, 1809–1917', in From Grand Duchy to a Modern State: A Political History of Finland since 1809 (London: Hurst); more profoundly in Finnish see his Suomen suuriruhtinaskunta 1809–1917 (2004), (Helsinki WSOY).

Sweden. At the same time, the organising process and modernisation of the new nation and its civil society proceeded more along (progressive) Scandinavian models than (backward) Russian ways[8].

The development of an autonomous Finland was bound to clash, sooner or later, with the imperial perspectives of Saint Petersburg, which lied just across the border. And it did at the change of the century[9]. But even after the independent Republic of Finland was established in 1917–1919, the good tsar Alexander II (1818–1881) was allowed to hold his head high on Senate Square.

Eastern outpost of western civilisation

In front of the command headquarters of the Finnish Defence Forces, Kasarmi Square lies just a couple of blocks south of Senate Square. In November 2017, a new monument was unveiled there, the National Memorial to the Winter War. The statue illustrates an unknown soldier, still standing even though his body is shattered by multiple holes. Or, in the words of President of the Republic Sauli Niinistö at the unveiling ceremony: 'The work reflects the single person as an agent of something much larger than one individual – the future of a whole nation, which had to be redeemed with the highest of sacrifices'[10].

The Winter War against an unprovoked invasion by Stalin's Soviet Union is Finland's holy war[11], but it was not by any means the first war with Russia on Finnish lands – and not even the last. Thus, the Kasarmi Square memorial can be associated to much longer history that dates back centuries, even before Finland had become a nation.

The idea of Russia as an archenemy emerged as propaganda in the Swedish Kingdom, when the two powers clashed while spreading their

8 M. Majander (2004), Pohjoismaa vai kansandemokratia? Sosiaalidemokraatit, kommunistit ja Suomen kansainvälinen asema 1944–51 (Helsinki: SKS), 49–50.

9 T. Polvinen (1995), Imperial Borderland: Bobrikov and the Attempted Russification of Finland, 1898–1904 (London: Hurst).

10 'National Memorial to the Winter War', Finnish Government press release, 30 November 2017, https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/1410845/talvisodalle-kansallinen-muistomerk-1.

11 Of the vast literature on the Winter War, see for example O. Vehviläinen (2002), Finland in the Second World War: Between Germany and Russia (Basingstoke: Palgrave); L. Clerc (2015), La Guerre Finno-Soviétique (novembre 1939-mars 1940) (Paris: Economica).

spheres of influence around the Baltic world. Finnish lands were often battlefields[12], and the long occupations by the Russian armies in the eighteenth century also left harsh marks to the collective mentality of the Finns. Memories of murder, pillage, rape, even kidnappings and slavery lived in oral traditions among common people as well as in emerging written histories[13].

On the other hand, realpolitik in the changing power balance proved that declining Sweden was unable to defend Finnish lands militarily in the long run. A new modus vivendi had to be sought and it was found in the rather favourable form as a Grand Duchy described above, developing peacefully under the imperial security umbrella of Russia.

Despite the loyal attitude to the Grand Duke (i.e., the Tsar) the Finns were not willing to adopt Russian ways that represented foreign identity. This determination was manifested in a widespread opposition to some imperial measures that Russia started to adopt at the turn of the century without the consent of the Finnish Diet. A new idea emerged, or a new formulation of an old latent one, in which Finland was seen as the eastern outpost defending western civilisation[14].

Anti-Russian sentiment got an extra ideological layer with the Bolshevik revolution that inspired the Finnish labour movement to try to follow suit. The Finnish Reds were defeated, but the bloody Civil War of 1918 legitimised a White hegemony in which negative attitudes and stereotypes further fermented into open hatred toward an Asiatic and barbaric neighbour. Soviet communism represented existential threat, politically and militarily, as well as culturally[15].

12 D. Harrison (2023), Fienden: Sveriges relation till Ryssland från vikingatiden till idag (Stockholm: Ordfront).

13 K. Vilkuna (2005), Viha: Perikato, katkeruus ja kertomus isostavihasta (Helsinki: SKS), with an extensive summary 'The Great Wrath', 562–589.

14 K. Katajala (2014), 'Finland – the Last Outpost of Western Civilization? Explaining the Myth and Metaphor', Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte, 27(2), 299–309.

15 O. Karemaa (1998), Vihollisia, vainoojia, syöpäläisiä: Venäläisviha Suomessa 1917–1923 (Helsinki: SHS), with an English summary 'Foes, Fiends, and Vermin: Ethnic Hatred of Russians in Finland 1917–1923'.

Descending 'iron curtain'

Thousands of Finnish Reds fled to Soviet Russia for political reasons, in the aftermath of the Civil War and later, mainly in search of better living when the capitalist West suffered global depression. Many of them suffered a tragic fate in the latter half of the 1930s, if they had survived that long. Alone in Stalin's Great Terror of 1937–1938 circa 10,000 Finns were convicted, over 75% of them to death penalty: an ethnic cleansing almost comparable to the fate of the Poles[16].

There was also traffic in the opposite direction. After the revolution, thousands of Russians took refuge in Finland, or rather via Finland, as most of them continued further toward a more cosmopolitan Europe. The biggest wave of these emigrants, over 6,000 officers and marines, arrived across the frozen Gulf of Finland within a day after the rebellion in the naval fortress Kronstad, in front of Petrograd (former Saint Petersburg and future Leningrad), failed in March 1921[17].

Principally, the border became controlled and closed, sealed tighter year after year. This was the time when the iron curtain descended, separating Finland and Soviet Russia.

Paradoxically, from one perspective it can be argued that the Bolsheviks saved Finland. According to an old joke, it is better to have a long borderline with Russia than no border at all. Without a revolution, a capitalist Saint Petersburg could have integrated a great share of the Finns to its dependency with a sheer dynamic appeal. Large parts of eastern Finland gravitated towards the Russian capital that consumed their agricultural and other goods.

Demand of labour in a world class metropolis was immense compared to small Finnish towns. At the turn of the century, over 20,000 Finns lived

16 I. Takala (2011), 'The Great Purge', Journal of Finnish Studies, 15(1&2), 147–161; A. Mainio (2024), 'Suomalaiset Stalinin vainoissa: Kriittinen katsaus kuoleman kirjanpitoon', in M. Kaihovirta et al. (eds.), Työväki ja Neuvostoliiton vuosisata (Helsinki: Työväen historian ja perinteen tutkimuksen seura). – Exact figures are hard to establish and they also depend on who are counted as a 'Finn'. The absolute number of Polish victims is roughly ten times bigger. Cf. T. Snyder (2010), Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin (New York: Basic Books), Chapter 3, 'National terror'.

17 P. Nevalainen (1999), Viskoi kuin Luoja kerjäläistä: Venäjän pakolaiset Suomessa 1917–1939 (Helsinki: SKS).

and worked in Saint Petersburg: Russian empire provided tempting career opportunities, especially in the armed forces. During the Grand Duchy era, around 4,000 Finns served as officers in the imperial army and navy, and over 300 of them rose to the rank of General.[18]

Russian markets were also vital for Finnish industries that were late to develop. The imperial customs policies favoured the Grand Duchy to its western rivals, so that around the year 1910, of all imports of paper the 95% came from Finland. Furthermore, the outbreak of the Great War meant, at first, a great boom for the Finnish production capacity that tried to satisfy the increasing demands of Russia's war effort – with rising prices and satisfying profits.

The collapse of imperial Russia and revolutions of 1917 put an end to all this. However, luckily the European reconstruction after the Great War caused a great demand for timber and forestry products, Finland's main export items. Even the paper manufacturers succeeded in making an incredible U-turn from eastern to western markets, from Saint Petersburg to London, whereas trade with the Soviet Union remained marginal throughout the 1920s and 1930s[19].

Cold War compromises

'From the Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent', Britain's wartime leader Winston Churchill declared in his famous speech in Fulton in March 1946[20]. The prophetic phrase left open Finland's geopolitical position and political fate. How would the demarcation line between East and West be drawn in the area north of Stettin?[21]

The question had been the same when Nazi Germany lured the Soviet Union into a pact in August 1939. Hitler's Foreign Minister, Joachim von

18 M. Engman (2004), Pietarinsuomalaiset (Helsinki: WSOY).

19 M. Kuisma (2015), Venäjä ja Suomen talous (Helsinki: Siltala).

20 Churchill's 'Iron Curtain Speech', 5 March 1946, https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-si-news-of-peace/; of the context, see, for example, R. Jenkins (2001), Churchill (London: Macmillan), 809–813.

21 See Rentola, How Finland Survived Stalin.

Ribbentrop, assured Moscow 'that there is no question between the Baltic and the Black Sea which cannot be settled to the complete satisfaction of both countries'. In the secret protocol that followed between the two, Finland fell quite naturally into the Soviet sphere[22]. Small states are small change in great power gamble.

At that stage, Germany had no complaints but political constellations were soon in a state of flux. One year after Stalin had burned his fingers in the Winter War, Hitler was no longer willing to commit to the spheres of influence deal in Europe. He was already moving German troops through Finland and looking for allies for Wehrmacht's invasion to east, as well as on the (now important) northern flank[23].

Churchill's Fulton address is often regarded as one of the signposts from the Second World War to the Cold War. Less often, it is quoted that in the very same speech he acknowledged 'the Russian need to be secure on her western frontiers by the removal of all possibility of German aggression.' In Finland, this was marked by the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance that was concluded with the Soviet Union in 1948.

However, this did not integrate Finland into the Eastern bloc: although the country clearly lied militarily in the Soviet sphere of influence throughout the Cold War, the FCMA Treaty did not oblige joint exercises, planning, or other cooperation between the Finnish and the Soviet armed forces. Furthermore, the Finns managed to lead a policy of neutrality of their own kind in European and international affairs[24].

Politically, Finland took notice of Moscow's interests but held on to the multi-party democratic system of western type. The Finnish society developed according to Scandinavian models in achieving a well-functioning welfare state as the fifth member in the Nordic family. At the

22 S. Kotkin (2017), Stalin. Vol. II: Waiting for Hitler, 1928–1941 (London: Allen Lane), 654–667.

23 I. Kershaw (2000), Hitler, 1936–45: Nemesis (London: Allen Lane), 332–335; Kotkin, id., 799–821.

24 M. Kramer et al. (eds.) (2021), The Soviet Union and Cold War Neutrality and Nonalignment in Europe (Lanham: Lexington Books), especially articles by Johanna Rainio-Niemi, Kimmo Rentola & Kari Möttölä.

same time, it may be argued that the iron curtain was nowhere as transparent as on Finland's – carefully guarded – eastern border.[25]

The Finns managed to make a virtue out of necessity, not totally unlike the Grand Duchy era. After the heavy war, reparations to the Soviets trade relations to east were cherished in a way that clearly aided Finnish economy and industries. Before the breakthrough of West Germany's Ostpolitik in the 1970s, little Finland was the Soviet Union's most important trading partner among the Western nations[26].

In a bipolar world order, the Finns could boost that they were getting the best from both sides. Critics were not that enthusiastic and accused the country of Finlandisation, meaning adaptation (too much or unnecessarily far) to Soviet views and interests. Basically, Finland was paying its oil bill and other economic benefits by following and embracing Moscow in other fields.[27]

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989–1991 can be compared to the crash of imperial Russia in many ways – a new 1917, all over again. Finland felt freer to breath and to make political decisions without foreign constraints, but a part of Finnish industries lost a major share of their export markets. This was one of the causes that led the country into a severe depression, the worst since the early 1930s.

Towards normal interaction

After the Cold War, when Estonia regained its independence, lively connections were quickly established between Helsinki and Tallinn. While cruises to Stockholm had traditionally been popular leisure of the Finns suddenly tens of ferries took millions of people across the Gulf of Finland each year. The two capitals were often referred as twin cities.[28]

25 See H. Meinander (2020), A History of Finland, Revised and updated edition (London: Hurst), Chapter 8 'Welfare and Neutrality'.

26 P. Sutela (2014), Trading with the Soviet Union: The Finnish Experience 1944–1991 (Helsinki: Kikimora); I. Hirvensalo & P. Sutela (2017), Rahat pois bolševikeilta: Suomen kauppa Neuvostoliiton kanssa (Helsinki: Siltala), especially 205–209.

27 For example, T. Forsberg & M. Pesu (2016), 'The 'Finlandisation' of Finland: The Ideal Type, the Historical Model, and the Lessons Learnt', Diplomacy & Statecraft, 27(3), 473–495.

28 See R. Mokka et al. (2009), Talsinki / Hellinna (Tallinn: Demos Helsinki), https://demoshelsinki.fi/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Talsinki-Hellinna_FIN.pdf.

With iron curtains torn down, one could dream that, in a future peaceful and integrating world, it would become easy and natural to take a train from the Helsinki railway station to Saint Petersburg. A world class metropolis with its cultural attractions was expected to rise back to its international bloom. Increasing interaction with Russia would enrich everyday life on both sides of the border.

Important infrastructure was built to aid this development. The high-speed train service Allegro started to operate in December 2010 three times a day in each direction, reducing the travel time between Helsinki and Saint Petersburg to three and a half hours. Multiple entry visas made contacts significantly faster and easier compared to the old Soviet times. A new motorway to the border was opened in 2018, easing the rapidly grown transitory traffic from Finnish ports to Russian markets.

Nouveau riche Russians were welcomed customers, in the luxury stores of the Helsinki city centre as well as in the holiday resorts in Eastern Finland, that tends to struggle economically in comparison to the western parts of the country. For their part, the Finns living closer to the border learned to save money by filling gas tanks with cheap petrol on the Russian side.

After the disorders of the 1990s, the Russian economy was stabilised to such an extent that Finnish companies began to see promising prospects in the east, again. When the new ambassador arrived in Moscow in 2000, he was surprised to learn that the oligarchs and business elites formed his most important contact network – not the Foreign Ministry. Investments were made on many different levels[29].

As stated in an academic book on the Janus-faced nature of the Finnish-Russian relationship, the relations were better than ever before. Politically, there were no problems: trade flourished, cultural contacts were lively, and friendship between people seemed genuine; a historical break with troubled past seemed obvious. Finland had finally reached

29 R. Nyberg (2019), Patriarkkoja ja oligarkkeja (Helsinki: Siltala), 221.

normal relationship with its eastern neighbour, claimed the same author of the book ten years later, in 2013[30].

During the Cold War, the energy sector – oil, gas, and nuclear – had provided prime fuel for cooperation between two states with different political systems, and it seemed rather natural to continue on this basis despite the worsening signals of the nature of Putin's rule. A new nuclear power plant was still planned in Finland, together with Rosatom, long after Russia had taken over the Crimean Peninsula[31].

Imperial nostalgies?

Russian immigrants do not represent a new phenomenon in Finland, but the size of their community has traditionally remained small. Since the early 1990s, the number of Russian speakers living in Finland has increased from under 4,000 to over 93,000 (2022) and they form the largest language group in the country after Finnish and Swedish, the official national languages.

Proportionally, Russian speakers represent less than 2% out of a population of over 5.5 million. However, Putin's Russia performs eagerly as a protector of all Russian expatriates and uses false news about their bad treatment in its propaganda. This kind of hybrid warfare has also been conducted against Finland[32]. On the other hand, 6,000 persons moved from Russia to Finland in 2022 – by far, the biggest number in three decades.

The modest presence makes it difficult to argue that Finland would somehow belong to the Russian world (Russkiy mir). An eccentric populist politician, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, raised only few eyebrows in the

30 T. Vihavainen (ed.) (2004), Venäjän kahdet kasvot: Venäjä-kuva suomalaisen identiteetin rakennuskivenä (Helsinki: Edita), 440–443; T. Vihavainen (2013), Ryssäviha: Venäjän-pelon historia (Helsinki: Minerva), 14.

31 H.-M. Husu & M. Kojo (2022), 'Ja Rosatom on varmasti erittäin hyvä toimija myös Fennovoimalle', Politiikasta, https://politiikasta.fi/ja-rosatom-on-varmasti-erittain-hyva-toimija-myos-fennovoimalle-kuinka-kansanedustajat-perustelivat-venalaista-ydinvoimakytkosta/.

32 B. Renz & H. Smith (eds.) (2016), After 'hybrid warfare', what next? – Understanding and responding to contemporary Russia (Publications of the Government's analysis, assessment and research activities), https://helda.helsinki.fi/server/api/core/bitstreams/873e92fc-c475-4bc2-8bdf-a23e43f43fac/content; R. Nyberg (2018), 'Hybrid Operations and the Importance of Resilience: Lessons from Recent Finnish History', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2018/02/hybrid-operations-and-the-importance-of-resilience-lessons-from-recent-finnish-history?lang=en.

1990s when he spoke about regaining the pre-1917 Russian empire. According to his later outbursts, Lenin's recognition of independent Finland was 'illegal'. Zhirinovsky also considered a mistake the fact that the Soviet Union did not occupy the whole Finland in the Winter War[33].

In a state of the nation address in 2005, Putin already called the collapse of the Soviet empire 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century', a genuine tragedy as tens of millions of fellow countrymen found themselves beyond Russia's borders. Ukraine is obviously the principal case in his analysis, but beneath there is also a clear nostalgy for the pre-1917 empire. Putin has defended Russia's aggressive actions as a need to correct Lenin's historical mistakes[34].

Can independent Finland be considered as one of those mistakes? As the centenary of independence was approaching, Putin reminded of Russia's role in aiding and accepting that sovereignty – as if it depended on Moscow's good will[35]. After all, in 1917, the Bolsheviks were the only ones in Russia to promote national sovereignty for the Finns; moreover, Lenin's Council of People's Commissars were the first foreign government to formally recognise the independence of Finland[36].

According to a former aid, Putin considered he had the right (if not the duty) to protect areas that once belonged to his predecessors, including Finland. When and in which form, that depended on circumstances[37]. On top of that, the Finnish Institute of International Affairs pointed out that the celebrations commemorating the centenary of Finland's independence could provide opportunities for Russian actors to question that sovereignty, by suggesting that it was a personal 'gift' by Lenin[38].

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33 'Suomi palautettava Venäjälle', Ilta-Sanomat, 7 October 2015, https://www.is.fi/ulkomaat/art-2000001014765.html & 'Zhirinovski hyökkää taas', Ilta-Sanomat, 19 September 2020, https://www.is.fi/ulkomaat/art-2000006641995.html.

34 V. Putin (2021), 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', President of Russia, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181; 'Vladimir Putin accuses Lenin of placing a 'time bomb' under Russia', The Guardian, 25 January 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/25/vladmir-putin-accuses-lenin-of-placing-a-time-bomb-under-russia.

35 Press conference of presidents Niinistö and Putin, 1 July 2016, https://www.ruutu.fi/video/2671121.

36 See J. Paasivirta (1989), Finland and Europe: The early years of independence, 1917–1939 (Helsinki: SHS).

37 'Putin vill även återta Finland', Svenska Dagbladet, 29 March 2014, https://www.svd.se/a/b2f4c6af-6f74-3e4f-8b00-88ae4c083a76/putin-vill-aven-aterta-finland.

38 T. Martikainen et al. (2016), Neighbouring an unpredictable Russia: Implication for Finland (Helsinki: FIIA), 16, https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/ffpp05_neighbouring_an_unpredictable_russia.pdf & Venäjän muuttuva rooli Suomen lähialueilla (Helsinki: Val-

EU and NATO as anchors of security

The fear of great power spheres of influence is deeply rooted in the Finnish soul structure. The infamous Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939 left the Finns to face alone the Red Army invasion three months later[39]. During the Cold War, Finland had to manage (again) the Soviet power and pressure mainly on a bilateral basis. Fortunately, this time political means proved to be enough.

Finland's immediate reaction to the collapse of the Soviet Union was to terminate the FCMA Treaty and to seek membership in the European Union. A sovereign nation used the right to choose its own company, and after a referendum in 1994 the Finns joined the EU without any reservations. The era of a vague position, a grey area, between East and West was over[40].

Militarily, there was no similar rush into NATO. On one hand, Finland did not want to identify itself with countries of the former communist bloc in Eastern Europe, but rather with Sweden, that was committed to continue its non-alignment[41]. On the other hand, with lessons of long history in mind, Finland held on to its well-equipped defense forces, based on conscription and a large reserve of manpower, and military capabilities were increased by bilateral cooperation with Western powers.

Moreover, Finland always emphasised, also in official documents, that it could seek to become a member of NATO if circumstances so required. And that was exactly what happened when, first in December 2021, Putin tried to deny that right: only two months later, Russia invaded the neighbouring Ukraine. Now, both the Finnish public opinion and political leadership oriented rapidly towards NATO[42].

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tioneuvoston kanslia), https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/loppuraportti_venajan_muuttuva_rooli.pdf, 62.

39 Kotkin, Stalin, Chapter 12 'Smashed Pig'; Rentola, How Finland Survived Stalin, Chapter I 'The Winter War 1939–40'.

40 T. Tiilikainen (1998), Europe and Finland: Defining the Political Identity of Finland in Western Europe (London: Routledge).

41 For example, T. Forsberg (2023), 'Four rounds of the Finnish NATO debate', Nordic Review of International Studies, 1, 41–50, https://nris.journal.fi/article/view/125327.

42 On Finland's entry into NATO, see L. Nurmi (2023), Suomen salattu tie Natoon (Helsinki: Into); R. Uimonen (2023), Sauli Niinistö – Suomalaisten presidentti (Helsinki: WSOY); M. Strömberg & T. Nilsson (2024), Högt över havet: Så övergav Sverige alliansfriheten (Stockholm: Bonnier).

In a bold phone call made to Putin, the message of President Niinistö was: 'You caused this, look at the mirror'. Putin, for his part, stressed that 'rejecting the traditional policy of military neutrality would be wrong since there are no threats to Finland's security. Such a change in the country's foreign policy course could have a negative effect on Russia–Finland relations'[43]. If that was a threat, it was to no avail: Finland sent in its application in May 2022, and subsequently became a full member of NATO in April 2023.

Frontline state

Undoubtedly, Putin's Russia considers Finland as an enemy territory, just like Stalin did in the 1920s and 1930s – culminating in the preventative Winter War and its sequel, the so-called Continuation War of 1941–1944. Already back then, the geopolitical strategists of the Tsar were worried that a great power enemy could attack and push towards Saint Petersburg passing through Finland.

The escalation from the Ukrainian invasion to a direct military conflict between Russia and NATO draws many scary scenarios. Finland is a frontline state in a very concrete way, as its over 1,300-kilometre-long eastern border covers more than half of NATO's total border land with Russia.

Under a geo-strategical standpoint, Finland could be regarded as the 'fourth Baltic state', a position with which the Finns have felt uneasy, as they would rather see themselves in the same context with the Scandinavian countries[44] – and NATO seems to respect that wish. Together with other Nordics, Finland will be placed under the Joint Force Command Norfolk, based in the USA, while the Baltics remain under the Brunssum headquarters in the Netherlands.

The traditional view of Russia as a centuries-old archenemy dominates

43 'Look in the mirror', Niinistö tells Russia…', YLE News, 11 May 2022, https://yle.fi/a/3-12441348; Putin's telephone conversation with Niinistö, 14 May 2024, https://india.mid.ru/en/news/russian_president_vladimir_putin_s_telephone_conversation_with_president_of_finland_sauli_niinist/.

44 See Majander, Pohjoismaa vai kansandemokratia?, ibid.

again the Finnish mental retrospective. 'The mask has now come off', Niinistö described on the first day of the Russian attack to Ukraine, 'and only the cold face of war is visible'.[45] The benefits of peaceful coexistence and cooperation are suddenly a distant memory.

Finnish companies have cut their losses and withdrawn from Russian markets. The national airline Finnair provides no longer the shortest and fastest gateway from Europe to Asia, as Russia's airspace is closed also for its services; the Allegro train does not run anymore, and the motorway towards east is empty of traffic. The loss of Russian tourists has given another blow to Eastern Finland.

After 15 years of planning, the ill-fated joint nuclear plant project reached rapidly a dead end[46]. On their side, Russia cut all the electricity supplies to Finland; but those losses have been covered by increasing domestic power production. Alternate suppliers have also been found for nuclear fuel that Russia has provided for already existing Finnish reactors. Only the import of a few raw material items, such as nickel and fertilisers that are not on the EU embargo list, continues[47].

All in all, bilateral trade between Finland and Russia has ceased almost completely. For the Finnish economy, on one hand the side-effect of today's shock has been more limited than the one of the post-Soviet collapse of early 1990s; on the other hand, it does not ease Finland's prolonged economic agony, in a situation in which rising expenditures on defense and security, as well as aid to Ukraine, strain the state budget.

Closed border

The border crossing points between Finland and Russia has been closed when Russia started to facilitate instrumentalised migration by pushing third-country nationals without a visa to seek refuge in Finland[48]. The

45 'Putin's mask comes off…', YLE News, 24 February 2022, https://yle.fi/a/3-12332089.

46 'Fennovoima pulls the plug on Russian-built nuclear plant', YLE News, 2 May 2022, https://yle.fi/a/3-12425648.

47 H. Simola (2024), 'The collapse of trade with Russia has had limited effect on Finnish manufacturing', Bank of Finland Bulletin, 5 July 2024, https://www.bofbulletin.fi/en/2024/3/the-collapse-of-trade-with-russia-has-had-a-limited-effect-on-finnish-manufacturing/.

48 'Finland Does Not Plan to Reopen Its Eastern Border With Russia', Schengen News, 5 August 2024, https://schengen.news/finland-

fallen new iron curtain hurts other groups, too: for example, Russian expatriates living and working in Finland cannot visit their families and friends on the other side. The lack of human interaction has deeper cultural dimensions also on the Finnish side: Finland had to concede the Karelian Isthmus with its historical centre, city of Vyborg, twice to Soviet Russia in the peace treaties of the Second World War (1940, 1944). The entire population was evacuated and settled to other parts of the country, but the idea of Karelia remained dear in many families and to an extent for the whole nation.

Besides for some activist circles, the disintegration of the Soviet Union did not raise serious demands regarding Karelia. Even more important than the pipe dreams of shifting the border, was that in the post-Cold War decades people could develop living grassroot contacts and civil cooperation across the border. For those involved, now it feels like Vyborg has been lost for the third time[49]. Of course, this is a marginal group of people, but somehow the case reflects wider sentiments that the Finns feel towards Russia. There is no denying that in Finland there exists certain mistrust and even aversion, that Putin has indirectly fostered with his ruthless policies. But beneath expressed anger lies silent sadness about missed opportunities. There could be so much to gain on both sides if stable normal relations were maintained and encouraged between the two countries.

For the time being, such a future seems very far away. From the perspective of Helsinki, an ad hoc night at the Mariinsky Opera in Saint Petersburg is out of reach and sight. But as long as Tsar Alexander II can stand undisturbed on Helsinki Senate Square, there is hope for mutual respect and understanding.

does-not-plan-to-reopen-its-eastern-border-with-russia-pm-says/.

49 'Ukrainan sota on nostanut evakoiden muistot pintaan', Maailman Kuvalehti, 29 August 2022, https://maailmankuvalehti.fi/2022/3/pitkat/ukrainan-sota-on-nostanut-evakoiden-muistot-pintaan-moni-kokee-etta-karjala-on-menetetty-nyt-kolmannen-kerran/.

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Chapter 4

Unveiling the New Iron Curtain: Russian Influence in the Western Balkans and Its Impact on State Relations Post-Yugoslav Wars

Jasmina Ibrahimpašić

Abstract: The collapse of Yugoslavia in the last decade of the 20th century marked the beginning of a turbulent era in the Western Balkans which was characterized by ethnic clashes, political instability and intervention of the international community. As the dust settled from the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, a new geopolitical landscape emerged, with Russia seeing an opportunity to assert its influence in the region, therefore, leading to the formation of a modern-day Iron Curtain. For

the past 30 years, the accession process toward the European Union (EU) and NATO has been a central theme in the post-Yugoslav era by reflecting aspirations for stability, economic growth and security. At the same time, Russian interference has complicated the efforts toward joining EU and NATO as Russian involvement in the Western Balkans over the past few years keeps manifesting through political alliances, economic investments and strategic partnerships. The Western Balkans accession process toward the EU has been stagnant, until the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

Keywords: *Western Balkans, EU-NATO Balkan partnership, Russian interference*

Introduction

The collapse of Yugoslavia in the last decade of the twentieth century marked the beginning of a turbulent era in the Western Balkans, characterised by ethnic clashes, political instability, and intervention of the international community. As the dust settled from the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, a new geopolitical landscape emerged, with Russia seeing an opportunity to assert its influence in the region, therefore, leading to the formation of a modern-day Iron Curtain.

For the past 30 years, the accession process toward the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been a central theme in the post-Yugoslav era by reflecting aspirations for stability, economic growth, and security. At the same time, Russian interference has complicated the efforts toward joining the EU and NATO, as the Russian involvement in the Western Balkans over the past few years keeps manifesting through political alliances, economic investments, and strategic partnerships. As certain political parties and leaders in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to have a close relationship with Russia, Western powers have raised concerns regarding the region's democratic stability and alignment with Euro-Atlantic institutions.

The Western Balkans' accession process toward the EU and NATO has been stagnant until the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. However, these countries joined in a historic turn when Ukraine and Moldova became candidates in June 2022, pushing Bosnia and Herzegovina forward, who also earned the status of candidate on 15 December 2022. Although there is a feasible movement toward Euro-Atlantic integration, the process itself remains with one main obstacle – that is, the Russian influence, posing a significant challenge to regional stability and the formation of a new Iron Curtain.

Historical ties between Russia and the Western Balkans

Looking at the history of the Western Balkans and the power dynamics that shifted throughout history between big empires, one can observe and understand the origins of Russia's interest in the Western Balkans. In this sense, the region has always been a crossroad between big powers such as the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires between 1878 and 1918, Germany and Italy during the Second World War, and most recently British, US and EU interests (Loshaj, 2024)[1].

Therefore, Russia's involvement in the Western Balkans is not a new phenomenon. Dating back to the nineteenth century, Russia has viewed the region as a part of its sphere of influence, largely due to religious and historical ties. When nationalist uprisings escalated in the Balkans in 1875 and Serbia and Montenegro failed to liberate themselves from the Ottoman Empire, 'the Russians decided to settle the situation themselves through war against the Turks in 1877-1878'[2]. Coming as a winner out of this war, Russia proposed the Treaty of San Stefano in 1877, in which it advocated for a strong Bulgaria and Serbia.

With this treaty, Russia also tried to solve The Eastern Question, aiming to create a Southeastern Europe under Russian and Slavic domination[3,4].

1 J. Loshaj (2024), 'Between Continuity and Change: Russian Influence and Security Challenges in the Western Balkans Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Kosovo. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kosovo/20922-20240122.pdf

2 K. A. Shafer (1989), The Congress of Berlin of 1878: Its Origins and Consequences, p. 2 https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.5811

3 A. Makalesi. & E. Özkan (2022), 'Avrupa Araştırmaları Dergisi', The Journal of Southeastern European Studies Güney-Doğu Avrupa Araştırmaları Dergisi -The Journal of Southeastern European Studies, 38, 63–86. https://doi.org/10.26650/gaad.1144714

This frightened Austria, as it saw Russia as a potential 'force of Slavic palingenesis in the Slavic minorities of Austro-Hungary that could fragment the empire in a wave of nationalistic unrest'[5]. However, as Berlin, Vienna, and London were concerned about Russia's intentions in the Balkans and the potential rising power over the region, this was reflected at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, with Russia only obtaining small territorial gains in Bessarabia[6],[7]. However, these historical relations between Russia and the region are 'heavily mythologised'[8], as there are only small and brief periods of alliances between these two sides with much longer periods of dry-up contact.

Dating back to the nineteenth century, Russia has viewed the region as a part of its sphere of influence, largely due to religious and historical ties

The Western Balkans: A Post-Yugoslav Geopolitical Context

The Western Balkans is a geopolitical term introduced in the early 2000s by the governing bodies of the EU to refer to six countries in South-Eastern Europe, which were not EU members or candidates at the time, but were (and are) covered by the EU enlargement policy[9],[10]. Initially, this region referred to

4 K. A. Shafer (1989), ibid.

5 A. Makalesi & E. Özkan (2022), ibid.

6 M. Mutschlechner (2014), 'The Congress of Berlin and the division of the Balkans', Der Erste Weltkrieg, 7 June, https://ww1.habsburger.net/en/chapters/congress-berlin-and-division-balkans

7 Shafer, K. A. (1989), ibid.

8 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry (2023), 'Little substance, considerable impact Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro', The Netherlands Institute of International Relations "Clingendael", p. 9, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/little-substance-considerable-impact.pdf

9 M. Dabrowski, and Y. Myachenkova (2018), 'The Western Balkans on the road to the European Union', Policy Contribution, (online) (4), pp.1–23. https://euagenda.eu/upload/publications/untitled-133335-ea.pdf.

10 B. Stanicek and A. Caprile (2023), 'Russia and the Western Balkans', https://www.euro-

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. However, Croatia has joined the EU in 2013. Most of these countries were a part of one-country Yugoslavia, together with Slovenia. Albania represented an exception, which was under the leadership of Enver Hoxha until he died in 1985[11].

The Fragmentation of Yugoslavia

The breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s was a canon event for all Western Balkans countries. With Josip Broz Tito's death on 4 May 1980, Yugoslavia's downfall started to snowball. Before the end of 1980, Yugoslavia 'had already slid into the most serious economic, political, and social-psychological crisis of its existence'[12]. At the time, the entirety of Europe was struggling with maintaining economic problems, but the Eastern Block, including Yugoslavia, was the most devastated by the economic crisis as the socialist values could not survive the economic crisis.

Soon enough, the republics started developing different views and ideas on approaching the economic crisis. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) demanded the implementation of more restrictive monetary, finance and foreign trade policies as a leverage to approve more loans to Yugoslavia. However, the decentralisation phase of the 1970s provided the republics' governments and banks with considerable competencies. Therefore, by abiding by the IMF's demands, the republics would be 'handing back greater control to the central government over the expenditures and revenue of the republics and establishing a more unified and centralized economic policy'[13]. This pushed wealthier republics to seek even more authority to protect their industries, culminating in 1985 when they blocked the passage of three laws designated to regulate exports.

parl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf

11 S. Gužvica (2023), 'Albania's Resistance Movement Achieved a Unique Victory in the Struggle Against Nazism', Jacobin, 17 November, https://jacobin.com/2023/11/albania-resistance-movement-socialism-communist-party-enver-hoxha-nazism

12 Calic, M. J. (2019), A History of Yugoslavia (Purdue University Press), p. 252

13 Id., p. 253

On the other hand, many people in Yugoslavia started to resent Tito for not grooming a designated political heir. However, many years before Tito's death it was speculated that his position as the leader of Yugoslavia would be taken by a prominent Yugoslavian politician, Džemal Bijedić. Unfortunately, Džemal Bijedić died in an aeroplane crash on a mountain near Kreševo, Bosnia and Herzegovina[14]. Therefore, when Tito died, the leadership did not pass to one single replacement, but to 'an eight-member presidency, comprising one representative from each of the six republics, and one from each of Serbia's two autonomous provinces, Vojvodina and Kosovo'[15]. The problem with this system was the fact that it changed annually, according to an agreed schedule that would allow each republic and province to lead the country. While intending to ensure that no one had full control over Yugoslavia, this system brought the opposite effect – chaos emerged, soon enough the divisions that Tito kept suppressed started to re-emerge, and new political parties based on nationality were formed.

The emergence of nationalism

In 1981, Franjo Tuđman released his book Nationalism in Contemporary Europe in New York[16]. Due to its publishing and to further interviews with Swedish and German televisions and with the French Radio (where he spoke about Croatia's inequality, the persecution of dissident intellectuals, and the exaggeration of the Jasenovac victims), he was sentenced to three years in prison which was later lowered to two years of imprisonment[17,18]. On 21 August 1983, the so-called Sarajevo process was held before the High District Court in Sarajevo against thirteen Bosniak intellectuals who were tried for crimes against the people and the state[19]. This process went down in history as one of the last major

14 D. Kaminić (2018), 'Umro je Džemal Bijedić, noć kada Tito nije mogao zaspati', N1, 18 January, https://n1info.ba/vijesti/a238486-godisnjica-smrti-dzemala-bijedica/

15 L. Silber and A. Little (1997), Yugoslavia, (Penguin Books), p. 29

16 M. Ćosić (2020), 'Franjo Tuđman i problemi objavljivanja knjige Nacionalno pitanje u suvremenoj Europi', Journal of Contemporary History, 52(3), 759–789. https://doi.org/10.22586/csp.v52i3.11064

17 B Herić (2023), 'Kako je Tito spasio Tuđmana višegodišnje robije: Ne pakujte Franji', Klix.ba, 21 May, https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/regija/kako-je-tito-spasio-tudjmana-visegodisnje-robije-ne-pakujte-franji/230516072

18 L. Silber and A. Little (1997), ibid.

19 A. Džunuzović (2021), 'Sarajevski process 1983. godine bio je priprema za Agresiju na BiH, Stav, 21 August, https://stav.ba/vijest/sarajevski-process-1983-godine-bio-je-priprema-za-agresiju-na-bih/3964

political persecutions in Yugoslavia on the ideological basis: the prosecution claimed that the defendants were spreading propaganda in favour of establishing an Islamic state on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and maintaining contact with certain foreign organizations[20],[21].

As people started to doubt the values, institutions, and the overall functionality of the political system, the younger population of Yugoslavia started rethinking Yugoslav socialism and the very essence of Yugoslavism. By the end of the 1980s, fundamental social values like equality, solidarity, and self-sacrifice disintegrated together with the base of secular belief in progress. In 1974, sociologists reported a gradual increase in people who practiced religion and, by the mid-1980s, it was reported that younger generations were more religious. The rediscovery of religion had reactivated faith as a fundamental element for the formation of identity. Soon enough, 'each of the religious communities worked actively to glorify its own nation as being sacred'[22].

In this context, the Catholic Church started working on re-establishing the place of religion in the national politics of Croatia by reassociating the church with the nation. However, this also brought up the ill-fated alliance between the Catholic Church, Franciscans, and the Ustasha regime from the Second World War when horrific atrocities took place against Serbs.

Similarly, in Serbia the Orthodox Church saw these developments as an opportunity to honour and commemorate the Serb victims of Croat fascism. Besides that, the Orthodox Church tried to attract more believers back to church by displaying relics of the Serbian czar Stefan Dušan across Belgrade and celebrating Vidovdan as the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo[23]. Through this process, the all-encompassing

20 M. J. Calic (2019), A History of Yugoslavia (Purdue University Press).

21 . Dž (2023), 'The Sarajevo Process and today's BiH: Implications of the Event for an independent State', Sarajevo Times, 22 November, https://sarajevotimes.com/the-sarajevo-process-and-todays-bih-implications-of-the-event-for-an-independent-state/

22 M. J. Calic, ibid., p. 269

23 Id.

theme was the unification and assertion of the Serb nation which will play a determining role in the Yugoslav wars. As early as 1972, it was reported that the Yugoslavian regime was concerned about the fact that a vision of Great Serbia was being idealised, that the Serbs in Croatia were being instrumentalised for this purpose, and that the Ustasha's crimes from the Second World War were being used as propaganda for such idea.

When it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Islamic theologians and politicians also seized the opportunities which were presented to them at the end of the 1980s, and they started establishing closer ties between religion and national identity. As the ideals of the old regime were dying out, nationalism started spreading like wildfire through all nations within Yugoslavia; soon enough, it became evident that nationalism proved itself to be an effective tool in transforming the secular identities of people back into their respective religious affirmation. Therefore, when the late 1980s came around, all sides already 'applied semantics of religious symbolism quite successfully to mobilize support from their respective ethnic community for nationalist aims'[24].

The domino effect from the dissolution of the Soviet Union

After the Second World War, Josip Broz Tito kept a close relationship with Stalin and the Soviet Union. However, this relationship did not last and it broke after less than two years after the end of the war. The first obstacle to the relationship between Tito and Stalin was Greece, where Tito had territorial ambitions – his ultimate goal was to establish a Balkan federation that would include Bulgaria, Albania, and possibly Greece together with Yugoslavia[25]. On the other hand, Stalin feared that such action would cause deeper strife between the United States and the Soviet Union. The second obstacle that tarnished the relationship was the amendments to the Yugoslavian constitution, which replaced the central control (distinctive of the Soviet Union) with a more decentralised control.

24 Id., p. 272

25 Id.

The final straw that broke the relationship between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union was the Marshall Plan: Tito was eager to apply for the proposed financial aid, and this would go against Stalin's orders; in fact, the latter considered the Marshall Plan as a way for the West to meddle in the politics of the country. But, as Yugoslavia got expelled from the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in 1949, it found itself alone in the communist world and soon enough the country started to economically struggle. Tito did not wait long and asked for financial aid from the United States of America, receiving 50 million USD as a part of the Yugoslav relief program[26].

Thanks to these developments, Yugoslavia found itself between two major global powers – the NATO on the West and the Warsaw Pact on the East. The fallout with the Soviet Union also posed a threat to the country as 'Belgrade feared an invasion, especially in light of the periodic border incidents with Hungary and Romania'[27]. This threat proved itself to be a cohesive element that kept Yugoslavia together, for as long as the Cold War was going on between the Soviet Union and the United States; but as soon as the dissolution of the Soviet Union occurred at the end of 1991, the downfall of Yugoslavia started to accelerating rapidly, and the country stopped being seen as a middleman between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

The beginning of the end of Yugoslavia

The year 1989 is marked as the beginning of the end of Yugoslavia. The crisis within the country reached an unprecedented and dramatic climax, which was influenced by the collapse of other communist regimes in Eastern Europe. In May 1989, Slobodan Milošević became the president of Serbia and, in July of the same year, he pushed a proposal for constitutional reform in Yugoslavia introducing the qualified majority decision-making instead of the principle of consensus at the federal level[28]. Later in September, the Slovenian Parliament went into the

26 The Marshall Plan: Design, Accomplishments, and Significance name redacted Specialist in Foreign Affairs (2018), https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20180118_R45079_1ac1da1f67d80fba262ea260914c9148ba55f87a.pdf

27 M. J. Calic, ibid., p. 181

process of amending their national constitution and added the right to self-determination and secession.

The League of Communists of Yugoslavia met for the last time in January 1990 for its fourteenth extraordinary congress[29]. However, it dissolved due to poisoned relations and irreconcilable differences between Serbia on one side, and Croatia and Slovenia on the other[30]. Pretty soon, the people of Yugoslavia stopped considering themselves as Yugoslavians but started identifying as Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, and Bosniaks.

By 1990, Yugoslavia's political leadership decided to hold elections in each country. However, this backfired as political parties started organising around ethnic identities of people and not political programs. Shortly after, many people started believing that 'only their own national party would represent them well in difficult times'[31]. In this context, Slobodan Milošević organised a new political party, the Socialist Party of Serbia, which campaigned for greater rights for Serbs but supported the continuation of Yugoslavia. He was supported by the Serb Democratic Party based in Bosnia and Herzegovina, led by Radovan Karadžić. On the other side, Croats organised themselves around the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose members promoted Croat separatism, while the Party of Democratic Action promoted the interests of Bosnian Muslims.

As the election of 1990 ended, Bosnia and Herzegovina proved to be in the most difficult situation as on its territory there lived three main ethnicities who voted for their respective political parties. These parties took the majority of seats in the elections which were held in November and December – the Muslim Party of Democratic Action (SDA) with 87 seats, the Serbian Democratic Party (SPS) with 71, and the Croatian HDZ-BiH with 44 mandates[32],[33].

28 Id.

29 Id.

30 L. Silber and A. Little, ibid.

31 M. J. Calic, ibid., p. 286

32 Id.

The Yugoslav wars

Both Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence from Yugoslavia on 25 June 1991[34]. At the time, the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) was responsible for internal security in Yugoslavia; it covered the whole nation and was based on the principle of providing equal protection to all the people of Yugoslavia. However, in reality, the JNA's units were overrepresented with Serbs, and many of them 'saw the prospect of Croatia's independence as a threat to both their „Titoist Yugoslav" and Serbian identity'[35]. After Slovenia declared independence, the JNA occupied the border posts as a response to Slovenians trying to establish an international border with Croatia[36]. This war was famous as the Ten-Day War, and Slovenia emerged out of it relatively unscathed. Croatia managed to achieve the same objective as Slovenia but with much more effort[37].

The third war was the attempt by the Serbs in Croatian Krajina to join their lands with Serbia[38] when the president of the Serb Democratic Party in Croatia, Milan Babić proclaimed the formation of the Republic of Serb Krajina with its capital in town Knin[39]. The fourth and the bloodiest war happened on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 until 1995, when the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed.

Russia's geopolitical ambitions in the post-Yugoslav space

The Yugoslav wars of the 1990s were indirectly influenced by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and coincided with a period of geopolitical weakness for Russia. However, as Russia started rising globally under Vladimir Putin, the Western Balkans emerged as a valuable front for examining its foreign policy. While the region is working on

33 L. Silber and A. Little, ibid.

34 R. H. Ullman (1996), The world and Yugoslavia's wars, Council On Foreign Relations.

35 V. Vujačić (2015), Nationalism, Myth, and the State in Russia and Serbia : Antecedents of the Dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (Cambridge University Press)

36 M. J. Calic, ibid.

37 R. H. Ullman, ibid.

38 R. H. Ullman, ibid.

39 M. J. Calic, ibid.

harmonising its political systems with the EU's system and bilateral relations between each other in hopes of joining the EU someday, Russia has been periodically trying to assert its presence in the Western Balkans.

Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the Clingendael Report from August 2023 found that the Russia's interests in the Western Balkans are threefold: a) projecting great power status globally; b) obstructing the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and keeping the West out of the region where possible; and c) utilising the Balkans as a tool in its foreign policies[40]. Other reports have observed similar objectives of Russia in the region, with small variations of the last objective in the sense that Russia has the desire to protect its economic interests and those of its elites[41]. 'Moscow is driven by geopolitics'[42], therefore, the geographical position of the Western Balkans plays a crucial role for Russia which sees the region as a leverage regarding the West.

In achieving its previous glory, Russia has been playing the religion card by exploiting 'the popular sentiment that it enjoys among the Christian Orthodox population in the region to strengthen relations with local political and cultural actors, governments, and businesses'[43]. Consequently, when it comes to the Western Balkans region, Russia has maintained a close relationship with Serbia and Bosnian Serb leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina[44]. Apart from this, Russia has been trying to attract countries through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which was successful in 2019 when Serbia signed a Free Trade Agreement[45]. Although Russia is aware that with the EAEU it cannot compete against the EU, Russia uses such tools for its political interests, and Serbia relies heavily on these to keep its balancing act between receiving benefits

40 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.

41 B. Stanicek and A. Caprile, ibid.

42 D. Bechev (2019), 'Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans [Review of Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans]', Atlantic Council, 20 December, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russia-strategic-interests-and-tools-of-influence-in-the-western-balkans/

43 J. Loshaj (2024), 'Between Continuity and Change: Russian Influence and Security Challenges in the Western Balkans Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Kosovo, p. 10. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kosovo/20922-20240122.pdf

44 N. Walker and S. Fella (2024), 'Security in the Western Balkans', House of Commons Library, 20 October, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2024-0089/

45 M. Stojanović (2019), 'Serbia Signs Trade Deal With Russia's Eurasian Union', Balkan Insight, 25 October, https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/25/serbia-signs-trade-deal-with-russias-eurasian-union/

from both the EU and Russia.

Political Alliances and Support for Pro-Russian Leaders

Russia has over the last two decades built strong political ties with certain leaders and political parties in the Western Balkans, but mainly in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is because there is a significant number of Orthodox communities in these three countries, and Russia is revolving its political narratives around traditional values and pan-Slavism, while exploiting the religious bond[46]. It is important to point out that 'there are sizable Orthodox communities in the Western Balkans (Serbia 88%, Montenegro 72%, North Macedonia 65%, Bosnia and Herzegovina 31%)' and many people identify their national identity with religion[47].

Keeping in mind the above-mentioned fact, there are strong differences between these three countries when it comes to political relations with Russia. In this sense, Russian-Serbian relations resemble more of a historical and brotherhood-like relationship, while Montenegro has been on Russia's list of non-friendly states since Montenegro joined NATO[48]. Bosnia and Herzegovina's relations with Russia are a little bit more peculiar – namely, state-level relations with Russia are fairly limited, but the main engagement with Russia happens on the entity level since Republika Srpska harbours a close relationship with Russia[49].

Similar differences can be observed in the responses and actions of these three countries after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To be specific, all three countries condemned Russian aggression in a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) vote in March 2022[50], but their follow-up actions have differed. In case of Montenegro, the country's relations have

46 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.

47 S. Secrieru (2019), RUSSIA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS Tactical wins, strategic setbacks, p. 5, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russa%20WB_0.pdf

48 NATO (2017), 'Montenegro joins NATO as 29th Ally', North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 5 June, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_144647.htm?selectedLocale=en

49 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.

50 United Nations (2022), 'General Assembly Overwhelmingly Adopts Resolution Demanding Russian Federation Immediately End Illegal Use of Force in Ukraine, Withdraw All Troops | UN Press', Press.un.org., 2 March, https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12407.doc.htm

been deteriorating since 2014 when Montenegro fully aligned with EU sanctions on Russia[51],[52]. In the case of Serbia, the country has been playing a so-called staged balancing act, trying to maintain a good relationship both with the West and Russia, and in doing so it has resisted calls from the EU to impose sanctions on Russia[53],[54]. While Bosnia and Herzegovina has condemned the Russian invasion, it has failed to impose sanctions due to the resistance coming from the entity of Republika Srpska and its leader Milorad Dodik[55],[56]. On the state level of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serb Ministers in the Council of Ministers 'blocked a decision to apply sanctions and deny Russia and Belarus access to funds from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)'[57].

Russia's economic investments and energy dependence

When we talk about economic investments in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro, unquestionably, the EU outperforms Russia[58]. It can be observed that international sanctions over Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 have affected Russia's economic footprint in the Western Balkans by shrinking and stagnating its economic activities[59]. However, despite this, Russia wields its political and economic influence through various political proxies in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina[60].

Therefore, when it comes to Russian influence in the sphere of economic investments and energy dependence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia enjoys significant economic relations with its smaller entity – the Republika Srpska and its leader Milorad Dodik. Most notably, after the Russian aggression on Ukraine, Milorad Dodik 'sought to intensify

51 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.
52 J. Loshaj, ibid.
53 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.
54 J. Loshaj, ibid.
55 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.
56 J. Loshaj, ibid.
57 B. Stanicek and A. Caprile, ibid.
58 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.
59 B. Stanicek and A. Caprile, ibid.
60 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.

economic relations with Russia'[61]. It is also important to note that Russia has the Zarubezhneft oil refinery in the Republika Srpska which 'has cost Russian investors 60 million dollars since 2016, but Russia maintains it for leverage, because it keeps people employed, builds goodwill, and allows Russia to create a partnership with the RS'[62].

Furthermore, data from the European Union Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators point out that Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are dependent on Russia's gas, as Russia 'supplies close to 100% of gas needs and owns several assets, such as the Lukoil petrol stations network'[63].

Media influence and soft power

Apart from Russia's economic investments and energy dependence, Russia has also deployed media and soft power tools in hopes of disseminating pro-Russian narratives and fostering anti-Western sentiment in the region[64]. In this context, the media outlet Sputnik Srbija has been identified as one of the prominent tools of Russian influence in the Western Balkans media space[65], together with Serbia-based propaganda giant RT Balkan, as both publish their content in the Serbian language[66].

Many Western governments and organisations perceive this kind of media outlets as Russia's tools 'to provide disinformation and propaganda support for the Kremlin's foreign policy objectives'[67]. For instance, 'Russia's Sputnik portrays the animosity between Serbs and Albanians as a clash between Orthodox Christians and Muslims'[68]. These media outlets have the potential to reach a wider public that speaks Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian, or Montenegrian languages, since all four

61 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.
62 J. Loshaj, ibid.
63 B. Stanicek and A. Caprile, ibid.
64 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.
65 B. Stanicek and A. Caprile, ibid.
66 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.
67 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.
68 S. Secrieru, ibid.

languages are very similar with different dialects[69]. This has been observed as the propagation of disinformation, fake news, and Russian propaganda spilt over into neighbouring countries of Serbia – namely Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro[70].

In addition to media, Russia has also been promoting cultural and religious ties through the Orthodox Church which proved itself as a powerful tool of influence in the region[71]. To be specific, the Serbian Orthodox Church numbers about 8 million members across all three countries, giving it substantial societal influence[72]. This does not come as surprise when we consider the background of Russian political narratives, especially considering Russia's role as the defender of Christian-Orthodox traditional values, and the pan-Slavic link between the people from the Western Balkans and Russia, dating back to the nineteenth century[73],[74].

Russia has also deployed media and soft power tools in hopes of disseminating pro-Russian narratives and fostering anti-Western sentiment in the region

The Western Balkans' quest for EU and NATO integration

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain which followed the collapse of Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, countries of the Western Balkans embarked on a path of making efforts and implementing reforms to achieve stability

69 B. Stanicek and A. Caprile, ibid.
70 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.
71 B. Stanicek and A. Caprile, ibid.
72 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.
73 J. Loshaj, ibid.
74 W. Zweers, N. Drost, and B. Henry, ibid.

through Euro-Atlantic integration[75]. In this sense, the EU set in motion 'a Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) with Western Balkan countries in 1999' in hopes of eventually integrating these countries into the EU[76]. This move was 'seen as beneficial both by bringing stability and security and introducing democratic and economic reforms'[77]. It should be noted that the accession of the Western Balkans into the EU presents primarily an economic opportunity, while NATO membership would bring access to the security of the region[78].

Later on, at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the governments of the EU members together with representatives of the Western Balkans countries gave a promise to integrate the Western Balkans into the EU[79],[80]. As of now, only Croatia joined the EU in 2013, while other countries' progress towards EU membership is still sluggish[81]. However, it should be noted that all Western Balkan states, except for Kosovo, are candidates for EU membership[82]. In that sense, Montenegro began its accession talks in 2012 and Serbia in 2014, before a long delay occurred due to doubts about the EU's capacity to absorb new members[83]. Prompted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the beginning of 2022, accession negotiations were carried out with Albania and North Macedonia, while Bosnia and Herzegovina became an EU candidate in December 2022[84].

Countries like Croatia, Slovenia, and Montenegro have become members of either the EU, NATO, or both. On the other hand, Serbia and

75 J. Loshaj, ibid.

76 N. Walker and S. Fella, ibid.

77 K. Grimm and G. Zore (2008), 'Integrating the Western Balkans into NATO and the EU: Challenges, Expectations and Needs 2', https://www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/pfp_rssee_budva_policy.pdf

78 H. Preljević and A. Mustafić (2018), 'The Western Balkans on the road to the EU and NATO?', Balkan Studies Centre, 30 November, https://bsc.ius.edu.ba/blog/western-balkans-road-eu-and-nato

79 M. Savin (2024), 'Unlocking Progress in the Western Balkans: A Call for Action', European Western Balkans, 3 April, https://european-westernbalkans.com/2024/04/03/unlocking-progress-in-the-western-balkans-a-call-for-action/

80 J. Loshaj, ibid.

81 M. Savin, ibid.

82 N. Walker and S. Fella, ibid.

83 L. Scazzieri (2021), 'Reviving European policy towards the Western Balkans [Review of Reviving European policy towards the Western Balkans]', Centre for European Reform, 15 December, https://www.cer.org.uk/publications/archive/policy-brief/2021/reviving-european-policy-towards-western-balkans#section-6

84 Bosnia and Herzegovina (2024), Www.consilium.europa.eu, 4 May https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/bosnia-herzegovina/

Bosnia and Herzegovina face a more complex path toward Euro-Atlantic integration, by various involvements from Russia which tarnishes the integration process. Despite the fact that Serbia was granted EU candidate status in March 2012[85], 'Serbia has not aligned itself with EU sanctions against Russia following the invasion of Ukraine'[86]. Instead, Serbia and Russia keep cultivating their mutual relationship since the 1990s. This has been seen numerous times – from 2022 when Serbia signed a gas deal (EU Candidate Serbia and Russia Sign Foreign Policy Agreement, 2022)[87] and an agreement for mutual 'consultations' with Russia[88] until recently, when 'Germany and Rwanda brought a resolution to the UN General Assembly in May 2024 with the aim of introducing the genocide in Srebrenica as a worldwide day of remembrance'[89].

On the other hand, the Bosnian-Herzegovinian accession process towards the EU is being jeopardised by the president of Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik. Since July 2021, Milorad Dodik has been boycotting state institutions, often threatening that Republic of Srpska 'would withdraw from Bosnia and Herzegovina's armed forces, and key judicial and taxation bodies'[90]. In his secessionist rhetoric, he often seeks support from Vladimir Putin, Victor Orban, and Aleksandar Vučić[91].

Conclusions

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Western Balkans stand at yet another critical crossroad in its post-Yugoslav journey. The region's path toward Euro-Atlantic integration has been slow and fraught with challenges over the years, many of which are due to Russia's influence in the region. Therefore, the concept of re-emergence of a New Iron

85 Serbia (2024), Www.consilium.europa.eu, 11 January, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/serbia/

86 N. Walker and S. Fella, ibid.

87 EU candidate Serbia and Russia sign foreign policy agreement (2022), AP NEWS, 24 September, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-united-nations-general-assembly-foreign-policy-moscow-serbia-c63b0ca1271dd5b2ee3008bdcbb7de23

88 Id.

89 E. Rathfelder (2024), 'Anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre: Commemoration of „Hell on Earth " [Review of Anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre: Commemoration of „Hell on Earth "], Taz, 11 July, https://taz.de/Jahrestag-des-Srebrenica-Massakers/!6019796/

90 N. Walker and S. Fella, ibid.

91 M. Ruge (2022), 'The past and the furiou: How Russia's revisionism threatens Bosnia [Review of The past and the furiou: How Russia's revisionism threatens Bosnia]', European Council on Foreign Relations, 13 September, https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-past-and-the-furious-how-russias-revisionism-threatens-bosnia/#hungarys-influence-in-bosnia

Curtain in the Western Balkans can be attributed to the growing divide between the countries of the region that are aligning themselves with the West, and those that keep close ties to Russia. However, it is important to note that this division is not purely geopolitical, but also ideological, as it is intertwined with the issues of national identity and nationalism that have their roots in the Yugoslav wars. While the Russian invasion of Ukraine has presented an opportunity for EU and NATO enlargement in the Western Balkans, the wraith of a New Iron Curtain continues to loom over the region. Russian influence will likely stay a destabilising factor, especially in Serbia and Republika Srpska, where pro-Russian sentiments keep getting stronger.

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Chapter 5

Türkiye's Perspective on the Resurgence of the Iron Curtain: Balancing Relations with Russia and the European Union

Elif Menderes

"The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters."

- Antonio Gramsci

Abstract: This article examines Türkiye's unique position within the evolving geopolitical landscape, particularly concerning the potential resurgence of a new Iron Curtain. Historically, the Iron Curtain symbolised the ideological and geopolitical divide between the West and the East during the Cold War. In the

current context, the term is being revisited amidst the rising tensions between Russia and the Western nations. Türkiye, strategically positioned between Europe and Asia, faces challenges and opportunities as it navigates its relationships with the European Union (EU) and Russia. The article explores the historical context of the Türkiye-Russia relations, the complexities of Türkiye's EU membership aspirations, and the impact of contemporary geopolitical shifts, including the conflict in Ukraine and renewed European security concerns. Additionally, it provides a multifaceted analysis of how historical traumas, societal memory, and international relations theories shape contemporary foreign policy decisions in Türkiye and Europe.

Keywords: *Türkiye, Iron Curtain, European Union, Russia, geopolitical strategy, international relations.*

Introduction

The word curtain has been in our lives for decades, with its many meanings and historical associations that vary across languages and cultures. In English, curtain[1] evokes the connotation of a barrier, a divider that hides or separates spaces. It means the existence of something hidden behind something and not fully visible. The term Iron Curtain, famously coined by Winston Churchill in 1946[2], similarly evokes a powerful connotation of a geopolitical barrier that once divided Europe into two sides of influence during the Cold War.

The Iron Curtain is a central symbol in twentieth-century history, representing the division between the capitalist Western bloc, led by the United States, and the communist Eastern bloc, led by the Soviet Union. The curtain was more than just a figure; it exceeded its metaphorical meaning and reflected real-world barriers such as fortified borders and

1 Oxford English Dictionary (20.07.2024), "Curtain", Oxford Learner's Dictionaries,https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/curtain_1

2 K. Larres, K. (2017), 'Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' Speech in Context: The Attempt to Achieve a 'Good Understanding on All Points' with Stalin's Soviet Union', The International History Review, doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2017.1298531

military checkpoints. Eventually, these ideological breaks affected every aspect of European political, social, and economic life. The Iron Curtain became a symbol of the battle between two opposing perspectives, namely democracy at the one corner and communism at the other. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the famous Iron Curtain was lifted gradually, and all this meant the end of the Cold War, and the beginning of a new brave era of Europe for integration and cooperation[3]. With its prosperous historical and geopolitical implications, this Iron Curtain metaphor provides a unique view through which to analyse the geopolitical landscape and foreign policy decisions.

In Turkish, the word for curtain is perde[4]. This term also means a physical barrier, like in English, but it carries additional cultural and emotional contexts. In Turkish, perde can evoke the idea of veiling or covering. The perde is not just a physical object, but a metaphor possibly symbolising secrecy, division, or protection, depending on the context.

In Russian, the word **занавес**[5] (zanaves) is used for curtain, a term that brings to mind both theatrical performances and political metaphors like a sense of anticipation and mystery. Politically, the metaphorical use of Iron Curtain **(железный занавес,** zhelezny zanaves) in the Russian culture carries a heavy and oppressive connotation; a merciless barrier that was separating the Soviet bloc from the West and restricting any movement and communication[6]. This metaphor, obvious in Russian culture, reflects the country's historical and geopolitical experiences, shaping its foreign policy decisions and international relations.

European languages also bring their own interpretations to the meaning. In German, Vorhang[7] (curtain) similarly means separation and cover. In

3 J. L. Gaddis (1992), 'The Cold War, the long peace, and the future', 16(2), 234-246, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24912152

4 Türk Dil Kurumu (20.07.2024), "Perde", TDK Turkish Language Association, https://sozluk.gov.tr/

5 Gramota.ru (20.07.2024), "**Занавес**", Gramota.ru, https://gramota.ru/poisk?query=%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%81&mode=all

6 A. Connolly (2006), 'Through the Iron Curtain: Analytical space in post-Soviet Russia', Journal of Analytical Psychology, 51(2), 173–189, doi:https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-8774.2006.00582.x

7 Duden (20.07.2024), "Vorhang", Duden online, https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Vorhang

French, rideau[8] suggests a theatrical curtain that falls at the end of an act, but also serves as a protective shield, much like in military contexts. In these languages, the term curtain maintains its dual meanings as both a barrier and a protective or concealing entity.

It is pragmatic to check the various meanings of the curtain in different languages and cultural contexts to better understand the layered symbolism behind the Iron Curtain metaphor. Ultimately, the Iron Curtain was not just a physical or ideological divide, but a manifestation of deeper fears and insecurities that resonate differently depending on the cultural and historical circumstances.

For Türkiye, as a country that is both in Europe and Asia, the concept of a curtain has a unique resonance. Since Türkiye historically positioned at the crossroads of empires and cultures, its experience of barriers, both physical and ideological, has been one of negotiation and balance. The perde in Turkish culture signifies division as much as a space of negotiation, like a barrier that can be lifted or drawn depending on the circumstances. This duality is mirrored in Türkiye's contemporary foreign policy, which often involves carefully balancing its relationships between competing powers, particularly Russia and the European Union (EU)[9]. With its implications for division and

Since Türkiye historically positioned at the crossroads of empires and cultures, its experience of barriers, both physical and ideological, has been one of negotiation and balance

8 Le Robert (20.07.2024), "Rideau", Le Grand Robert de la langue française, https://dictionnaire.lerobert.com/definition/rideau

9 M. Kutlay and Z. Öniş (2021), 'Understanding oscillations in Turkish foreign policy: Pathways to unusual middle power activism', Third World Quarterly, 42(12), 3051-3069. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1985449

negotiation, the Iron Curtain metaphor provides a valuable framework for understanding and analysing Türkiye's foreign policy decisions and its role as a potential mediator and a regional power.

Similarly, in Russian political rhetoric, the curtain symbolises both the imposition of state control and the protection of national sovereignty. Surprisingly, the first country to use the term Iron Curtain in reference to the Soviet Union was Russia itself[10]: it embodies the tension between openness to the rest of the world and isolation, and it is not difficult to claim that this dynamic continues to shape Russia's foreign policy today. While understanding this perspective, it is also possible to illuminate why the idea of an Iron Curtain resonates strongly in Russian discourse, particularly amidst current geopolitical tensions.

In contrast, the Western European view of the Iron Curtain often focuses on the loss of freedom and oppression associated with the Soviet era[11]. The curtain here symbolises division and restriction, like a barrier that needs to be torn down to achieve unity and liberty. This sentiment has shaped much of Europe's approach to security and cooperation in the post-Cold War era.

Herein, this article aims to delve deeper into the complexities of Türkiye's position within the current geopolitical landscape. The concept of the Iron Curtain, symbolising geopolitical divisions in Europe, has re-emerged in discussions about Russia's influence across the continent. For Türkiye, navigating these divisions has become increasingly complex as it seeks to balance relations between Russia and the European Union. The recent geopolitical developments have revived fears of a new divide in Europe. The Russia-Ukraine war, Türkiye's role in mediating between parties, its position within the NATO, its involvement in the Black Sea region, the economic ties with Russia, and the EU Care represent the key recent topics. Whether Türkiye will play a pivotal role due to its unique

10 I. Feuerlicht (1955), 'A new look at the Iron Curtain', American Speech, 30(3), 186-189. doi:https://doi.org/10.2307/453937

11 P. Balázs, A. Bozóki, S. Catrina, A. Gotseva, J. Horváth, D. Limani, . . . K. Perlaky-Tóth (2014), '25 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain: The state of integration of East and West in the European Union', European Commission, Directorate-General for Research & Innovation. European Commission, https://openresearch.ceu.edu/entities/publication/18d3f1ce-ddb2-4147-9aa3-58a7fc429ae4

geopolitical position straddling Europe and Asia will be seen over time. While new tensions arise, summoning a ghost of the Iron Curtain or inventing another one becomes popular discourse, and Türkiye's role as a potential mediator, negotiator, and regional power becomes ever more significant. This piece will provide an understanding of how Türkiye views the resurgence of such a divide and its implications for regional security, stability, and foreign policy. It will also highlight the diverse perspectives to show how historical traumas and contemporary realities converge to shape today's political rhetoric and strategies.

Türkiye and Russia has had its ups and downs, with different periods of conflict and cooperation

Historical context of Türkiye-Russia relations

The historical relationship between Türkiye and Russia has had its ups and downs, with different periods of conflict and cooperation. Indeed, these ups and downs were shaped significantly by the geopolitical ambitions of both states. It is not a big surprise that the two giant empires, the Ottoman and Russian Empire, were also often adversaries, engaged in numerous conflicts, most notably over control of strategic territories of the time, such as the Black Sea region, more specifically the large inland sea situated at the southeastern extremity of Europe. The Crimean War (1853–1856) and various Russian-Turkish wars highlight the long-standing rivalry over the influence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia[12]. The fall of

12 J. W. Warhola and W. A. Mitchell (2006), 'The warming of Turkish-Russian relations: Motives and implications', Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization,

the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923 did little to diminish the historical tensions, as the newly founded Turkish state desired to navigate its geopolitical position amidst larger powers.

During the Second World War, Türkiye adopted a policy of neutrality to balance its relations towards the sides of the war: the Axis powers, led by Germany, Italy, and Japan on one side; and the Allied Powers, led by Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union on the other. However, the strategic location of Türkiye made it a crucial player in Soviet geopolitical calculations. Soviet-Turkish relations during this period were complex and full of strategic manoeuvring. While the Soviet Union initially perceived Türkiye as a potential ally, tensions arose as the war progressed. In 1945, the Soviets demanded territorial concessions in the eastern provinces of Kars and Ardahan, which are cities in northeast Türkiye, and for control over the Turkish Straits, which is the only connection of the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. These developments ultimately pushed Türkiye closer to the West[13], as Soviet demands were perceived by Türkiye as a direct threat to its sovereignty: this lead to Türkiye's eventual alignment with the West and its accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952, together with Greece, as a strategic counterbalance against Soviet expansionism.

Throughout the Cold War, Türkiye's foreign policy was shaped by its commitments to NATO and the broader Western alliance led by the United States. For the Soviet Union, it was the principal adversary. With Türkiye firmly embedded within the Western alliance system, the Cold War era strengthened the antagonistic nature of Türkiye-Russia relations[14]. This period was characterised by a policy of containment, with Türkiye playing a crucial role in the regional security architecture designed to prevent Soviet expansion into the Middle East and

14(1), 127-143, https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/14_1_KG867M85664G8800.pdf

13 B. Gökay (2021), 'Turkish neutrality in the Second World War and relations with the Soviet Union', Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2021.1935082

14 N. Uslu (2003), 'The Russian, Caucasian, and Central Asian Aspects of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post Cold War Period', Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, 2(3-4), 168–169.

Mediterranean.

The end of the Cold War marked a substantial shift in Türkiye-Russia relations, moving from overt antagonism to a much more complicated relationship characterised by the effects of potential cooperation and competition areas. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 gave both sides a chance to reassess bilateral relations and their roles in a rapidly changing geopolitical system.

One of the key areas of cooperation between Türkiye and Russia that emerged in the post-Cold War period was in the realm of energy. Russia, with its vast reserves of natural gas and oil, became a critical energy supplier to Türkiye. This economic interdependence has grown over the years, with major projects such as the Blue Stream pipeline, a remarkable symbol of the new pragmatic partnership between the two countries, which was completed in 2005[15]. However, this cooperation has not been without tensions. Geopolitical competition, particularly in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, where both countries have significant strategic interests, has often strained bilateral relations. For example, the 2008 Russia-Georgia War caused Türkiye's and Russia's different interests in the region to clash. Many European countries expressed concerns about other potentially volatile regions in the post-Soviet space and displayed a stance that contradicted Russia's behaviour while ensuring Georgia's territorial integrity[16].

Moreover, Türkiye's foreign policy continues to be shaped by the EU's targeted objectives and initiatives (again, with ups and downs), and its natural close ties with NATO, which often puts it at odds with Russia's. The ongoing conflict in Syria, where Russia supports the Assad regime and Türkiye backs opposition groups, further illustrates the sophistication and often-placed nature of Türkiye-Russia relations in the post-Cold War era[17]. Similarly, the war in Ukraine has added another layer of tension

15 G. Bacik (2001), 'The Blue Stream Project, Energy Co-operation and and Conflicting Interests', Turkish Studies, 2(2), 85-93. doi:10.1080/714005686

16 I. Gretskiy, E. Treshchenkov, K. Golubev (2014), 'Russia and Turkey in a shifting global order: Cooperation, conflict, and asymmetric interdependence in a turbulent region', Communist and Post-Communist Studies, 47(3), 375-383, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48610410

17 E. Balta (2019), 'From geopolitical competition to strategic partnership: Turkey and Russia after the Cold War', Uluslararası İlişkiler / In-

between the two countries. While Türkiye condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and then supported Ukraine's territorial integrity in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict, it also aims to maintain a pragmatic relationship with Russia, particularly in economic and emerging areas[18]. This delicate balancing highlights the complex dynamics of Türkiye-Russia relations, where cooperation and competition coexist amidst regional instability and great power competition.

The historical legacy of conflict and cooperation between Türkiye and Russia has continuously impacted contemporary sentiments in both countries. For Türkiye, the memory of Russian territorial ambitions during the Ottoman period and the Soviet era has not just influenced its foreign policies, but also fostered a deep sense of caution and mistrust. This emotional and psychological aspect of the historical experience is crucial to understand Türkiye's contemporary foreign policies, often marked by a wariness of Russian intentions. The historical legacies influence Türkiye's balancing act between NATO allies and Russia today.

In Türkiye, contemporary geopolitical dynamics have backed these historical memories, such as Russia's recent assertiveness in its near abroad and its involvement in the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts. The echoes of past Russian actions in these modern conflicts serve as a reminder of the longstanding challenges that Türkiye faces in managing its relationship with Russia. This historical perspective is crucial for understanding Türkiye's approach to balancing its relations between the West and Russia, as it navigates a complicated geopolitical landscape shaped by historical legacies and contemporary realities.

Türkiye's evolving relationship with the EU

Türkiye's aspirations to become a member of the EU date back to the Ankara Agreement in 1963, which recognised Türkiye's eligibility for the

ternational Relations, 16(63), 69-86. doi:https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.621309

18 Z. Öniş and S. Yılmaz (2015), 'Turkey and Russia in a shifting global order: Cooperation, conflict, and asymmetric interdependence in a turbulent region', Third World Quarterly, 36(1), 140-159. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1086638

full membership in the long run. The plan aimed to create a customs union between the two parties in three phases, with the potential of paving the way for Türkiye's membership in the European Economic Community (EEC). However, the journey towards EU membership has been tested with challenges and lapses rooted in various dimensions. The European Council's decision at the 1997 Luxembourg Summit to exclude Türkiye from its enlargement process, citing democratic shortcomings and human rights concerns, marked a significant setback. This decision, despite Türkiye's customs union agreement with the EU in 1995, highlighted the persistent doubts within the EU regarding Türkiye's readiness for membership[19]. This dynamic has remained unchanged in recent years, with the EU consistently expressing deep concerns about democratic developments in Türkiye. Issues such as restrictions on freedom of expression and erosion of judicial independence remain significant points of the statement. These ongoing concerns have contributed to the unique and complex structure of EU-Türkiye relations, where economic cooperation and strategic interests coexist with significant political divergences[20]. Despite the long-standing aspiration for EU membership, Türkiye's path to accession remains uncertain, and its relationship with the EU continues to be characterised by cooperation and tension.

A complex mix of cooperation and divergence illustrates the state of the current EU-Türkiye relations. On one hand, the two entities share substantial economic ties, the EU being Türkiye's largest trading partner, whilst Türkiye became the EU's fifth largest trade partner in 2023, representing 4.1% of the EU's total trade in goods with the world[21]. The Customs Union agreement promotes free trade in goods, highlighting the economic interdependence between Türkiye and the EU. The potential update of the Customs Union is a key opportunity to modernise trade relations by expanding into areas like services, digitalisation, and

19 M. Müftüler-Bac (1998), 'The Never-Ending Story: Turkey and the European Union', Middle Eastern Studies, 34(2), 240-258. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/00263209808701250

20 Ç Üstün (2010), 'EU and Turkish Neighborhood Policies: Common Goals', Caucasian Review of International Affairs, 342-354. https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/cria/v4i4/f_0020906_17380.pdf

21 European Commission (20.07.2024), "Türkiye", policy.trade.ec.europa.eu, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/turkiye_en

green energy cooperation, which aligns with both Türkiye and the EU's development goals. Additionally, cooperation on migration, particularly in managing the flow of refugees from the Middle East, has been a significant area of alignment[22]. The 2016 EU-Türkiye migration deal exemplifies this cooperation, where Türkiye agreed to stem the flow of migrants to Europe in exchange for financial aid and political concessions.

The arrest and imprisonment of journalists and political opponents has raised concerns within the EU, leading to a break in accession talks[23]. Furthermore, the deterioration of judicial independence and the rule of law in Türkiye has been considered inconsistent with the EU's Copenhagen criteria, which outline the necessary political and economic conditions for membership[24].

The recent EU elections, held between 6 and 9 June 2024, could affect Türkiye-EU relations, too. The rise of right-wing populism and Euroscepticism in several EU member states has led to a more conservative perspective on enlargement. Parties critical of Türkiye's accession have gained ground, particularly in countries like France, Germany, and Austria, where there is strong public opinion against further EU expansion[25]. The European structure has the potential to lead to a more strict EU policy towards Türkiye, potentially further delaying Türkiye's accession prospects. Recent developments in Germany and the Netherlands, which impose stricter immigration controls and more rigorous asylum policies, reflect the growing influence of right-wing populist movements. These policies could further complicate Türkiye's relations with the EU, as migration and asylum issues have been central in their negotiations, potentially causing further delays in Türkiye's EU accession process.

22 Aydın-Düzgit, S., & Fuat, E. K. (2017, 01 01). EU-Turkey Relations and the Stagnation of Turkish Democracy: Breaking a Vicious Cycle. Global Turkey in Europe Working Papers, 103-164. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09869.14

23 B. Saatçioğlu (2016), 'De-Europeanisation in Turkey: The Case of the Rule of Law', South European Society and Politics, 21(1), 133-146. doi:10.1080/13608746.2016.1147994

24 S. B. Gulmez, A. E. Topal, B. Rumelili (n.d.), 'From Europeanisation to De-Europeanisation: The Europeanisation Process of Turkey in 1999–2014, Open Research Europe, doi:https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.16176.1

25 F. Schimmelfennig (2018), 'European Integration (Theory) in Times of Crisis: A comparison of the Euro and Schengen crises', Journal of European Public Policy, 25(7), 969–989. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1421252

On the other hand, there is a growing distinction among some EU member states of the strategic importance of Türkiye, especially in light of upgraded geopolitical tensions[26]. The ongoing war in Ukraine and the need for a stable southern side have a potential to make Türkiye a key-actor in regional security. Thus, while the political mood within the EU might be alert, there are pragmatic voices advocating for continued engagement with Türkiye.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has further problematised the EU-Türkiye relationship. Türkiye's strategic positioning between Europe and Asia, and its historical connections to Russia and Ukraine, have let it play a unique balancing role. Türkiye has condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea and has provided drones to Ukraine, highlighting its support for Ukrainian sovereignty[27]. At the same time, Türkiye maintains economic and energy ties with Russia, as evidenced by the continued import of Russian gas and the development of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant.

Türkiye's role in bargaining the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which enabled the safe export of Ukrainian grain despite the ongoing conflict, highlights its diplomatic leverage and balancing act between competing interests. This initiative has been critical for global food security, in maintaining a channel of dialogue between Russia and the West and emphasising Türkiye's strategic importance[28].

In this context, its actions have placed Türkiye as a balancing power that can navigate complex geopolitical landscapes, including those involving the EU, Russia, and Ukraine. However, this balancing act also underlines the challenges in its relations with the EU. Türkiye's foreign policy moves are often perceived through the lens of EU-Russia relations, complicating an already multifaceted relationship.

26 . Aydın-Düzgit, & E. K. Fuat, (2017), 'EU-Turkey Relations and the Stagnation of Turkish Democracy: Breaking a Vicious Cycle', Global Turkey in Europe Working Papers, 103-164, 1 January, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09869.14

27 G. Dalay (2021), 'Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts: Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh', Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP). doi:https://doi.org/10.18449/2021RP05

28 D. Isachenko (2023), 'Turkey in the Black Sea Region: Ankara's Reactions to the War in Ukraine against the Background of Regional Dynamics and Global Confrontation', Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SP). doi:doi:10.18449/2023RP12

The resurgence of the Iron Curtain: a multifaceted analysis

From Türkiye's perspective, the new Iron Curtain idea represents a re-emergence of geopolitical divisions reminiscent of the Cold War era, where ideological, political, and military lines were drawn between the East and the West. Historically, Türkiye was a frontline state on the periphery of the Iron Curtain, serving as a bulwark against Soviet expansion into the Mediterranean. The new iteration of the Iron Curtain, however, does not simply repeat the past but is shaped by recent factors such as Russia's annexation of Crimea, its aggressive policies in Ukraine, and its increasing influence in Central and Eastern Europe[29]. For Türkiye, this new divide represents both a challenge and an opportunity to redefine its role in regional and global politics[30].

Türkiye itself is strategically positioned in the current geopolitical landscape between the West and Russia, which requires careful balancing. Russia's recent actions in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly its military invasions into Ukraine and its support for separatist movements, have heightened security concerns across Europe, including in Türkiye. Türkiye's role has become increasingly crucial in NATO's strategy following the Ukraine invasion. While NATO enhances its presence in Eastern Europe via Finland and Poland, Türkiye maintains a unique position by balancing its NATO commitments with diplomatic and economic ties to Russia, offering an essential channel for dialogue and regional stability. Türkiye's current geopolitical strategy has involved a blend of opportunism and strategic alignment, where it leverages its NATO membership while simultaneously pursuing closer economic and military ties with Russia[31]. This dual approach is evident in Türkiye's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system, which has tested its relations with NATO allies, and its position in the Black Sea, where it seeks to maintain a balance between supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity

29 S. Adar (2024), 'Turkey's Geostrategy: Opportunism and Dissonance', Internationale Politik Quarterly. https://ip-quarterly.com/en/turkeys-geostrategy-opportunism-and-dissonance

30 J. Wöllenstein (n.d.), 'New Iron Curtain rising on the EU border with Belarus', Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/29447862/New+Iron+Curtain+rising+on+the+EU+border+with+Belarus.pdf/c6dd637d-dfe9-27db-145c-7265d5e690f5?version=1.0&t=1722349622640

31 Adar, S., ibid.

and engaging Russia diplomatically.

Türkiye's balancing act becomes clearer when compared with other NATO members, such as Finland, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Finland's NATO accession in 2023 marked a shift from neutrality to security alignment, while Türkiye played a key role in facilitating the enlargement despite initial delays[32]. Meanwhile, Poland pursues a hard line strategy against Russia, emphasising military build-up, whereas Türkiye relies more on diplomatic leverage[33]. Similarly, Czech Republic's decisive break from Russian influence contrasts with Türkiye's more pragmatic approach, driven by geopolitical engagement[34].

Central and Eastern European states, such as Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, view the revival of the Iron Curtain through the lens of historical trauma and current security threats. These countries, having experienced Soviet influence, are particularly sensitive to any symptom of Russian aggression. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine have only heightened their concerns, leading them to endorse a more substantial NATO presence and stronger EU sanctions against Russia[35]. These states

From Türkiye's perspective, the new Iron Curtain idea represents a re-emergence of geopolitical divisions reminiscent of the Cold War era, where ideological, political, and military lines were drawn between the East and the West

32 K. Archick, P. Belkin, A. S. Bowen (2023), 'NATO Enlargement to Sweden and Finland', Congressional Research Service (CRS), https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11949

33 NATO (2024), Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2024), https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf

34 Foreign Ministry of the Czech Republic (18.10.2024), "Minister Kulhánek acquainted NATO allies with evidence of the involvement of Russian agents in the Vrbětice explosion", https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/en/issues_and_press/archive/events_and_issues/x2021/x2021_04_22_minister_kulhanek_acquainted_nato_allies.html

perceive a new Iron Curtain as a vital barrier to safeguarding European democratic values and sovereignty from Russian authoritarianism[36].

European institutions such as the European Commission and External Action Service have adopted a careful stance on the new geopolitical realities. They stress the importance of unity among EU member states in addressing the Russian threat, endorsing a comprehensive strategy that includes economic sanctions, military preparedness, and diplomatic efforts. The EU's response to Russia's actions is also noted by the requirement to maintain international law and defend the sovereignty of Eastern European states[37]. However, there is a recognition that a new Iron Curtain could deepen divisions within Europe, especially between member states with differing views on handling relations with Russia.

Comparing European perspectives with those of Türkiye displays both convergence and divergence[38]. Like its European partners, Türkiye is concerned about Russian aggression and its implications for regional stability. However, Türkiye's approach is slighter, balancing its security concerns with economic and strategic interests in maintaining a working relationship with Russia. Unlike many Eastern European states, Türkiye does not see a new Iron Curtain as a required or desirable development, but rather as an imaginable barrier to its purposes of playing a mediating role between East and West.

The resurgence of the Iron Curtain is also shaped by historical traumas, which play a crucial role in contemporary foreign policy decisions in Türkiye and Europe. Türkiye's memory of being a frontline state during the Cold War influences its careful approach to new divisions in Europe. In addition, in Central and Eastern Europe, the collective memory of Soviet occupation fuels a desire for defensive, solid measures against any

35 J. Wöllenstein, ibid.

36 R. Sakwa (2020), 'The new era of confrontation: Russia and the World: 2020 IMEMO Forecast', New Perspectives, 28(4), 495-502. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X2095444

37 R. Alcaro and Dijkstra (2024), 'Re-imagining EU Foreign and Security Policy in a Complex and Contested World', The International Spectator, 59(1), 1-18. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.202

38 P. Kubicek (2022), 'Contrasting theoretical approaches to Turkish foreign policy', Turkish Studies, 23(5), 645-658. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2022.2107340

perceived Russian resurgence[39]. These historical narratives are critical in shaping these countries' public opinion and foreign policies.

From the international relations perspective, realism would explain Türkiye's strategic positioning as a pragmatic response to the international system, where power and security are essential. Türkiye's actions, such as balancing between NATO and Russia, align with a realist perspective that prioritises national security over ideological alignment. On the other hand, the liberal perspective would highlight Türkiye's concentration on multilateral organisations and diplomatic efforts to maintain regional stability and cooperation.

Public opinion in Türkiye and Europe significantly affects foreign policy choices related to Russia and the potential resurgence of the Iron Curtain: in Türkiye, there is a substantial divide between pro-Western segments that support closer ties with Europe and more nationalist elements that tend to a more independent or even Russia-aligned stance[40]; in Europe, instead, public sentiment favours decisive actions against Russian aggression, as reflected in support for sanctions and increased NATO presence in Eastern Europe[41]. This variation in public opinion shapes the policy directions of respective governments, influencing their stance on issues related to the new Iron Curtain.

The potential implications of a new Iron Curtain heighten Türkiye's concerns regarding regional security and stability. Türkiye is conscious of the risks of new geopolitical divides as a country in Europe and Asia. It is concerned that a settled East-West divide could destabilise the region, undermine its economic interests, and limit its diplomatic options. Consequently, Türkiye supports a balanced approach that addresses security concerns while avoiding actions that could lead to further polarisation[42].

39 P. D. Beaumont, J. Wilhelmsen, K. L. Gjerde (2024), 'Reimagining NATO after Crimea: Defender of the rule-based order and truth?', Contemporary Security Policy, 45(3), 396-425. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2024.2349393

40 R. Sakwa, ibid.

41 M. Pierini (2023), 'Turkey's Geopolitical Role. Between National Ambitions, Western Anchors and Russian Sway', International Institute of Mediterranean, https://www.iemed.org/publication/turkeys-geopolitical-role-between-national-ambitions-western-anchors-and-russian-sway/

Türkiye's approach to encouraging regional security involves active participation in multilateral engagements and fostering dialogue among regional actors. This strategy is evident in its involvement in various diplomatic initiatives, such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Astana Process for Syria, where it seeks to balance relations with Western allies and Russia[43]. Türkiye's multilateral engagement aims to position itself as a mediator and a stabilising force in the region, encouraging a cooperative rather than confrontational approach to security.

Amidst the evolving geopolitical tensions, Türkiye also sees opportunities to strengthen economic ties and regional cooperation. The development of the Trans-Caspian-East-West Corridor and increased energy cooperation with countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia illustrate how Türkiye seeks to enhance its regional influence and economic integration. These initiatives strengthen Türkiye's economic interests and counter Russian influence, further problematising the narrative of a new Iron Curtain[44].

Conclusion

This article has examined Türkiye's exceptional position within the evolving geopolitical landscape marked by the potential resurgence of a new Iron Curtain. The concept of the Iron Curtain, historically associated with the ideological, political, and military division between the West and the East, continues to influence current geopolitics. For Türkiye, the re-emergence of such a division presents challenges and opportunities. The article has examined the historical context of Türkiye-Russia relations, highlighting periods of conflict and cooperation shaped by geopolitical ambitions and historical traumas. It has also discussed Türkiye's evolving relationship with the EU, highlighting the complexities of balancing aspirations for EU membership with the pragmatic need to maintain a

42 S. J. Blank (2008), 'Towards a New Russia Policy', Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College. doi:http://www.jstor.org/stable/res-rep11831

43 S. Adar, ibid.

44 C. Nissen and Dreyer (2024), 'From optimist to sceptical liberalism: reforging European Union foreign policy amid crises', International Affairs, 100(2), 675–690. doi:https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae013

working relationship with Russia.

Further, the article analysed European perspectives on the new Iron Curtain, particularly the views of Central and Eastern European states, and European institutions, which often see such a divide as crucial to protect democratic values against Russian aggression. A comparative analysis with Türkiye's perspective reveals both convergence and divergence, with Türkiye adopting a more slight approach that seeks to mediate rather than deepen divisions.

In the renewed Iron Curtain context, Türkiye distinguishes itself by balancing NATO commitments with economic ties to Russia. Unlike Finland, Poland, and Czechia, which align closely with NATO, Türkiye acts as a mediator, bridging divides and playing a crucial role in maintaining regional stability.

Given the evolving geopolitical dynamics, Türkiye must adopt a flexible and balanced foreign policy that can navigate the complexities of its relationships with both the EU and Russia. First, Türkiye should continue to leverage its strategic position to act as a mediator between East and West, advocating for dialogue and diplomatic engagement rather than confrontation. This approach would enhance its role as a potential regional power and foster more outstanding regional stability and security.

Convincing high-level EU and Türkiye policymakers is crucial for the future of peaceful relations; Türkiye is not like Russia or China in its governance or strategic aspirations. Rather than pushing Türkiye towards greater reliance on Russia, the EU could embrace Türkiye as a critical ally in securing European interests. Then, Türkiye's policymakers should prioritise internal reforms to address democratic backsliding and human rights concerns, too, which have been significant points of contention with the EU. Türkiye can enhance its standing within the European community by aligning more closely with EU values and standards. Several scenarios could evolve in the Türkiye-EU-Russia relationship, each with regional security and cooperation implications. In one scenario, if tensions between Russia and the West continue to escalate,

Türkiye may find itself increasingly pressured to choose sides, complicating its balancing act. Alternatively, de-escalating tensions and a renewed commitment to dialogue and cooperation could provide Türkiye with greater flexibility to mediate and influence regional dynamics positively.

In any case, Türkiye's ability to navigate this complex geopolitical environment will rely on its diplomatic skills, economic resilience, and commitment to democratic values. As the new Iron Curtain reshapes Europe's political landscape, Türkiye finds itself on both sides, navigating alliances and rivalries. The ability to engage across this divide will be pivotal in shaping the region's future stability. As Türkiye balances its relationships with the EU and Russia, its role as a potential mediator and regional power will remain crucial in shaping the future of European security and cooperation. Eventually, Türkiye's strategic choices will significantly impact its national interests and the broader geopolitical stability of the region, emphasising the need for a forward-looking foreign policy approach.

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A liberal future in a united Europe

Is the future of Europe a (new) growing Iron Curtain? It is around this question that the journey 'Towards a New Iron Curtain', written by six authors from different countries and perspectives (Poland, Czech Republic, Finland, Turkey and Bosnia), is developed in the context of a Europe trying to respond to the threat to the international order. After the end of the previous Cold War, European leaders embraced the principles of a "Europe whole and free", in which all nations would accept the obligation to resolve disputes peacefully. This illusion finally dissolved in February 2022.

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