Four Years of Russia's Full-Scale War Against Ukraine: Regional Ramifications and Global Impacts

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Introduction

In 2014, Russia carried out armed aggression against Ukraine by annexing Crimea and occupying parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. This was a response by the Russian authorities, led by President Vladimir Putin, to Ukraine's and the Ukrainian people's desire to leave the Kremlin's foreign policy orbit and the *Russkiy Mir* sphere, and to pursue membership in the EU and NATO. The loss of Ukraine was unacceptable for Russia; therefore, from the early 2000s Moscow had been preparing more radical steps against the Ukrainian authorities. To this end, the concept and ideology of the *Russkiy Mir* were actively developed and implemented; pro-Russian political elites in Ukraine were financed; interference in the country's internal affairs and in the lives of Ukrainians was carried out by bringing the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych to power; an artificial issue of the "persecution" of the Russian language and Russian-speaking Ukrainians was created; and disinformation about the North Atlantic Alliance

and the EU was disseminated. According to the Russian leadership's plan, this was intended to hinder Ukraine's movement along the Euro-Atlantic path, intimidate Ukrainians, and return them to Russia's geopolitical sphere. President Vladimir Putin did not conceal his desire to restore the Soviet Union, in which Ukraine was to be included not as an independent or autonomous part of a "USSR 2.0," but as an integral component of Russia. In other words, the emphasis was placed on the complete destruction of Ukrainian statehood and the erasure of Ukrainian identity.

Putin embedded such narratives into the formation of the state ideology of the *Russkiy Mir* in order to once again assert to the world a claim to Ukrainian history and Ukrainian statehood, which he views as components of Moscow-Russian statehood and history. It is important for Putin to demonstrate that Russia has always been part of the civilized world in various historical periods. However, historians have shown that this is not the case, and that Muscovy, and later Russia, has been predominantly part of Asian history. This is evidenced by the style of governance formed in Muscovy and inherited by Russia; by its political system; and by the population's aspiration to see a strong monarch-president with despotic traits who will decide their fate and assume responsibility for important decisions. Accordingly, these historical, cultural, and civilizational factors make the existence of an independent and sovereign Ukraine—with its own history and statehood spanning a thousand years—impossible within Putin's worldview and policy. Having taken the first serious step in 2014 toward realizing his goal of destroying Ukraine as an independent state and Ukrainians as a nation, Putin received a frankly weak response from the EU and the United States. This effectively gave him free rein in the following

years, when he began preparing for a full-scale invasion. In addition to using already traditional instruments—propaganda, disinformation, and the formation of anti-Ukrainian public opinion in a number of countries—Putin gradually placed Russia on a war footing and prepared Russian society for a full-scale war against Ukraine and for his prolonged stay in power through amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation. This was necessary to justify increased spending on the army and the Russian military-industrial complex, as well as the future mobilization of troops.

In 2021, the Russian leadership ceased concealing its plans for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In this context, several important points should be noted: (1) Putin's article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," which once again reiterated the thesis of the unity of the two peoples, criticized Ukrainian identity and statehood, and portrayed Russia as a state that must unite and reconcile; (2) The declared desire to "denazify" Ukraine, whose authorities allegedly "destroyed" the Russian minority in Ukraine; (3) The promotion of the thesis of protecting Russian borders from Western countries allegedly preparing an invasion from Ukrainian territory, which led to the so-called December initiatives of the Kremlin in December 2021 – demands that NATO withdraw its troops and remove bases from the territories of Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia; (4) The open aspiration to occupy Ukraine in order to incorporate it into an updated version of the Soviet Union 2.0, which would become a kind of hybrid of the USSR and Tsarist Russia.

The Results of Russian Aggression Against Ukraine: 2022–2025

The concentration of Russian troops near Ukraine's borders caused concern not only in Kyiv but also in Western countries. Intelligence data from a number of states confirmed fears of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Despite this, it can be argued that the EU and NATO countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, did not fully comprehend the scale of the Russian threat and Putin's transition to implementing a new phase of his plan to occupy Ukraine, destroy Ukrainian identity, and commit genocide against Ukrainians. On February 24, 2022, Ukrainians awoke to explosions and massive aerial bombardments of their homes and cities. The offensive was launched from the north through Chernihiv and Sumy; from the east through Kharkiv; and from the south – from the Black Sea toward Odesa and Mykolaiv, as well as from occupied Crimea toward Kherson and Mariupol. Within a few days, parts of the Kyiv, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, and Kharkiv regions were occupied, along with the Chornobyl NPP and the Zaporizhzhia NP Plant – the largest in Europe. Russian regular troops landed at Hostomel Airport with the aim of establishing an air bridge and advancing further toward Kyiv. Their task was to capture or kill the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and to install a pro-Russian regime in Kyiv. It was anticipated that the Russian armed forces would seize the Ukrainian capital within three to five days; however, their plans were thwarted by the Ukrainian Defense Forces, which launched a counteroffensive in the second half of March 2022, forcing Russian troops to retreat.

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The liberation of the Kyiv region in April and the withdrawal of the Russian army from the Chornobyl zone revealed to Ukrainians and the world the horrific crimes committed by Russian forces—killings of civilians, mass graves, and other war crimes in Bucha, Irpin, and Borodianka. The siege of Mariupol began on February 28 and lasted until May 20. Russian forces continuously shelled the city and its civilian population from the air, dropped guided aerial bombs on residential districts, and targeted hospitals, homes, and schools. They also blocked residents from leaving the city and repeatedly disrupted evacuation plans to transport civilians by bus from Mariupol to Zaporizhzhia. The humanitarian catastrophe in Mariupol, caused by constant bombardment by the Russian army, led to the deaths of a significant number of residents, whose bodies were buried by relatives and friends in the courtyards of apartment buildings, on the streets, and later in mass graves. The exact number of Mariupol residents killed remains unknown. Experts estimate that the figure may amount to several tens of thousands. Some of the territories occupied in the spring of 2022 were recaptured during the autumn–winter campaign of 2022, when the Ukrainian counteroffensive enabled the Armed Forces of Ukraine to restore control over the Kharkiv region and part of the Kherson region, liberating Kherson, Izium, Kupiansk, and other settlements. Since 2023, the so-called war of attrition has been going on. Russian forces have been unable to accomplish

their objectives of fully capturing the Donbas or establishing control over border settlements in the Sumy, Chernihiv, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, and Kharkiv regions. Russia's creeping advance has cost Moscow hundreds of thousands of lives—both its own citizens and foreign nationals recruited by the Russian military and political leadership in Africa and North Korea.

Since 2023, the so-called war of attrition has been ongoing.

Due to its inability to seize and advance further, the Russian army has, since February 2022, continued to employ a scorched-earth tactic on a daily basis. Targets of Russian missiles, drones, and guided aerial bombs include residential buildings, maternity wards, hospitals, kindergartens, schools, universities, museums, libraries, social infrastructure, and animal shelters. Russian forces use cluster munitions and phosphorus bombs prohibited by international conventions. Frontline cities are constantly shelled with artillery, multiple-launch rocket systems, FPV drones, and UAVs. Daily terror against the civilian population has become normalized, including so-called "human safaris," in which people traveling by car, bicycle, or simply walking down the street are deliberately targeted. Since 2014, Russia has seized less than 20% of Ukraine's territory, annexing Crimea and illegally incorporating it, along with four regions (Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia), into its constitutional framework. Currently, the Russian leadership is attempting to consolidate these territorial gains and obtain control over the remaining parts of the Donbas through a series of so-called "peace negotiations." The simulation of

a negotiation process demonstrates that neither since the beginning of armed aggression against Ukraine in 2014 nor since the launch of the full-scale invasion in 2022 has the Kremlin been able to achieve its objectives of fully occupying Ukraine and returning it to Russian control and influence.

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Nevertheless, Russia continues mobilization efforts, increases investments in its military-industrial complex, and intensifies propaganda and disinformation in Europe and globally, distorting the real situation on the front and presenting non-existent achievements. To halt the further spread and deepening penetration of Russian disinformation, EU and NATO countries must separately work on further banning Russian information, media, and cultural-educational networks (the Russian Houses and Russian language and cultural centers). After sanctions were imposed on *RT and Sputnik* in the EU (but not in Serbia), Moscow continued using these outlets against Ukraine, Europe, and NATO by changing their names and domain ownership. In addition, a propaganda network of websites called *Pravda* was launched, becoming a new and powerful instrument of Russian propaganda in Europe and worldwide. Russia is gradually descending into economic and social crisis, which can be deepened through the strengthening of sanctions policy, with particular emphasis on the application of secondary sanctions mechanisms. This would deprive the Russian Federation of steady revenue streams, prevent the expansion

of its technical capabilities, strengthen efforts against Russia's shadow fleet, and enhance countermeasures against the procurement of technologies for drones, unmanned systems, and various weapons. It would also disrupt logistical chains used to circumvent sanctions through countries that continue to supply Russia with components, software, and technology.

Regional and Global Consequences

Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its full-scale invasion have permanently altered the architecture of regional security in Europe and have prompted a rethinking of the world order established after the end of the Second World War. These changes may be described as tectonic. They could have occurred much earlier, more rapidly, and less painfully had the United States and Europe responded decisively in 1991 to Russia's seizure of part of independent Moldova and the creation there of the proxy entity of Transnistria. This opened a Pandora's box for the Kremlin, and each subsequent act of aggression – against Georgia in 2008 and against Ukraine in 2014 – combined with the weak reaction of the West, ultimately led to war in Europe and to the strengthening of Russia to the extent that Putin and Russia continue to remain subjects of international relations despite the genocide and war crimes committed in and against Ukraine. One immediate consequence has been that Ukraine and Ukrainians have permanently left the sphere of Russian influence and ceased to be part of the *Russkiy Mir*. This has been followed by the gradual collapse of Russian hybrid influence in other parts of the world: Russian "peacekeepers" withdrew from Karabakh; Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a historic peace agreement that restored Azerbaijan's territorial control and enabled Armenia to rapidly reorient its foreign policy toward the West. Russia's displacement from what had traditionally been its sphere of influence created conditions for the strengthening of the United States and Turkey in the region, the development of ties between the South Caucasus and European countries, and changes in and expansion of trade structures as well as the regional energy and security architecture. Iran has expressed open concern, while Russia has shown more restrained reactions, with its leadership formally welcoming the agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

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At the same time, Russia is strengthening its position in Georgia. The pro-Russian government has abandoned European integration and is increasingly moving into the orbit of the *Russkiy Mir*, despite months of public protests. Georgian citizens have attempted to draw on the example of the Euromaidan and the European Union's support for Ukraine in its war against Russia. However, these efforts have not yielded positive results, although Brussels and the European Parliament have expressed support for Georgian demonstrators. In Georgia, the current authorities are leveraging Russia's war against Ukraine to deepen ties with Moscow and to construct a Georgian version of the *Russkiy Mir*. A reduction of Russian influence is also evident in Central Asia, while the EU's interest in cooperation with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is growing. This is

evidenced by the agreement signed between Uzbekistan and the European Union and by the strengthening of bilateral cooperation between Slovenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Kazakhstan. At the same time, intensified contacts with Astana create additional risks of expanding Chinese presence. Beijing is using Astana as a gateway for deeper penetration into the EU. The displacement of Russian influence is proceeding slowly, but China is already attempting to fill the emerging vacuum. Washington might also become involved in this process, although this appears unlikely, as the United States has lacked a coherent strategy toward the EU or Southeastern Europe since the early 2000s.

A reduction of Russian influence is also evident in Central Asia.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Europe has traveled a significant path and increasingly demonstrates unity in supporting Ukraine, expanding sanctions, and countering Russian proxies and hybrid influence. Nevertheless, it would be premature to speak of full EU unity, as the governments of Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic have displayed anti-Ukrainian positions and rhetoric. This is particularly evident in Budapest and Bratislava; in Prague, the situation is more delicate, as the Babiš government has come to power and has already refused to participate in financing Ukraine under the "Loan for Ukraine" program. At the same time, Czech President Petr Pavel, many Czech politicians, and civil society continue to provide support to Ukraine. Despite

risks of fragmentation and the growing number of populist politicians, the EU is slowly moving toward strengthening the regional security system and seeking mechanisms to circumvent Hungary's veto power in votes concerning the extension of sanctions against Russia and the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine. Visible manifestations of these changes include the unblocking of €90 billion in support for Ukraine and the creation and implementation of a European rearmament program through 2030.

EU is slowly moving toward strengthening the regional security system.

The EU is still far from fully recognizing that the fundamental realities on the continent have changed: Russia did not launch this war to protect Russian-speaking Ukrainians; it initiated the war to completely destroy Ukraine and seeks to extend the conflict to EU and NATO countries. Therefore, the European Union must continue moving toward greater cohesion despite the challenges posed by populist governments and must develop regional alliances in defense, security, economic, and energy sectors.

Conclusion

It appears unlikely that the EU or NATO will collapse under the pressure of Russian aggression against Ukraine and the radical changes unfolding in Europe and globally. Both organizations are undergoing a difficult

period, as beyond rearmament and addressing internal challenges, they are constructing a new identity that compels them to step out of their traditional comfort zone and from under the U.S. security umbrella. This process is lengthy and painful; nevertheless, since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, Finland and Sweden have joined NATO through an accelerated procedure. In this case, a pragmatic political decision demonstrates the Alliance's ability to respond to complex challenges when threats become real. The next step must be NATO's and the EU's readiness to respond to open Russian provocations against member states, which have occurred regularly since 2022. Reliance on Article 5 of the NATO Treaty can no longer be taken for granted, as there has been no practical mechanism for its application. This represents a psychological barrier that Alliance countries have yet to overcome; however, under the pressure of escalating Russian aggression, new forms and methods of response and defense are being sought. The United Kingdom may play one of the leading roles in this process, as it has provided comprehensive assistance and support to Ukraine and has been more proactive than Germany or France in strengthening its own defense capabilities and countering Russian provocations.

NATO and the EU must cease looking to the United States for direction, as Donald Trump's policies are highly unpredictable, and such turbulence is likely to persist. Trump and his circle, like Russia and China, are actively engaged in competition for resources, including in the Arctic and Antarctica. An example of this was the escalation of tensions around Greenland and Donald Trump's expressed desire to purchase or otherwise acquire the island from Denmark. This contributed to Putin's renewed international subjectivity and the initiation of negotiations with him, pressure on Ukraine to conclude an immediate peace agreement, and the implicit legitimization of Putin's actions regarding Ukraine—namely, the annexation of Crimea and the determination to secure control over the Donbas at any cost. Russia is weakening, albeit slowly, losing allies in various regions of the world—such as Venezuela in South America and Iran in the Middle East – while simultaneously attempting to instrumentalize the United States and Trump for its own purposes. Despite these complex geopolitical circumstances, it would be premature to speak of Europe diverting its attention from Ukraine or shifting its focus to other geopolitical issues. This issue will remain as one of key determinants of European security.

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