Russia's war against Ukraine is not only a challenge to territorial borders. It is Putin's war to change Europe's order.

Russia's war against Ukraine is not only a challenge to Europe's territorial borders, writes **Kristina Spohr**. *It is a war that challenges the character and rules that have governed the international system since 1945.*

At dawn on 24 February 2022, Russian military forces invaded Ukraine. This blatant act of aggression marked a major escalation of a conflict that first erupted in 2014 with Russia's annexation of the Crimea and its backing of the separatist territories in the Donbass. Vladimir Putin launched Russia's invasion under the guise of a 'special military operation', claiming to be answering calls for 'help' by the 'People's Republics of Donbass' – Donetsk and Lukhansk – which he had recognised only three days earlier. But he claimed he also wanted to 'demilitarize and denazify Ukraine', while bringing to 'justice those who have committed numerous bloody crimes against peaceful people, including Russian nationals'.

His real target, however, is much larger than Ukraine – nothing less than the European order created under American aegis after the end of the Cold War. To Putin, that order is an 'empire of lies' that has tried to 'put the final squeeze on us, finish us off, and utterly destroy us'. To countries like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – Baltic states that struggled for much of the twentieth century to escape Russian domination – that European order is the touchstone of their freedom.

This brutal attack on Ukrainian territorial integrity had been long in coming. Yet many in Europe and America had hoped, perhaps even believed, that war could be averted by diplomatic means, such as the Normandy Process developed by France and Germany after 2014. But, since last autumn, diplomacy has been overshadowed by the relentless build-up of Russian forces in the region – so that by mid-February 2022, nearly 200,000 soldiers were poised on Ukraine's eastern, northern, and southern borders. Meanwhile, as Putin intensified the political pressure on Kyiv, he also launched a propaganda offensive against the West.

On 17 December 2021, Putin demanded formally binding security guarantees from America and NATO, specifically barring former Soviet republics from ever joining NATO and preventing any military cooperation with these countries. He also called on NATO to pull its troops back to their 1997 positions, while insisting that America withdraw its own forces, including its nuclear weapons, from Europe altogether. Putin's goal was not just a rewrite of Russia's post-1991 relations with the West. His apparent target was an end to the NATO alliance created back in 1949.

A week of intensive diplomatic talks in mid-January ended without result. In subsequent written answers, NATO and America unsurprisingly rejected Russia's radical restructuring attempt. Yet Washington did try to 'set out a serious diplomatic path forward', proposing discussions over reciprocal restraints on short- and medium-range nuclear weapons, as well as limits to the size and location of military exercises. More phone calls and meetings at the Kremlin followed, with the German Chancellor and French President at the forefront. The Beijing Winter Olympics, accompanied by an uneasy show of Russo-Chinese unity, passed. Nothing halted the momentum towards war.

In fact, there was never any room for negotiation between NATO and Russia on the key issues. From the West's perspective, Putin's demands were wildly unrealistic. Western leaders could not countenance a Kremlin veto over where NATO could locate conventional forces or nuclear weapons. Nor was the Alliance prepared to rescind its 'open door' policy, which ensured that any state could seek to join it, not least because such freedom of choice is a basic condition of the European security order enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 – and signed by the Soviet Union.

But herein lies the crux. For Putin, the post-Wall European security order that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 is simply unacceptable: so much so, that he is willing to pay the highest price to overturn it – by force.

Putin's final steps to war were carefully orchestrated. They began on 17 February, when the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that 'in the absence of will on the American side to negotiate firm and legally binding guarantees on our security from the United States and its allies', Russia was 'forced to respond, including with military-technical measures'.

Four days later, Putin marshalled his Security Council members on 'live' TV, bullying and harassing them as they confirmed Russia's recognition of its proxies – the People's republics of Donetsk and Lukhansk – as fully independent states. His own speech was rambling, but extremely angry and passionate. It tried to bend Ukraine's complex history to his own vision. The very idea of Ukrainian statehood, he claimed, was a fiction. Ignoring that parts had fallen under the jurisdiction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Poland or Lithuania, he insisted that historically Ukraine had always been part of Russia. Blaming Lenin for 'separating, severing what is historically Russian land', he declared that 'modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia'. He also described Gorbachev's decision to give Ukraine the right to become independent of the Soviet Union 'without any conditions', as just 'crazy'. Above all, he turned his ire on to the West, especially America which, he declared, had cultivated and corrupted Ukraine, turning it into a 'colony with a *puppet* regime' and leading it away from its rightful place within a greater Russia.

As a misreading of history, Putin's speech was extreme even by his standards. It ignored, most obviously, the fact that in 1991, as the USSR teetered on the brink of collapse, more than 90% of Ukrainians (including majorities in the regions of Donbass and Crimea) had voted for independence. It also made no reference to Ukraine's commitment in 1994 under the Budapest Memorandum to exchange all its nuclear weapons – one third of the former Soviet Union's arsenal – in return for formal security assurances from Britain, the United States, and most notably Russia.

During his own turn at the Council meeting, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov offered a much shorter and more succinct, but no less revealing, rendition of the Kremlin's view of the recent past. This contained the long-perpetuated myth of Western betrayal of Russia over supposed promises that had been made on NATO's non-enlargement during German unification diplomacy in 1990. Lavrov even claimed to have proof of a Western stab in Russia's back – a 'new' document from the UK National Archives, 'recently' unearthed by an American IR scholar, and the subject of a sensationalist article in the *Spiegel online* only four days earlier. Unsurprisingly, none of these claims bore to close scrutiny. The document had been declassified almost five years earlier. A note on a quadripartite discussion of foreign ministry political directors from Britain, France, Germany, and the U.S., it was not an official negotiation by top leaders. It contained nothing that could serve as proof of binding pledges. Clearly, both journalist and academic had fallen for the 'fallacy of the lonely fact', but this did not trouble the unscrupulous propagandists in the Kremlin. On the contrary, Lavrov could not have hoped for a better gift at such an opportune moment.

Putin and his closest acolytes have gone to great lengths to construct their narrative of Russian victimisation. They have played on feelings of guilt in some parts of the West, notably Germany, about the huge losses suffered by the Red Army in combatting Nazi aggression. It is their way of trying to foster acceptance and create legitimacy for Russian actions towards Ukraine. Their relentless abuse of history needs to be categorically rejected and decisively countered. For Putin's dangerous revisionism not only threatens an order based on peaceful resolution of conflicts, self-determination, and inviolability of borders. In Putin's mind, history and geography trump such principles. As he proclaimed in his declaration of war on 24 February, the fact that on Russia's 'historical land, a hostile "anti-Russia" is taking shape' is 'a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation'. If they stand in his way, he is therefore prepared to threaten Europe and America with consequences 'such as you have never seen in your entire history'.

The war, then, is about much more than Russia seeking to absorb Ukraine and potentially other parts of the Russian 'near abroad', the former Soviet Republics. Putin sees his country as engaged in a struggle against American presence in Europe and against the post-Wall global order at large. For the West too, this is now a war that challenges more than just territorial borders. It also strikes at the heart of the character and rules that have governed the international system since 1945. The stakes are that high.

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About the Author

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