The Pathways to the war in Europe

Os caminhos da guerra na Europa

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Abstract

War broke out in Europe when Europeans were convinced of their lasting peace, based more on ideas than reality. Pacifism, the dream of Europeans in the 60s and 70s, was replaced by the violence of conflict. Analysts, historians, militaries, sociologists and other commentators on war have found it difficult to deal with the novelty of a nationalist war of defense in a global world. The global turn in political theory has been put to the test. In its analytical capacity, in the normative projection of the desired world in the face of the strategic and political reality of resources, multilateralism and the emergence of new global actors. The *Wider West* or the *Global South* are examples of emerging concepts whose substantive meaning has yet to be clarified. This issue of Political Observer aims to contribute to the debate, and provide a historical record of the emergence of the present of the war, sometimes contextualizing the past in order to clarify some of the vectors of the analyses that will follow in a future perceived as uncertain, for which this opening paper provides a first viewpoint sustained by some further readings mentioned at the end, which are essential to understanding the conflict.

Keywords: war; Ukraine; Europe; conflict

Surfacing the present

Ukraine was a cornerstone of the Soviet Union until it voted overwhelmingly for independence in 1991. A milestone that became a death sentence for the collapsing superpower and a progressive difficulty in maintaining its status in the concert of world powers.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, OTAN moved eastwards, bringing into the fold most of the Eastern European nations that were in the communist orbit. In 2004, OTAN added the former Soviet republics in the Baltic Sea, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, to the group. Four years later, it declared its intention to offer membership to Ukraine in the distant future - crossing a red line for Russia.

Putin pointed out that he perceived OTAN's expansion as an existential threat, and the prospect of Ukraine joining the Western military alliance as a hostile act. In interviews and speeches, he emphasized his view that Ukraine is part of Russia, culturally, linguistically and politically.

While part of the Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine may feel the same way, a more nationalist Ukrainian-speaking population in the west has historically supported greater integration with Europe. In an article written in July 2021, Putin underlined the shared history, describing Russians and Ukrainians as one people. Ukrainians, who in the last three decades have

sought to align themselves more closely with Western institutions such as the European Union and OTAN, declare their opposition to this.

In early 2014, mass protests in the capital Kiev, known as *Euromaidan* or the *revolution of dignity*, forced out a Russian-friendly president after he refused to sign an association agreement with the European Union. Russia responded by annexing the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and fomenting a separatist rebellion in eastern Ukraine, which took control of part of the Donbass region. Despite a ceasefire agreement in 2015, the two sides have failed to achieve a stable peace, and the front line has barely moved since. Almost 14,000 people have died in the conflict and there are around 1.5 million internally displaced people in Ukraine, according to the Ukrainian government.

Since then, Putin has increased the pressure on the West without ever firing a shot or driving a tank across its border with Ukraine. Moscow has been accused of engaging in a hybrid war against Ukraine, using cyber-attacks, economic pressure and propaganda to increase tensions. Still, the Kremlin's intentions in the country have largely remained a mystery. What Putin did make clear, however, was that he perceived OTAN's eastward expansion as an existential threat to Russia.

Putin presented the US and OTAN with a list of security demands. The main one was a guarantee that Ukraine would never join OTAN and that the alliance would reduce its military presence in Eastern and Central Europe - proposals that the US and its allies have repeatedly said are non-negotiable. Putin indicated that he was not interested in lengthy negotiations on the issue.

High-level negotiations between the West and Russia ended in January 2021 without any breakthrough. The impasse has left European leaders engaged in a frenzy of diplomacy, exploring a negotiating channel established between France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine - known as the *Normandy Format* negotiations - which could provide a way to calm the crisis.

Putin repeated allegations that Ukraine was carrying out a genocide of Russian speakers in the Donbass region and called for the conflict to be resolved by progressing peace in Minsk, echoing rhetoric similar to that used as a pretext to annex Crimea. But Moscow and Kiev continued to disagree on the main elements of the peace agreement signed in 2015. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said he didn't like any point of the Minsk agreements, which call for dialogue on local elections in two Russian-backed separatist regions in the east of the country and - although it's not clear in what sequence - would also restore the Ukrainian government's control over its eastern borders. Putin responded in blunt terms, saying that regardless of whether Zelensky liked the plan, it should be implemented.

President Zelensky repeatedly underestimated the danger of a Russian invasion, noting that the threat had existed for years and had not become more serious in recent months. In Kiev, Ukrainians continued their daily business and habits, despite international warnings and foreign governments withdrawing their diplomatic staff from the capital. The Ukrainian government has insisted that Moscow cannot prevent Kiev from building closer ties with OTAN, or interfering in its domestic or foreign policy. Amid warnings from Western leaders of a Russian invasion, the Ukrainian president declared 16 February as National Unity Day, insisting that Ukraine would not be intimidated by any enemy and would be able to defend itself. *We are doing our best to defend our interests and have won the diplomatic support of almost all the leaders of the civilized world, Zelensky said, adding: The security of Europe and the entire continent depends on Ukraine and our armies.*

Gathering the past

The effort to contextualize the current war involves, at least briefly and tentatively, scrutinizing some of the milestones in Ukraine's history. From the founding of the *Kazar Khanate* in the south-west of what is now part of Europe, near the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus, to Kievan Rus (800-1100), the center of the powerful and prestigious all-powerful state in Europe, with a principality capital in Kiev. This is at the root of the various national identities in the Slavic area of

Europe. Both the Ukrainian nationality and the other East Slavic nations in subsequent centuries, including Russians and Belarusians.

Kievan Rus succeeded the *Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* (1300-1600), when the southern part of Ukraine (including Crimea) was ruled by the *Crimean Khanate*, while the lands west of the Carpathians had been dominated by the Magyars or Hungarians since the 11th century. By virtue of the Union of Lublin of 1569, a considerable portion of Ukrainian territory passed from Lithuanian to Polish control, transferred to the crown of Poland. As you can see, the shifting and shrinking of the borders of what is now called the territory of Ukraine is not a historical inevitability, but rather a dynamic circumstance of the times.

Especially if we think back to the *period of the Cossacks* (1600-1800), those who settled around the Dnieper River, who in the mid-17th century represented a quasi-state (Zaporozhian Sich) that escaped Poland's control. In 1648, these rebellious Cossacks provoked the partition of Ukraine between Poland and Russia, consolidated by the Treaty of Pereiaslav (1654), in which the Tsar undertook to protect eastern Ukraine from the Poles. In 1783, the Crimean Khanate was annexed by Russia, which ended Tatar - Turkmen - domination in the region. This leads us to think about the socio-historical affiliation of these territories with Turkey and the other republics in this geographical area.

When Poland was shared between Prussia, Austria and Russia in 1793-95, the latter initially took the territories to the east of the Dnieper River, the long river that flows from Russia into Belarus and from there into Ukraine, while Austria took Western Ukraine. In 1796, Russia renamed the territories west of the Dnieper River *New Russia*.

Although the promises of Ukrainian autonomy made by the agreement of Pereiaslav never materialized, Ukrainians played an important role within the Russian Empire, taking part in the wars against the Eastern European monarchies and the Ottoman Empire. Subsequently, the Tsarist regime began to implement a harsh policy of "Russification", banning the use of the Ukrainian language in publications and in public.

By the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed at the beginning of 1918, the Soviet Union gave up sovereignty over a large part of Ukrainian territory, but this treaty was cancelled with the defeat of the Central Empires at the end of the First World War, and the territory became disputed in the Polish-Soviet War. It was the collapse of the Russian and Austrian Empires after this war, as well as the Russian Revolution of 1917, that led to the resurgence of the Ukrainian national movement in favor of self-determination in much of Ukraine.

In February 1917, with the end of Tsarism, power began to be contested between the Provisional Government in St Petersburg and the *Central Rada in Kiev*. In December, following the Bolshevik seizure of power, the First Congress of Ukrainian Soviets proclaimed domination over the easternmost regions of Ukraine. On the other hand, the Rada allied itself with the Austro-German troops who invaded the country in the spring of 1918. Until 1920, Ukraine was the battleground of the war between the Soviet government and its internal and external enemies. The Polish failure in the Kiev Offensive (1920), the final act of the Polish-Soviet war, led in March 1921 to the celebrated *Peace of Riga* between Poland and the Bolsheviks, which once again divided Ukraine. The western portion was incorporated into the new *Second Polish Republic* and the larger part, in the center and east, became the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, later united with the Union of Socialist Republics when it was created in December 1922.

The Ukrainian national ideal survived during the first years under the Soviets. Ukrainian culture and language flourished during the adoption of the Soviet nationalities policy. These gains were lost with the political changes of the 30s. Soviet industrialization began in Ukraine from the late 1920s, which led to the country's industrial output quadrupling in the 1930s. To meet the need for greater food supplies and to finance industrialization, Stalin established a program of collectivization of agriculture. The process was guaranteed by the actions of the Soviet military and police: those who resisted were arrested and deported. The peasants were forced to deal with the devastating effects of collectivization on agricultural productivity and the demands for increased production quotas. This historic process, known as the Holodomor, led to around 7 million

people dying of starvation. At the same time, the Soviets accused the Ukrainian political and cultural elite of nationalist deviations, when nationality policies were reversed. Two waves of purges (1929-1934 and 1936-1938) resulted in the elimination of four-fifths of Ukraine's cultural elite.

In September 1939, as a result of secret clauses in the non-aggression pact signed in 1939 between Germany and the USSR and Germany's invasion of Poland, which destroyed that country's military power, there was also a Soviet invasion of Poland, which expanded the territory of Ukraine.

During the Second World War, some members of the Ukrainian nationalist underground fought against Nazis and Soviets alike, while others collaborated with both sides. In 1941, the German invaders and their Axis allies advanced against a desperate Red Army. During the siege of Kiev, the city was designated a Hero City by the Soviets for the fierce resistance of the local population. More than 660,000 Soviet soldiers were captured there.

At first, the Germans were welcomed as liberators by many Ukrainians, especially in Western Ukraine, which had only been occupied by the Soviets in 1939. However, German control over the occupied territories didn't bother to exploit Ukrainian discontent with Soviet policies; on the contrary, it maintained collective farms and carried out a genocidal policy against Jews. As a result, the majority of the population in the occupied territories began to oppose the Nazis.

Total civilian losses during the war and the German occupation of Ukraine are estimated at between five and eight million people, including more than half a million Jews. Of the eleven million Soviet soldiers killed in battle, around a quarter were ethnic Ukrainians.

With the end of the Second World War, the borders of Soviet Ukraine were extended westwards, uniting most Ukrainians under a single political entity. Most of the non-Ukrainian population of the annexed territories was deported. After the war, Ukraine became a member of the United Nations.

Succinctly, we could say that since the emergence of the first East Slavic state in the region that corresponds to present-day Ukrainian territory, there has been a brief period of independence (1917-1921), but after the Russian Revolution, this was followed by the absorption of Ukraine into the Soviet Union in 1922. The current borders were only fixed in 1954. It was finally independent in 1991, with the disintegration of the USSR.

Since the beginning of its independence, Ukraine has struggled to peacefully implement its system of government. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has been mired in years of corruption, mismanagement, lack of economic growth, currency devaluation, and an inability to secure funding for public markets.

From 2004 onwards, Ukraine sought to establish closer relations with the European Union and Russia. Among these measures was an association agreement with the European Union, which would provide Ukraine with conditional resources to carry out multiple reforms. At Russia's request, Ukrainian President Yanukovych refused to sign the agreement, after which he signed a treaty and a billion-dollar loan with Russia, which sparked civil unrest in Kiev and led to violent clashes with police forces. This series of protests and political events, which took place between 2004 and 2005, were a response to the massive allegations of corruption, vote intimidation and outright electoral fraud during the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election. The protests were instigated by numerical data from local and foreign observers, and widespread public knowledge, that the results of the 21 November 2004 vote between the main candidates, Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovych, were rigged in favour of the latter. The colour orange was adopted by the protesters as the official colour of the movement because it was the colour of the election campaign of the main opposition candidate, Viktor Yushchenko. The protests became known as the Orange Revolution because the symbol of solidarity with Yushchenko's movement in Ukraine was an orange ribbon or flag of the same colour.

This is how ten years later, in 2014, the Second Orange Revolution or Continuous Orange Revolution, also known as the Revolution of Dignity in Kiev, was marked by violent protests against the elected government of Viktor Yanukovych. The unrest had already begun at the end of the previous year, in 2013, with public protests, evolving since then, with many calling for the

resignation of the president and his government. The demonstrators demanded greater European integration, as well as action on corruption in the government. The unrest quickly escalated, leading to the deposition of Yanukovych and the installation, a few days later, of an interim government, supported by groups from different parts of the political system, all united against Russian power. The deposed president took refuge in Russia and is now wanted in Ukraine on charges of being responsible for the deaths of demonstrators. This E*uromaidan (this esplanade of Europe)* brought about the fall of the government and was followed by a series of changes, in rapid succession, in Ukraine's socio-political system, including the formation of a new interim government, the restoration of the constitutional amendments and 2004 and the holding of new presidential elections on 25 May 2014, in which the pro-Western Petro Poroshenko emerged victorious.

As we saw earlier, after the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, while separatist forces backed by the Russian government took over part of the Donbas region in south-eastern Ukraine.

Since the beginning of 2021, a build-up of Russian military presence has taken place along the Russia-Ukraine border. Ukraine was invaded by Russia on 24 February 2022. The Invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022, or officially by the Russian government as the "Special Military Operation in Ukraine" was a large-scale military invasion launched by Russia. Several analysts considered this invasion to be the biggest military confrontation in Europe since the Second World War. The war generated a huge wave of migration from Ukraine and Russia, as well as a global food crisis, rising fuel prices and fuelled inflation.

On 21 February 2022, Putin recognised the Donestsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic, the two self-proclaimed state regions controlled by pro-Russian separatists in the Donbass. The invasion has received widespread condemnation from the international community, reflected in sanctions imposed on Russia. Global protests have taken place against the invasion, while the protests that have taken place in Russia have been responded to with mass arrests and the Russian government has significantly increased its repression of independent media.

A large number of companies have started a boycott of Russia and Belarus. Several states have provided humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine. In response to the military aid, Putin put Russia's nuclear forces on high alert, increasing tensions with the West, while the possibility of an escalation into nuclear war remains on the horizon.

The outlook for the future

The return of large-scale war to the old continent is profoundly shaking up Europeans' policies and mentalities and, consequently, the way they look at history and the world. In particular, with regard to the way in which defence issues and the organisation of the European security architecture have been viewed until now, nothing will ever be the same. However, while this is already clear to the vast majority of countries, there are many other challenges posed by the war in Ukraine that force us to rethink what lies ahead. Of these, three stand out as decisive for (re)shaping the future: Ukraine's full integration into the West; the rest of the world's position in the world order; and what kind of Russia we will have in the post-conflict period.

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