

The Buffer State Dilemma: Interrogating Russia-West Geo-Strategic Rivalry and Civilizational Stakes in Ukraine

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Abstract

The tepid relationship between Ukraine and the Russian Federation broadly represents only a fraction of geopolitical tensions between Western nations and Russia, particularly the United States and the European Union, following the demise of the Soviet Union. Russia's loss of Warsaw Pact allies, especially Ukraine- a critical buffer country- created an ideological space and raised questions about its security, civilization, and identity. Ukraine's strategic location acts as a buzzword to Russian ideological identity and economic resurgence, particularly in energy transit. The competing interests of the West and Russia over Ukraine snowballed into a crisis, culminating in the invasion of Ukraine. Opinions remain sharply divided in the literature on the root causes of the conflict. This paper interrogates the intersection of Russia's securitisation of its ideological identity in Ukraine, which is essential concerning Western influence, encroachment and its implications for the conflict. Utilising the structural realism as a theoretical framework, the paper adopted secondary method of data collection and, content analysis. The study highlighted the primacy of Russia's authoritarian ideology, like a religion its erosion is crossing the red line which European Union/NATO liberal values will bring to bear on Ukraine membership of the blocs. More importantly, the ideological securitisation stratagem was to protect its geopolitical interests and control over gas transit routes, which is fundamental to its economic resurgence. Therefore, the paper recommends dialogue platforms between Russia and NATO/EU to address Ukraine's status and promote its economic development, while allowing Ukraine to maintain balanced relations with Russia and Western nations.

Keywords: *Buffer State Dilemma; Russia; Western Nations; Ukraine; Geo-Political Rivalry; Civilizational Stakes.*

INTRODUCTION

The strained relationship between the Russian Federation and Ukraine represents only a fraction of Russia's broader challenges in its interactions with Western nations, particularly the European Union and the United States. As the successor state to the Soviet Union Central Government, Russia profoundly questions its national identity due to the ideological vacuum in post-Soviet states and the loss of key allies, notably Ukraine. Ukraine holds strategic significance as a buffer state between Europe and Russia, critical to Russia's authoritarian ideology, civilization, security and economic resurgence (Muzamil, 2022; Dim, 2024). Divergent strategic interests over Ukraine have exacerbated tensions between Russia and the West. While Western nations sought to integrate Ukraine into NATO and the European Union

to establish a unified bloc, Russia aimed to maintain its sphere of influence and defend its role in global geopolitics (Masters, 2022).

This clash of interests over Ukraine has led to significant conflicts, including Russia's annexation of Crimea 2014, invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and subsequently occupation of its swathe of territory by Russia, making it the most significant land conflict in Europe after the World War II (Wood, 2016; Kranodebska, 2021). The Western narratives have predominantly assigned blame to Russia for the situation, portraying President Vladimir Putin as an expansionist leader with imperial ambitions similar to those of Adolf Hitler. The perception is that Putin seeks to reverse the geopolitical consequences of the Soviet Union's dissolution by reclaiming control over Ukraine and other post-Soviet states (Abelow, 2022; Measheimer, 2022).

Some scholars have contended that Putin's foreign policy thrust indicates a renewed expansionist quest and ambition to establish a "Greater Russia" with a semblance of the Soviet Union (Toal, 2017; McDermott, 2021). Putin has frequently claimed that Ukraine is an "artificial state", asserting that Russians and Ukrainians share a common history, culture and civilisation. He thus has emphasised Russia's right to dominate its neighbours through concepts such as "near abroad", which define Ukraine's relationship with Russia while rejecting Western influence and liberal democratic ideals (Ashby & Glantz, 2023).

Contrary to this perspective, some scholars and analysts have argued that Western nations miscalculated policies, particularly NATO's eastward encroachment, which provoked Russia into viewing Ukraine as an ontological security threat and a springboard for the West and NATO influence in the post-Soviet states. They emphasised the renegeing and breaching of the informal assurances made by United States during German reunification discussions and negotiations in 1990-91, where NATO purportedly pledged not to expand toward Russia's borders (Measheimer, 2014). Over three decades, NATO's incremental eastward movement has fuelled Russian concerns about encirclement. Additional provocations include U.S. withdrawal from arms treaties like the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (2001) and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (2019), military exercises in Ukraine, and support for Ukraine's pro-Western government following the Revolution of Dignity (Measheimer, 2022; Trenin, 2014; Abelow, 2022). However, the concerns of Russia were set aside by many former Warsaw Pact Alliance states, who desperately wanted an affiliation with the West in order to preserve their independence, sovereignty and return to sustainable development. This premise, which logically justified NATO and EU expansion, was motivated not by the United States' or European Union's quest for enlargement, but rather by the effective demand of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states (Tellis, 2024).

While these highlighted factors are relevant in examining the conflict in the region, they neglect the conflict's broader ideological and philosophical proportions. This clash of interests between Western nations and Russia transcends geopolitical strategy; it represents a clash between Russian authoritarian ideology and Western liberal democracy (Merry, 2016). Putin's worries and suspicions about NATO expansion may be understood as part of this broader effort to shield Russian ideology from Western influence. This study, therefore, aims to examine Russia's securitisation of its ideology, civilisation and identity in Ukraine against perceived Western expansion. This thought is presented under the following headings: Methodology; Theoretical Framework; West's Support for Ukraine's NATO membership and Russia's Opposition; Russian Civilisation as a Strategic Tool; Western Affront; Security of Civilisation; Russian Primacy and Rejection of Equality; Discussion and Conclusion.

METHODOLOGY

The paper utilised the secondary method of data collection, Data were gathered from journals, books, conference papers, and analysed using content analysis. Content analysis was deployed to critically examine the content of documents to understand their ideas, concepts, and the message they convey (Stone et al, 1966). The purpose of analysis is to grasp and explain how the constitutive elements of a complex whole are related, with a view to gaining a better knowledge of the subject under study (Burnham et al, 2004). Content analysis is particularly well-suited for analysing documentary evidence, as it is descriptive, interactive, and multi-dimensional, allowing for a thorough exploration of textual materials. Thus, by extracting valuable information from the available documents, we arrived at conclusions which in turn informed our recommendations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of the Structural realism was adopted as a theoretical framework. Structural realism finds its foundation in Kenneth Waltz's Theory of International Politics (1979) and was subsequently expanded upon by John Mearsheimer in his work, the tragedy of Great Power Politics (2001) among others. The theory explicates the role of power politics in international system, with competition and conflict as the enduring features. Structural realism majorly focuses on the structure of international system and environment, and anarchy is considered as the major independent variable that presents significant opportunities and challenges for states as they relate with each other. The scholars noted that the anarchical structure of the international system, and its competitive character forces states to either opt for self-help or go for the balance of power through alliances for their survival, ideology and security.

Waltz (1979) contended that a state's position in the international system underscores and determines its policies, preferences and action. His argument noted that states are not intrinsically aggressive, but the first concern of states is to maximize power, maintain their position in the global system. This is because uncertainties about intentions of other states compel great powers to adopt competitive, offensive and expansionist policies whenever the benefits exceed the cost (Synder, 1991). While Mearsheimer (2001) argued that the ultimate goal of every major power is to become a hegemon. He noted that states quickly understand that the best way to ensure their survival is to be the most powerful state in the system (2001:33).

Security is the core of structural realism because survival is the main motivations of states, hence constant security competition and security dilemma, even with benign intentions. And since there is no higher authority above the state to protect its existence and interests, and external aggressor threatens its survival and interests, especially in the case of major powers or alliance, state's fear may cause misperception and lead to unwanted actions even a war or attack on the perceived aggressor. According to Feng and Ruizhuang (2006), structural realists noted that a state will take action because of their discontent with the global order and would do so to maintain its position among other states. Relating this to Russia invasion of Ukraine, it can be advanced that President Vladimir Putin and Kremlin resented the international system, particularly with the recent advancements made by NATO/EU, and uninspiring assurances not to expand to Ukraine. Conflict in Ukraine can be perceived as relative competition between NATO/EU and Russia, with EU/NATO seeking to expand its influence and liberal ideology into Ukraine, and Russia working to protect its ideology, civilization and strategic interests.

West support for Ukraine NATO Membership and Russia Opposition

The clash of interests is imperative in comprehending the dynamics in the Russia-West geo-political relationship, particularly in Ukraine. Russia perceives Ukraine's membership in NATO and the EU as a direct ontological security threat to its geo-strategic interests, ideology, identity and cultural values (Krasnodebska, 2021). Historically, Russia had deep cultural ties with Ukraine. Ukraine was central to Russia's identity and global vision. Russia and Ukraine traced their heritage to Kievan Rus and were part of an Orthodox civilisation. More importantly, the Black Sea in Ukraine, which has been described as a theatre of civilisation struggle between European and "oriental" civilisations, also symbolize the struggle for imperial greatness in Russian national discourse (Greenspan, 2022)

The Black Sea is significant to Russia, and Ukraine's attempt to secede is seen as a direct West-backed attack on Russian civilization and sovereignty. However, the US-led West resolved to incorporate Ukraine into the liberal international order, deciding in 2008 to expand NATO, a key pillar of the liberal order, to integrate Ukraine, which historically served as a buffer state for Russia. Governments in the United States, including those in President Bill Clinton's administration, have consistently voiced open support for Eastern European NATO membership, including Ukraine. The US support for Ukraine joining NATO continues and persists during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. They repeatedly confirmed United States backing for Ukraine's NATO membership despite initially attempting to "reset" US-Russian relations (Clinton, 2010; NBC News, 2009). Though President Donald Trump did not openly express support for Ukraine's NATO membership during his first term, his administration nevertheless provided military equipment and training assistance to westernize Ukrainian armed forces. Subsequently, President Joseph Biden's administration has avowed to commit to Ukraine's bid to join NATO (Williams & Zinets, 2021).

Under the banner of defending the liberal order and freedom, the West has actively supported Ukraine, urging it to continue the conflict despite the monumental humanitarian casualties and environmental deterioration. Since the commencement of the President Biden administration, the United States, the largest provider of military support to Ukraine, has committed over \$100 billion (Jonathan & Mellow, 2023). The European Union has contributed lethal arms and nonlethal equipment through the European Peace Facility (EPF). These substantial military supports include anti-tank missiles, artillery guns, air defence systems, armoured fighting vehicles, anti-structure munitions, M270 long-range multiple launch rocket systems, among others. The United Kingdom established a long-term training programme for the Ukrainian armed forces, with the aim of training about 30,000 new and existing Ukrainian soldiers, including pilots and marines. At the same time, Germany broke with its security policy and delivered a wide range of arms. These include 1,000 anti-tank, 500 surface-to-air missiles, and 14 armoured vehicles. While the supply represents an essential step in helping Ukrainians in their fight against Russia, it reinforces Europe's defence of its liberal ideology and security (Talmon, 2022; Wermuth & Zack, 2023; Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2024).

In response, Russia, having regained its great power status under the Vladimir Putin government, has steadily resisted by seeking to maintain Ukraine as a buffer state (Roren, 2023). Concomitantly, based on the cultural affinities, Vladimir Putin and the Russian political elite claimed that Ukraine's membership of the EU and NATO posed an ontological threat to Russia's age-long authoritarian regime and Orthodox civilisation (Wood, 2016). This opinion drives Russia's measures to undercut and challenge Ukraine's NATO aspirations. For Putin, alignment with the EU and NATO is toxic, perilous and represents not only a geo-economic

threat but also corrosion of Russian civilisation. Accordingly, after the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014 that toppled the pro-Russian government in Kyiv and aligned Ukraine more closely with the West, Russia responded by annexing Crimea. Russia subsequently sought to divide Ukraine to prevent it from falling into the Western sphere, and joining NATO and the EU. To this objective, Russia has openly clashed with Ukraine since 2014, supporting the pro-Russian separatist movements in Luhansk and Donetsk regions in their bid for secession. Corollary to the above, the Kremlin seeks to control the Eastern region as part of its sphere of influence, while leaving Western Ukraine as a neutral or demilitarized region (Plokhyy, 2023).

In the meantime, Ukraine perceives its relationship with Russia through a lens of resistance rather than symbiosis. Ukraine's struggle for self-determination is in tandem with Western liberalism, which has provoked Russian opposition due to its perceived corrosion of Russian ideology. Liberal values inherently antagonize authoritarian states. The United States-led liberal international order seeks to propagate liberal values worldwide and alter the global status quo in a way that resembles the American domestic order. This accounts for the United States' unwavering support for Ukraine's NATO membership, and this development also motivated Russia's military resistance. This clash of interests underpins the competing visions between Western liberalism and Russian authoritarianism, with Ukraine at the centre of this ideological struggle (Mearsheimer, 2018; Lee & Lim, 2025).

Russian Civilisation as a Strategic Tool

In the Soviet Union, as in contemporary Russia, the values of Orthodox civilisation shape its history and play a critical role in its domestic and foreign policy. The primacy of the Orthodox civilisation is elevated to the height of a secular religion, prompting Russia to pride and designate itself a civilizational state, the custodian and the protector of Orthodox Christianity and traditional values, contrary to Western civilisation and liberal traditions (Mankoff, 2022). In Russian religious traditions, Orthodox Christianity is connected to the religious philosophical orientations of the Holy Rus, which combines elements of statehood and religion, and emphasises the religious connectedness of the people of Ukraine and Russia (Sakwa, 2016). Therefore, Russia's vociferous and aggressive defence of its civilisation and ideology justifies its resistance and stiff opposition to NATO and EU expansion into Ukraine, which it views as an encroachment on its sphere of influence. For Putin, the assertiveness of this struggle is in defence against Western efforts to impose liberal democracy and multiculturalism, values perceived as hostile to Russia's values and traditions.

Ostensibly founded by Vikings in the ninth century, Kievan Rus expanded to include Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, with its capital in Kiev, in Ukraine. (Wood, 2016). As a result, Putin's conviction that Russians and Ukrainians share a common past and religious heritage underscores his resistance and opposition to Ukraine's Western alignment. He views this shift as a betrayal of their shared civilizational identity. For Russia, preserving this historical connection is crucial for maintaining its cultural identity, ideology and civilization ethos.

Western Affront

The end of the Cold War marked a momentous milestone and paradigm shift in European security architecture, which de-escalated nuclear acquisition with Russia's belief that the United States and NATO should respect and adhere to informal agreements regarding their expansion in Europe. However, NATO's eastward expansion, which included incorporating countries like the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, and later Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, and the Baltic States, was seen as a betrayal of these assurances. This

expansion aimed to establish liberal democracy, boost economic cooperation, and incorporate these post-Soviet states into international institutions, aligning them with Western values and norms (Mearsheimer, 2022; Muzamil, 2022).

The liberal order with concomitant democracy that emerged in Europe is diametrically at variance with the *realpolitik* of the Cold War era, leading to contradictory and conflicting visions between Russia and the West. While Putin, a pragmatist, acted by *realpolitik* philosophy, his Western counterparts adhered to liberal ideals. This variation of values accidentally contributed to the crises in Ukraine, as the United States and its allies, in pursuing liberal policies, inadvertently antagonize Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014; 2022).

Concomitant to the liberal order is the European Union's established Eastern Partnership Initiative in 2008, a program designed for the economic growth, transformative development and prosperity of the post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine, by incorporating them into the EU economy. Russia viewed this program as a geo-economic stratagem and instrument that could enhance NATO expansion and the spread of Western values, thereby undermining its control and influence. The Kremlin's apprehension is that the Western social engineering in Ukraine could set a model for similar changes in Russia, potentially eroding the authoritarian ideology which Putin represents (Emerson, 2014; Abelow, 2022).

Consequently, the West's triple packages of NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and the spreading of liberal democracy aggravated tensions between Russia and the West. The spark that ignited this simmering conflict occurred in November 2013, when Ukrainian President Yanukovich rejected a significant economic agreement with the European Union. This agreement would have required Ukraine to implement EU rules in exchange for market access. However, Russian leaders opposed it due to concerns about trade disadvantages and the potential circumvention of Russian tariffs. (Samokhvalov, 2019; Cooks, 2022).

Yanukovich's decision to accept a \$15 billion Russian economic bailout instead was influenced by the economic risks of Russian retribution and reprisal. While he made this move to avoid Putin's anger, there is no consideration of Ukrainians' emotions and aspirations that viewed the EU as a symbol of prosperity. The deferment of the EU agreement led to widespread demonstrations in Kyiv, resulting in the Maidan Revolution. The Kremlin saw the violent protests that led to the overthrow of Yanukovich's administration as a coup against a pro-Russian government, further worsening relations between Russia and the West (Pomeranz, 2016; Samokhvalov, 2021).

The insight of these events in Russia was shaped by its past and cultural bond to Ukraine, which it saw as an essential part of its civilizational identity. Russia viewed the West's policies as an ontological threat to its strategic interests and its status as a beacon of Orthodox civilisation in the region. These clashes of visions undergird the broader ideological conflict between Russia's authoritarianism and Western liberalism, with Ukraine caught in the web. The conflict demonstrates the challenges of incorporating Ukraine into Western institutions of NATO/EU, while respecting Russia's historical and cultural claims over the region (Neumann, 2017; Luchenko, 2023).

Security of Civilisation

Russia's self-designation as a beacon of civilisation shapes its foreign policy and relationship with post-Soviet states, especially Ukraine. This perspective casts Russia as a guardian of values and a provider of order within its influence. Rooted in a long history of *realpolitik* and authoritarian governance, Russian political elites consciously maintain this

civilizational identity, distancing themselves and their “near abroad” states, including Ukraine, from Western liberalism. Putin’s dream is to reassert Russia as the guardian of Orthodox civilisation, expecting “near abroad” states to support this vision, instead of embracing Western civilisation and democracy (Coker, 2019).

According to Tellis (2024), the current Russian ideology and Western ideology are at variance, like two parallel lines difficult to juxtapose, while Russian civilisations prioritize traditionalism, the West emphasizes pluralism and the expansion of individual rights. As a development model, Russia questions Western assumptions about democracy and governance while leveraging the launch of the new Eastern Partnership Policy in the erstwhile Soviet space, an instrument of non-democratic geo-economic expansion. Yuri-Kadobnov (2020) contends that Russia, as a beacon of civilisation, can uphold its distinctive and exceptional identity, setting its principles and values while contributing to world civilisation. The Moscow-centred Orthodox Church reinforces this notion by positioning itself as a doctrinal authority comparable to or exceeding the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Russian Primacy and Rejection of Equality

The assumption of state equality in the global system clashes with the Russian civilizational ethos and leadership aspirations. Russia perceived itself as one of the first-rate few truly independent and sovereign countries in the class of China and India, which implies that Ukraine is not truly independent.

Coincidentally, Kremlin policies toward Ukraine prioritize Russian interests over shared symbolic goals. This view prioritises realpolitik over individual rights, a status quo that Russia seeks to uphold despite Ukraine’s aspiration to align with Western liberal values (Trudolyubov, 2016; Bjorn, 2020).

Successive Kremlin leaders, including Putin, have strived to create an authoritarian “garrison state” to address both real and perceived internal and external threats. They perceive Western cosmopolitanism and openness as weakness stemming from abandoning cultural roots and traditional values in favour of false multiculturalism (Tellis, 2024, p. 11).

Sibal (2022) opined that integrating Ukraine into the European Union or NATO is deleterious and would pose an ontological security threat to Russian civilisation. The incorporation of Ukraine into Western institutions would mark a loss of significant values, a collapse of their civilisation mission, assignment, and trouncing of their religious and cultural system. Furthermore, it would devalue the national ideology that has inspired generations of Russians. He emphasizes that Russia’s unique cultural identity as the defender of Orthodox Christianity against Western decline makes it the natural locus of resistance to liberalism.

On the counterargument, narrative and Ukraine’s divergent perspective, its trajectory is often shaped by some periods in Europe and outside Europe. Ukraine's relationship with Russia is never symbiotic, but a subtle and subterranean confrontational struggle for self-determination. Ukraine’s desire for liberty from Moscow through a strategic alignment with the Western nations is offensive to Russia, particularly given Russia’s aspiration to reverse the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which Putin has called “the greatest catastrophe of the last century”. Russia’s efforts to frustrate Western encroachment near erstwhile Soviet space and its sphere of influence are seen broadly to preserve its security, ideology, civilisation and sovereignty, while Ukraine seeks to forge its path through Western cooperation and membership of its critical institutions (Wood, 2014; Biswas, 2023).

DISCUSSION

The current conflict in Ukraine, started by Russia under Putin, which is to thwart Western influence, underscores the clash between Western and non-Western civilisations and concomitant ideologies. The liberal West views the geo-economic expansion of its institutions as inherently peaceful, representing Ukraine's liberty to choose its alliances based on consent. While this freedom embodies state autonomy and sovereignty, the authoritarian Russian perspective, fuelled by fears of cultural and civilizational threats, interprets these possibilities with suspicion. Kremlin perceives the Western "civilising mission" through the spectacle of competition and rivalry, viewing it as altering the regional Eurasian equilibrium that will threaten its civilization and security. This assertion exemplifies the contradictory and incompatible political, cultural and ideological differences between the West and Russia. The Kremlin sees isolating Russia and its "near abroad" states, notably Ukraine, from Western globalization as the only way to preserve Russian identity (Krickovic & Sakwa, 2022).

Reflecting on history and broad interests, Russia has deep cultural bonds with Ukraine, considering it essential to Russia's identity and global vision. Russia's reaction to the EU and NATO advancement toward Ukraine stems from the fact that Kyiv lies at the heart of the mythical origin of the Russian nation and civilisation. The Kievan Rus', the ancient East Slavic state from which Russia emerged, was established in present-day Ukrainian territory. Geographically, as the origin of Russia's foundational myths, Ukraine is considered the heartland of Russian culture. Kyiv is often referred to as the "mother of all Russian cities", a reference that Putin made in a speech on March 18th, 2014, shortly after the annexation of Crimea (Greenspan, 2022).

More importantly, Crimea is believed to be where Prince Vladimir adopted Orthodoxy as the official religion of the people of the Rus. The capture of Crimea from the Golden Horde and expansion to the Black Sea was considered a significant milestone in the rise of imperial Russia (Samokhvalov, 2017). This historical connection underlies Putin's assertion that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, sharing the same historical and spiritual space. Any attempt to partition this unity by NATO is seen as a misfortune that must be resisted. For the Kremlin, suzerainty over Ukraine is thus a key to re-establishing the historical Russia. Subsequently obsessed by these delusions of historical past, several Russian leaders struggle to believe Ukraine is anything but a vassal territory (Trudolyubov, 2016; Merry, 2016; Nye, 2022).

In the quest to actualise their objective and counter the influence of the West, Russia leverage and exploits the socio-political divisions of the fault lines of Western-Eastern contradictions within Ukrainian society to its advantage. The instigated demonstrations provided an opportunity to annex Crimea and support pro-self-government movements in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Eastern Ukraine. These regions, home to a predominantly Russian-speaking population, want closer cooperation with Russia, unlike the Ukrainian-speaking population in the Western part of the country, which is more inclined toward integration with the European Union. The Russian-speaking minority perceives the pro-Western government as illegitimate, fascist and unable to protect their cultural interests and language. The regime change in Ukraine offered a significant setback for Russia, which lost a critical partner on its border. This unstable situation also jeopardized Russia's control over the Sevastopol naval base, a strategically important asset in the Black Sea Basin (Trenin, 2014; Lakomy, 2016).

The Kremlin perceives Ukraine as a sphere of vital interests, despite the significant changes that have occurred since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Many Russian political leaders believe that their influence over Ukraine is crucial not only to the West but also for domestic reforms and policies. Traditionally, Russian policy toward Ukraine has included initiatives such as integration attempts, security and economic cooperation, preventing the proliferation of strategic weapons, containing Western presence, and protecting the Russian-speaking population. The primary objective of this policy has been to ensure that Ukraine maintains a friendly attitude toward Russia, or at the very least, a neutral stance toward the West. Therefore, the Kremlin has strongly opposed any initiatives that could bind Ukraine to Western military, political and economic institutions such as the European Union or NATO (Lakomy, 2016).

However, this Russia policy was altered by European Union attempts to sign an economic integration agreement with Ukraine, the subsequent violent protests, and the regime change that ousted the pro-Russian government. With this situation, Putin's Ukraine policy, previously focused on the upper echelons of the Ukrainian government, underwent an immediate shift. A counteroffensive replaced defensiveness and manoeuvring. The primary objective became preventing Ukraine from joining NATO, blocking the economic integration agreement with the European Union, and ultimately regaining control of the country for the Eurasian project, centred on the reunification of what the Kremlin considers the "Russian World" (Gardiner, 2014; Gotev, 2014)

To actualise the annexation of Crimea, Russian Special Forces ("green men") physically cut off the Crimean Peninsula from the Ukrainian mainland, defeated the Ukrainian battalion in Crimea, and helped pro-Russian separatists in seizing control of government institutions. Justifying the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent referendum, the Kremlin blamed the West for consciously disregarding the Eurasian integration project through its geo-economic instruments and "civilizing mission". The core dilemma was how Ukraine could surrender aspects of its sovereignty to the European Union through economic integration when it had already compromised many aspects of its sovereignty to Russia. The agreement forced Ukraine to make a decision detrimental to Russian interests, and European policymakers failed to appreciate the implications of their policies, even when those standards conflicted with existing Ukrainian civilizational obligations to Russia (Wilson, 2014; Rumer, 2017).

Conversely, the European Union argued that Ukraine's long-standing cooperation with Russia inherently implied suzerainty. Furthermore, Russia's preference for zero-sum competition for Ukraine's allegiance, and that of other "in-between" states, was evident in President Dmitry Medvedev's 2008 Draft Security Treaty. A key element of this treaty was the creation of a legally binding document guaranteeing the principle of indivisibility among signatories (Nikitina, 2021).

As the crisis worsened, the Kremlin's ultimate aim of the "special military operation" is regime change and installation of a puppet that would uphold and defend Russian civilisation, including its institutions, economy, technology, culture, and religion, from Western corrosion. This objective arises from interpreting pro-Western sentiments and the cultural gravitational pull toward Europe, particularly in Western Ukraine. Russia viewed that Ukrainians are progressively more attracted to Western culture, found their system stable and predictable, aligning better with their lifestyle than the perceived corruption and power imbalances that characterise Russian civilisation (Irfan, Bilal-Habib & Hussan, 2023).

Putin is not oblivious to the sentiment that losing civilizational control and influence in Ukraine to the West could be disastrous, implying the collapse of Russia as a civilizational state. Therefore, Russia would still exist as a state, but would lose its status as a beacon of civilization and leader over post-Soviet states. The high cost of this competition is that as the crisis intensifies, Russia-West interests have deepened the long-standing political divisions in Ukraine, and their competition for civilizational dominion has come at a significant economic and humanitarian cost to Ukraine (Yevhemia, 2022; Dim, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The clash over Ukraine was not an accident of history but the result of deliberate policy choices by both Russia and the West. Both sides pursued their strategic interests in Ukraine with insufficient regard for the country's sovereignty and the potential consequences for its people. Thus, both Russia and the West share the responsibility for internationalizing the Ukrainian crisis. The West initiated the competition by seeking to alter the existing status quo in Ukraine, potentially undermining Russia's vital interests and values. In response, Russia sought to maintain the status quo, viewing Ukraine's interests as subordinate to its own. The EU/NATO policymakers may have believed that their policies for Ukraine would enjoy such economic and cultural advantages that Russia could not adequately compete. However, they failed to appreciate that the Kremlin could and would escalate the antagonism to the military sphere, where it held a significant advantage, despite the economic and humanitarian consequences to Ukraine and Ukrainians. Therefore, Russia and the EU/NATO must establish a platform to discuss and negotiate their visions and aspirations for Ukraine concerning its status and economic development.

More importantly, the physical and geographical boundaries of the liberal international order should be redesigned to reflect present geopolitical conditions. The primary objective should shift from attempting to alter the international status quo to maintaining it, with an apparent inclination for strategic restraint over enlargement (Posen, 2015). Overemphasizing liberal ideology risks nurturing and promoting a Manichean world view, characterised by arrogance and reluctance to engage with non liberal nations. Such a strategy increases the likelihood of unnecessary conflicts and entanglements. To this end, Ukraine should be given space and opportunity to pursue a bi-vector policy, promoting relations with both Western nations and Russia. The adoption of this approach could potentially de-escalate tensions, alleviate the disastrous consequences of the civilizational clash, and enhance a more stable, flourishing future for Ukraine.

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