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The Price of Wishful Thinking. The Policy of the West towards Russia*

Zarys treści: Artykuł analizuje politykę Zachodu wobec Rosji po 1991 r. Autor dowodzi, że zachodnie nadzieje na demokratyzację i „ucywilizowanie” Rosji były iluzją. W efekcie polityka oparta na życzeniowym myśleniu zakończyła się całkowitą porażką – czego kulminacją była agresja Rosji na Ukrainę w 2022 r. Zachód wierzył, że Rosja po upadku ZSRR stanie się demokratyczna, stabilna i przewidywalna. Liczono na „partnerstwo dla pokoju” i integrację („od Lizbony do Władywostoku”), ale żadna z tych idei się nie ziściła. Liczne instytucjonalne więzi (Rada Europy, G8, NATO-Russia Council, Partnerstwo dla Pokoju) nie przyniosły rezultatów.

Outline of content: The article analyses the West’s policy towards Russia after 1991. The author argues that the Western hopes for the democratisation and ‘civilisation’ of Russia were an illusion. As a result, policies based on wishful thinking failed completely – culminating in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2022. The West believed that after the collapse of the USSR, Russia would become democratic, stable, and predictable. There were hopes for a ‘partnership for peace’ and integration (‘from Lisbon to Vladivostok’), but none of these ideas became a reality. Numerous institutional ties (Council of Europe, G8, NATO-Russia Council, Partnership for Peace) have failed to deliver results.

Słowa kluczowe: Rosja, Niemcy, środki aktywne, propaganda, dezinformacja

Keywords: Russia, Germany, Active Measures, propaganda disinformation

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The policy of the West towards Russia, which has been conducted since 1991, met with a spectacular failure in 2022. None of its original assumptions has been confirmed. Russia has not become a more democratic, more stable, more predictable and more Western-like country. It has not become a contributor to international peace and stability, nor has it become a partner of the West, let alone an ally in solving the problems of the Balkans, the Middle East, the Far East, or Africa. No “Single European Home from Lisbon to Vladivostok” has been built, and there are no slightest signals that it could be constructed anyway in the future. It has not happened despite the many institutional links the West offered to Russia. Moscow was generously provided membership in the Council of Europe, the G8, the NATO-Russia Council, the Partnership for Peace, the Arctic Council, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, not to mention the Cold War-era CSCE/OSCE process and the United Nations platform for dialogue. The EU had developed the entire system of cooperation with Moscow within the framework of the EU-Russia structural dialogue based on the EU-Russia Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA) of 1997¹ and maintained it till 2014, till the Russian invasion of Crimea and Donbas. Germany promoted “Wandel durch Verflechtung” [Change (of Russia) through interdependence] with merely thinly veiled anti-American overtones² and “Wandel durch Handel” [Change (of Russia) through trade ties]³ as well as the “partnership for modernisation”.⁴ On 4 June 1999, the EU adopted the Common Strategy on Russia⁵ based on pure wishful

¹ ‘Agreement on partnership and cooperation establishing a partnership between the European Communities and their Member States, of one part, and the Russian Federation, of the other part – Protocol 1 on the establishment of a coal and steel contact group – Protocol 2 on mutual administrative assistance for the correct application of customs legislation – Final Act – Exchanges of letters – Minutes of signing’, *Official Journal of the European Communities*, L 327, 28 Nov. 1997, pp. 3–69, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A21997A1128%2801%29> (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025).

² G. Schröder, “Wandel durch Verflechtung”: Die Russen sind auf dem Weg zu Demokratie und Marktwirtschaft. Sie verdienen unser Vertrauen’, *Der Spiegel*, 20 May 2007, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/wandel-durch-verflechtung-a-da99a64e-0002-0001-0000-000051644671> (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025).

³ For more information, see J. Lau, “Wandel durch Handel”: Unsere Kolumne zu Phrasen der internationalen Politik’, *Internationale Politik*, 1 Sept. 2021, <https://internationalepolitik.de/de/wandel-durch-handel-0> (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025).

⁴ Joint Statement on the Partnership for Modernisation, EU-Russia Summit, 31 May – 1 June 2010, Rostov-on-Don, 1 June 2010, 10546/10, Presse 154, Council of the European Union, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/114747.pdf (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025). Consult as well: J. Ćwiek-Karpowicz, R. Formuszewicz, ‘Partnership on Modernisation: the EU’s New Initiative towards Russia’, *Bulletin PISM*, no. 43 (18 March 2010), <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/114972/a119-2010.pdf> (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025).

⁵ ‘Common Strategy of the European Union of 4 June 1999 on Russia (1999/414/CFSP)’, *Official Journal of the European Communities*, L 157/1, 24 June 1999. See as well: S. De Spiegeleire, ‘The Implementation of the EU’s Common Strategy on Russia’, in *The EU Common Strategy on Russia. Learning the Grammar of the CFSP*, ed. H. Haukkala, S. Medvedev (Kauhava, 2001), p. 89.

thinking, and on 31 May 2003, the “four common spaces EU-Russia” (Economic Space; Space of Freedom, Security and Justice; Space of Co-operation in the Field of External Security; and the Space on Research, Education and Culture)⁶ were proclaimed. All ended with failure, still, can you imagine the impression made by that declaration on Poles or Balts who just around 10 years earlier had got rid of the “common security space with Russia” and were confronted with a perspective to be included into one again, this time under the flag of the “EU-Russia partnership”?

What are the reasons for that spectacular misperception of reality and therefore the false policy based on the wrong assessments of Russian nature, Russian intentions, Russian goals and Russian methods used to achieve them?

Waiting for a “good tsar”

The West has demonstrated the profound misunderstanding of Russia – its nature, goals, ambitions and psychology in the last 34 years – since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The roots of that phenomenon are, however, deeper, and therefore, the very phenomenon is difficult to overcome. It is based on a mixture of ignorance, myths and conceit that prevent the great powers of the West from studying the experience of those who have dealt with Russia for centuries and whose warnings have been usually labelled as “historically motivated Russophobia” and ignored for all those years since 1991.

Millions of Germans were demonstrating against the American-led operation of the liberation of Kuwait,⁷ while simultaneously they ‘were in love’ with ‘Gorbi’ despite the Russian tanks that were smashing Lithuanian civilians at the TV Tower in Vilnius at that very same time.⁸ I do remember the great surprise of one of the professors of Oxford University when he asked a group of Polish, Czech, Slovak and Hungarian students in 1991, who was supported by us, Gorbachev or Yeltsin,

⁶ *EU/Russia: The four “Common Spaces”*, MEMO/05/103, Brussels, 18 March 2005, European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_05_103 (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025). See as well: D. Lynch, *Struggling with an indispensable partner*, in *What Russia Sees*, ed. id., Chaillot Paper Series, no. 74 (Paris, 2005), pp. 126–132.

⁷ T. Marshall, ‘German Peace Activists Roll Back Into Action: Protests: The shock of the gulf conflict has touched a chord among the nation’s youth and political left’, *Los Angeles Times*, 20 Jan. 1991, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-01-20-mn-881-story.html> (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025). For more detailed information on the German attitude to the First Gulf War, consult: M. Tinas, ‘German Foreign Policy During the First Gulf Crisis: Overcoming a Taboo on Being a Military Power on World Stage’, *Istanbul Gelisim University Journal of Social Sciences*, 9, no. 1 (2022), pp. 1–13.

⁸ G. Cartwright, ‘Tragedy and Triumph: Vilnius, January 13th, 1991 – Soviet Brutality and Lithuanian Independence’, *EU Today*, 13 Jan. 2024, <https://eutoday.net/lithuanian-independence-soviet-union/> (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025). See also: ‘Lithuanians sue Gorbachev over deadly Soviet crackdown’, *Courthouse News Service*, 13 Jan. 2022, <https://www.courthousenews.com/lithuanians-sue-gorbachev-over-deadly-soviet-crackdown/> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

and I answered him that our political thinker Maurycy Mochnacki, as early as the 1830s noticed that it is far easier to deal with “two tsars than with the one” and we are delighted there are two of them fighting each other instead of fighting us.

That love to the would-be “reformists and liberals” was constant, however. “A good tsar”, Gorbachev was replaced by “a good tsar”, Yeltsin, whose tanks shot down the Russian parliament. That military clash was proclaimed a triumph of democracy⁹ (to be understood well – I am not arguing the parliament represented ‘good guys’). Then Yeltsin was replaced by “the enlightened moderniser fascinated with German culture and a technocrat who, as a former KGB officer, had a sober view on reality” – Vladimir Putin. The last step back for a while, just to make room for a “young liberal” Dmitri Medvedev¹⁰ – a man who is fit for “partnership for modernisation”.¹¹ The neo-colonial bloody genocidal wars fought by Russia in Chechnya, the disintegrative wars fought against Georgia and Moldova, the Russian role in nourishing the bloody post-Yugoslav conflict, the Russian invasion of Georgia and even the conquest of Crimea and the lion’s share of Donbas in 2014 did not change that approach.

German myths – “Nothing can be done without Russia” and “Great nations should not be humiliated”

Moscow agreed to the unification of Germany in 1990. That fact contributed significantly to the popular myth that nothing can be done without Russian consent in Eastern Europe. If the largest and the most powerful nation in the region – Germany – had to wait for Russian consent, it is evident that all the others, much smaller and weaker, must do the same, and nothing stable can be achieved at a reasonable price without cooperation with Moscow. That is false based on another false symbol – the collapse of the Berlin Wall. That symbol places Germany at the

⁹ S. Savranskaya, T. Blanton (ed.), ‘Yeltsin Shelled Russian Parliament 25 Years Ago, U.S. Praised “Superb Handling”’, *National Security Archives*, 4 Oct. 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-25-years-ago-us-praised-superb-handling> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

¹⁰ The initial hope of 2008 (see: N.N. Petro, ‘Seizing the Medvedev Moment’, *New York Times*, 13 March 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/13/opinion/13iht-edpetro.1.11045974.html> [accessed: 19 Dec. 2025]), combined with some skepticism of more realistic experts: P. Frost, ‘Russia: Medvedev a Liberal? CA Implications’, Foreign Policy Association, <https://fpa.org/russia-medvedev-a-liberal-ca-implications/>) ended with full disillusionment (T. Prince, ‘Once A Hope Of Russian Liberals And The West, Medvedev Beats A Bellicose Drum To Stay Safe, Relevant’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 24 Apr. 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/medvedev-liberal-to-bellicose/31818941.html> [accessed: 19 Dec. 2025]) quite easy to be predicted for anyone from Central and Eastern Europe.

¹¹ ‘EU and Russia launch new partnership for modernization, European Commission’, press release, 1 June 2010, an official website of the European Union, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/press-corner/detail/en/ip_10_649 (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

very centre of the developments of 1989 that brought freedom to Central Europe and ended communism there. The truth is that it started not in Berlin but in Warsaw, and it was Poland, not Eastern Germany, that first got rid of the communist system, followed by Hungary and Czechoslovakia, while Germany and the Berlin Wall came later. Moscow was unable to stop the rebellion on such a scale, so there was no other option but to accept it.

Another false myth is a misinterpreted parallel between the German defeat in 1918, which resulted in the Versailles treaty that “humiliated Germany”, and thus resulted in its bitter revanchism that brought Hitler to power and culminated in the Second World War. In 1918, the German army was keeping its lines deep in France and Belgium and even deeper in the Russian Empire, while average Germans read that they lost the war in their newspapers. The “undefeated army” was “betrayed by the civilians” – Friedrich Ebert and Matthias Erzberger, who capitulated. It sounds familiar – the undefeated Soviet army was forced to leave Central Europe, “betrayed” by Mikhail Gorbachev and Edouard Shevardnadze, and Russians learned from mass media that they had lost the Cold War. The conclusion was – “if you do not want the Russian III Reich, do not humiliate Russia and give it what it wants, or there will be a disaster”. The thesis sounds logical, but the problem is that it was not a scale of humiliation that pushed Germany to seek revenge in the next war, but the hope of victory. Germany was humiliated much deeper in 1945, and still no one had any illusion that if they tried to start the revanchist war again, the result would be even worse. That is the correct conclusion and the proper signpost regarding the West’s policy towards Russia. Russia must not be appeased by soft treatment; just the opposite, it must be convinced that any dreams of recreating the Russian Empire are groundless, will be painful and costly, and will end in disaster for the Russian state.

The myth of Russia traumatised by the experience of 1812 and 1941

There is a widespread conviction that Russia, having been invaded by Napoleon in 1812¹² and Hitler in 1941, is traumatised, and we should accept its policy of the creation of a buffer zone to protect Russia from any further invasions. That is ‘natural’ and is based on the ‘Russian vital and justified national security interests’. Well, the lists of countries invaded by Moscow over the last 600 years, along with the years of those invasions, would make quite a book. Each one of its neighbours experienced Russian aggression and, quite often, a long-lasting and cruel occupation. The Russian right to security is not superior to that of its neighbours,

¹² It is worth noticing that Napoleon’s army, while crossing the Niemen River, entered the territory of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, which had been conquered just 17 years earlier, and Napoleon was welcomed there as a liberator. Genuine Russia started eastward from Smolensk.

and the Russian zone of interests is within the borders of the Russian Federation, not beyond them. Is there any real threat of a foreign invasion against Russia? Is Russia threatened with a massive influx of refugees from the bordering conflict zone, like Austria and Italy were during the Yugoslavian wars? Is Russia threatened with being cut off from the raw materials indispensable to its economy? So what are those mythical 'Russian justified interests'?

In 1999, the Finnish presidency of the European Union asked the EU member states whether Ukraine and Moldova should be given the perspective of EU membership. In 2000, Germany and France answered: "NO – because it would lead to the isolation of Russia"¹³ They forgot that the only country that is able to isolate Russia is Russia itself, and it does it from time to time.

The myth of Russia as a desirable ally

For ages, Russia has exported corruption and destabilisation, followed by aggression, war, death and enslavement. It has conducted such a policy towards the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Georgia and Sweden in the eighteenth century, towards Turkey, Central Asia and Persia in the nineteenth century and towards the entire world in the twentieth century, yet for the reasons unknown, the West was nourishing the naïve hope that Russia would help it to stabilise the former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1999 – why? Stabilisation means the shrinking of the Russian influence, while destabilisation is the primary tool to boost it. Why did so many people expect Russia to act in a way that would result in a reduction of its influence in the region instead of increasing it? The Balkans were stabilised, therefore, despite Russia and not in cooperation with Russia, and Moscow did its best to prevent stabilisation till the very last moment (the Russian mechanised battalion raid to Pristina is a symbol of those efforts¹⁴). Even while politically defeated, the Kremlin is still going on with its policy of destabilisation, inspiring both the failed coup d'état in Montenegro in 2016¹⁵ and the protests against the Greek-North Macedonian reconciliation.¹⁶ Spaniards must have had an unpleasant *déjà vu* of

¹³ P. Żurawski vel Grajewski, 'Stosunki UE-Ukraina – studium niepowodzenia wysiłków Kijowa na rzecz uzyskania obietnicy stowarzyszenia z Unią Europejską', in *Proces akcesji do Unii Europejskiej*, ed. P. Żurawski vel Grajewski (Łódź, 2001), p. 190.

¹⁴ M.G. Lenore, *The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA – London, 2004), p. 147. See also 'Confrontation over Pristina airport', *BBC News*, 9 March 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/671495.stm> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

¹⁵ M. Seroła, 'Montenegro: Russia accused of attempting to organise a coup d'état', *Analyses OSW*, 6 March 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2017-03-06/montenegro-russia-accused-attempting-to-organise-a-coup-detat> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

¹⁶ J. Strzelecki, 'Tensions between Greece and Russia, with Macedonia in the background', *Analyses OSW*, 25 June 2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-07-25/tensions-between-greece-and-russia-macedonia-background-0> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

their civil war (1936–1939) and Soviet interference,¹⁷ as Russia used its resources to support the Catalan separatism in 2021.¹⁸ Still, this has taught the West nothing.

The phenomenon is a cross-party one. President George Bush senior delivered the infamous chicken speech in Kyiv in 1991,¹⁹ President George Bush junior looked Putin in the eyes and “found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy”. They “had a very good dialogue” and Bush “was able to get a sense of Putin’s soul”.²⁰ President Obama, assisted by Hilary Clinton, “pushed a reset button” with Russia,²¹ President Joe Biden lifted sanctions on Nord Stream 2,²² prolonged New Start,²³ met Putin,²⁴ and finally suggested that the limited Russian annexation of

¹⁷ J. McCannon, ‘Soviet Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–39: A Reexamination’, *Russian History/L’Histoire Russe*, 22, no. 2 (1995), pp. 154–180.

¹⁸ R. Emmott, ‘Spain sees Russian interference in Catalonia separatist vote’, *Reuters*, 13 Nov. 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/spain-sees-russian-interference-in-catalonia-separatist-vote-idUSKBN1DD20Y/> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025). For more detailed information, consult: B. Kaczorowski, ‘Rosja wobec separatyzmu katalońskiego (2014–2017)’, *Politeja*, 61, no. 4 (2019), pp. 359–378.

¹⁹ ‘George Bush, 41st President of the United States: 1989 – 1993 Remarks to the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of the Ukraine in Kiev, Soviet Union, August 01, 1991’, American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-supreme-soviet-the-republic-the-ukraine-kiev-soviet-union> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025). More about the ignorance as a source of the speech of that kind, see: R. McConnell, ‘The Mythical Great Russia is Gone’, *The U.S.–Ukraine Foundation*, 16 Jan. 2023, <https://usukraine.org/blog/opinion-the-mythical-great-russia-is-gone> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

²⁰ A. Osborn, ‘U.S.-Russia summit: The American presidents Putin has confronted’, *Reuters*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-russia-summit-american-presidents-putin-has-confronted-2021-06-16/> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

²¹ ‘U.S.-Russia Relations: “Reset” Fact Sheet’, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House President Barack Obama, 24 June 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet>. For comments, see: R. Lowry, ‘The Russian Reset to Nowhere’, *Politico Magazine*, 5 March 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/03/russian-reset-to-nowhere-104324/> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025); and: P. Brookes, ‘Russian “Reset” a Resounding Failure’, The Heritage Foundation, 5 Apr. 2016, <https://www.heritage.org/arms-control/commentary/russian-reset-resounding-failure> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

²² A. Shalal, T. Gardner, S. Holland, ‘U.S. waives sanctions on Nord Stream 2 as Biden seeks to mend Europe ties’, *Reuters*, 19 May 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/us-waive-sanctions-firm-ceo-behind-russias-nord-stream-2-pipeline-source-2021-05-19/> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025). Consult as well: M. Lee, E. Knickmeyer, F. Jordans, ‘US spares ally Germany in sanctions for Nord Stream pipeline’, 19 May 2021, *AP News*, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-europe-germany-business-government-and-politics-6e538d7960c4dfbc334228f2f1db03bf> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025). Cf. S. Dębski, ‘Nord Stream 2: German and U.S. Credibility Suffers Serious Damage’, *pism.pl*, 21 May 2021, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Nord_Stream_2_German_and_US_Credibility_Suffers_Serious_Damage (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

²³ D.M. Herszenhorn, ‘Putin and Biden confirm extension of New START treaty’, *Politico*, 27 Jan. 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/putin-and-biden-confirm-extension-of-new-start-treaty/> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

²⁴ J. Crawford, ‘Biden-Putin in Geneva: looking for common ground’, *Swissinfo.ch*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/biden-putin-in-geneva-looking-for-common-ground/46691734>

the Ukrainian territories would be accepted (“minor incursions” will not provoke a major reaction from the US).²⁵ The present President Trump’s efforts to seek a *modus vivendi* with Russia are therefore not an exceptional phenomenon, and it is not difficult for Central Europeans to predict that it will fail, just as all earlier policies based on the same illusion – a hope for a stable, long-lasting compromise with undefeated Russia. Lord Palmerston said, “The Queen has an interesting illusion”, while commenting on Queen Victoria’s efforts to influence the construction of the British cabinet. Using that polite expression, we could say alike – the West has an interesting illusion – the construction of a sustainable international order based on the Russian signature beneath this or that agreement. The problem is that such an illusion is mortally dangerous for Central European Countries.

The reversed Nixon-Kissinger – i.e. the separation of Russia from China is another unrealistic dream. It looks like an old grandpa’s dream about being young again. We are not in the 1960s/1970s anymore, and even then, the first Russians and Chinese shot at each other at the Ussuri River, and then Nixon and Kissinger successfully deepened the gulf between Moscow and Beijing, but they did not create it; they just exploited the conflict that had already broken out without American inspiration. Russia is more than happy to nourish that ‘American dream’, and as long as it is dreamed, Moscow has excellent leverage over American dreamers, asking them for as many concessions as possible to consume them politically, initiate another conflict, and repeat the entire game again and again.

The nature of that game is not changed even if we replace China with Iran. Whatever the real goal of Obama, Biden and Trump policies – whether it is to separate Russia from China or to deprive Iran of Russian support, the end will be the same and is easily predictable. Russia will take as many benefits as it can and then cheat the US and do whatever it thinks makes America weaker.

“Russians love their children too” – maybe, but are you sure the Russian government does?

The West rarely understands Russian mentality. It is too difficult to describe even in Western languages. Only such masters of the written word as Richard Pipes can point out that Russia has never had nobility or aristocracy, nor has it had

(accessed: 20 Dec. 2025). Cf. R. Koffler, ‘Biden loses to Putin at Geneva summit just by showing up’, *The Hill*, 15 June 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/558385-biden-loses-to-putin-at-geneva-summit-just-by-showing-up/> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

²⁵ K. Liptak, ‘Biden predicts Russia “will move in” to Ukraine, but says “minor incursion” may prompt discussion over consequences’, *CNN*, 19 Jan. 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/19/politics/russia-ukraine-joe-biden-news-conference/index.html> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025). For a commentary, see D. Wood, ‘Joe Biden’s “Minor Incursion” Russia Remark: History Proves It Was a Mistake’, *The Heritage Foundation*, 26 Jan. 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/joe-bidens-minor-incursion-russia-remark-history-proves-it-was-mistake> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

burgesses in the western sense of those words. It was impossible in a country where the monarch (the state) had not only the political power over the people (*imperium* and *iurisdictio*), but also the power of ownership (*dominium*) – like a slave owner over his slaves.²⁶ Russia has no citizens – it has just inhabitants since nobody has ever been a *civis* there. That fundamental cultural difference between Russia and the West that prevents Westerners from understanding Russia may be illustrated symbolically by the fact that in Russian Orthodox liturgy, they speak of the ‘slaves of God’ (*raby bozhe*), unlike in the Ukrainian one, where they talk about the ‘children of God’ (*dity bozhy*). Russian peasants have never been individual farmers – the owners of their farms – the land belonged to a tsar or to the commons (*mir*) and then to the soviet *sovhozes* and *kolhoses*, unlike in Belarus and Ukraine, where the heritage of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth’s attitude towards private property survived Russian conquest at least till Stalin’s times. The result is that there is no such word in Russian as ‘mine’ (in the sense I own it). Russians say ‘it’s at me’ (*u myenya yest*). On 17 May 1722, Peter I abolished the secret of confession in the Russian Orthodox Church with his decree – he was obeyed and called ‘the Great’ by the Russian people.²⁷ All those fundamental differences between Russian culture and that of the West make understanding Russia very difficult for Western politicians, even those who, in theory, know that “in Russia, you win elections because you are the president, and you don’t become the president of Russia because you win the elections”. The rulers of Kremlin never take care of the people of Russia – 22 thousands of ethnic Russians were bombed to death in Grozny (85 per cent of all civilian casualties) when the Russian Army besieged the city,²⁸ the second Chechen War started with Russian provocation – the bomb attacks on the block of flats in Moscow, Volgodonsk, and Buynaksk that resulted in the death of hundreds of Russians²⁹ When Ukrainian journalist Georgi Gongadze was killed by Kuchma regime in 2000³⁰ the pan-Ukrainian movement “Ukraine without Kuchma” was born.³¹ Since 1992 (the official abolition of censorship in Russia)

²⁶ A. Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (New York, 1974), pp. 64–65, 78.

²⁷ K. Chojnicka, ‘Cerkiew prawosławna w reformach Piotra Wielkiego’, *Krakowskie Studia z Historii Państwa i Prawa*, 3 (2010), p. 284.

²⁸ Chechen civilians had families in the countryside, so they fled the city and sought shelter in the villages in the mountains. Ethnic Russians had no such option; S. Bakumenko, ‘To Bomb One’s People’, *Lawfare*, 11 Dec. 2024, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/to-bomb-one-s-people> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

²⁹ For more details, consult: A. Litvinenko, Y. Felshtinsky, *Blowing up Russia. The Book that Got Litvinenko Assassinated* (London, 2019), p. 288.

³⁰ ‘Ukraine Gongadze case: Court convicts journalist’s killer’, *BBC News*, 29 Jan. 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21245784> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

³¹ A. Naumov, ‘The role of the “Ukraine without Kuchma” campaign in the growing socio-political crisis in Ukraine at the beginning of the XXI century’, *Genesis исторические исследования*, 10 (2022), pp. 82–90.

till 2005 (the death of Aslan Maskhadov, Chechen leader who had signed ‘peace’ with Russia – the Khasavyurt Accord of 1996³²), as many as 214 journalists were killed in Russia, and nobody protested. When the Union of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia³³ tried to defend their sons from all the abuses they suffered in the Russian Army, somebody reasonably asked: “Well, and where are their fathers?” – these are not the stories from a remote past. It happened in post-Cold War times. So if you are told, “Russians love their children, too”, ask – well, are you sure the Russian government does? Where and when did you notice that in bombed Grozny? In Volgograd, Buynaksk or Moscow in 1999, in the Dubrovka Theatre in 2002? In ‘respect’ for the lives of Russian soldiers in Ukraine today? When you realise what the proper answer is, just accept that the people, both foreigners and Russians, are merely ‘the fertiliser of history’ for the rulers of the Kremlin.

A dream about the democratisation of Russia

The American victory in the Second World War resulted in the democratisation of Italy, Western Germany, and Japan. In the case of the first two countries, it was a return to the system, *mutatis mutandis*, known from the pre-totalitarian period; in the case of Japan, it was a cultural revolution – the Westernisation of the country’s political system. That success has already misled Americans, making them believe it is possible to repeat it in Iraq or in Afghanistan. We should not be misled in a similar way regarding Russia. Russia has no democratic tradition whatsoever. The oligarchic system of the medieval merchant republics of Novgorod and Pskov was a poor substitute for it. Still, even if we consider that case, we have to admit that its cultural heritage was uprooted in a bloody way by Ivan III and Ivan IV (the Terrible) of Moscow in the sixteenth century. Kierenski’s government in 1917 was instead a period of chaos rather than a functioning democracy, and the era of Yeltsin is called in Russian ‘*dyermocracya*’ (*dyermo* in Russian means ‘a shit’). Historically, Russia has known only two forms of its existence – predatory imperialism aimed at conquering neighbours or a state of chaos (*smuta* – ‘Time of Troubles’). Ukrainians rightfully joke that there are only two parties in Russia – the imperialists and the Greater Russians, and you can choose between

³² L. Fuller, ‘Chechnya: Khasavyurt Accords Failed To Preclude A Second War’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 30 Aug. 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1070939.html> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025). The story of the Khasavyurt Accords shows the most likely scenario for Ukraine under the peace agreement with undefeated Russia.

³³ For more information consult: J. Fürst, ‘Soldiers’ Mothers Have Long Been a Thorn in the Kremlin’s Side’, *Moscow Times*, 8 March 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/03/08/soldiers-mothers-have-long-been-a-thorn-in-the-kremlins-side-a84394> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

them. Even the latest ‘democratic hero’, Alexei Navalny, was not able to overcome that inherent Russian political character.³⁴

In Stalin’s times when new groups of deportees for the so-called ‘free settlement’ arrived to the places of deportation deep in Siberia those who had been deported earlier organized some basic assistance for their newly coming compatriots – Chechens for Chechens, Estonians for Estonians, Georgians for Georgians, Jews for Jews, Lithuanians for Lithuanians, Poles for Poles, Ukrainians for Ukrainians etc. The only newcomers left unassisted at the get-off place were Russians – nobody was waiting for them.³⁵

When Russian troops withdrew from Warsaw in 1915, and German ones had not come yet, the citizens of Warsaw armed themselves and created the Citizens Guard to prevent criminals from dominating the streets of the city. When Pirogzhin’s troops approached Russian towns on their way to Moscow in 2023, the inhabitants (I deliberately do not use the term ‘citizens’) focused on robbing shops rather than protecting them.

The Russian province has a criminal character. It is a source of new volunteers to the Russian army, attracted by the money they are paid by the government and by the opportunity to rob Ukrainians and rape Ukrainian women. Therefore, no ‘upper’ idea will be born or accepted there.³⁶ The Russian type mutiny is possible and even probable – if it occurs it will erupt suddenly and it will surprise the West – just like Pirogzhin mutiny did still the outcome of it will be not a democratic revolution but the post 1911 Chinese type situation – the division of the country among the local warlords the power of whom will be based on their armies protecting the monopoly of the warlord to collect the feudal-type rent from the population of the province under his control.

The disintegration of the Russian Federation along ethnic lines is only partially feasible (in the North Caucasus, Tatarstan, Bashkiria, and Tuva), but it will not resemble the USSR’s disintegration. The non-Russian nations within the Russian Federation are far weaker than those that tore apart the Soviet Union. So the chance of creating a set of democratic states based on the potential of non-Russian independentists is very limited. For the overwhelming majority of ethnic Russians, any attempt by any conquered people to get rid of Russian domination and to create a separate independent state is a crime, and any Russian politician motivated by democratic principles who dares to support any separatism will be proclaimed a traitor and ‘homeland reducer’. Therefore, while considering the chance for the

³⁴ For a more detailed description of Navalny’s views, see G. Kaminskaite, ‘Navalny: a patriot and an imperialist’, *New Eastern Europe*, 30 Jan. 2025, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2025/01/30/navalny-a-patriot-and-an-imperialist/> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

³⁵ А. Федерольф, *Рядом з Алеи* (Москва, 1996), p. 234.

³⁶ The opinion heard by the author from one of the Russian oppositionists at the conference: ‘Russia’s Futures? Annual Conference Russia 2023’ in the Baltic Defence College in Tartu, 2–3 March 2023.

creation of the future democratic Russia, we have to come to the conclusion best reflected by the famous Dante's sentence *Lasciate ogni speranza* ('Abandon all hope').

Corruption and propaganda

All the historical and cultural reasons that prevent the overwhelming majority of Westerners from understanding Russia are completed with corruption and propaganda, the old Russian weapons against the West. Poles remember Voltaire, who, paid in Russian gold, praised the Russian conquest of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a triumph of enlightenment over backwardness and of law and order over anarchy. When the 'backward' Polish-Lithuanian lands were incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1795, the majority of people who could read and write read and wrote in Polish within its borders (Baltic Germans constituted the second largest literate population, and the Russian language occupied only the third position in the ranking of the percentage of population who possessed the art of reading and writing). The number of printed books in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was 480 annually, while in Russia, it was limited to c. 240 in the 1760s–1780s. Despite that, Poland was portrayed as backwards, while Russia was portrayed as the one that brought higher culture to the newly conquered lands. The old academic centres of Northern Italy, Great Britain and France, as early as the mid-fourteenth century, were accompanied by the first universities in Central Europe – in the Bohemian Kingdom (Prague, 1348), in Poland (Kraków, 1364) and in Hungary (Pécs, 1367). The first universities in the German-speaking area were founded in Vienna (1365) and Heidelberg (1386), while the first university in Russia was established in Moscow in 1755. The first Cyrillic prints were produced in the late fifteenth century in Drohobych, in present-day Ukraine; in 1517 in Prague; and in Vilnius in the 1520s, while the first private print office was established in Russia in 1769. The Imperial Library founded by Catherine II in Petersburg was based almost entirely on war spoils – mainly 400,000 books stolen from the Załuski Library in Poland.³⁷ Still this did not prevent Voltaire to picture Russia as a source of enlightenment and Poland as a symbol of backwardness neither Frederick the Great of Prussia to portray Poles as 'the Iroquois of Europe' even though the University of Königsberg flourished only after a bulk of the professors of the Vilnius university (those who survived) had taken shelter there after 1655 when Vilnius was for the first time conquered by Russians and the population to the large extent massacred. That mechanism is still functioning. Ukraine and the Baltic states are 'nazis', Poland is 'antisemitic', Georgians 'committed genocide in South Ossetia', etc. while Russia 'wants peace' and is whatever you want it to be – it is both the 'crusader in a shining armour fighting ISIS in Syria' and 'a friend of Muslims humiliated

³⁷ P. Gursztyn, *Dlaczego Rosjanie są inni? Historia mentalności rosyjskiej* (Siedlce, 2025), pp. 320–321.

by the US and Israel', it is 'the heir of the USSR', and therefore 'the fatherland of all the leftists' and simultaneously 'the last hope of all the conservatives that defends the Christian values against Gay-Europe'. Russian propaganda is well-targeted and shaped in a way that is attractive for the chosen groups of people – everybody is addressed according to their ideological character. If you are not 'vaccinated' – i.e. if you do not have the Eastern and Central European experience, you may be easily seduced by that kind of propaganda, which in fact is a tool of the hybrid war.

In Moldova, Russian secret services organised both the LGBT organisation and the extreme Christian-Orthodox one, both led by Russian special services officers and fighting each other, showing the West how 'backwards Moldova is' and to the Moldavians 'how degenerated the West is'. It is important to understand that, if there was any Russian interference in the American electoral campaign, its goal was to spark a conflict and deepen internal political divisions in the US, not to support this or that candidate.

Not only Voltaire was paid with Russian gold. The German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who was employed by Gazprom after leaving office, was the 'crown jewel' of the Kremlin's achievements, but the list of European politicians corrupted by Moscow, and including the most prominent ones, is much longer. Among the former Austrian Chancellors, two worked for the Russians. Wolfgang Schüssel (Austrian Foreign Minister in 1995–2000 and Chancellor in 2000–2007) became a member of Lukoil's board of directors in 2019,³⁸ Russia's largest private oil company. Christian Kern, his successor in the Chancellery in 2016–2017, and previously the CEO of the Austrian state railways OeBB, joined the board of directors of Russian Railways (RZhD).³⁹ Well-paid Gazprom lobbyists included, for example, former Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson and former Finnish Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen. The majority of them have resigned from their Russian jobs after 24 February 2022, when enjoying them became politically too costly, although they had accepted the offers before and did so after 2014.

Also very mysterious was the agreement between Russia and the Prime Minister of Denmark, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, which led to a series of interstate visits at the highest level in 2009–2011 after a 46-year break.⁴⁰ Putin's close relations with

³⁸ 'Wolfgang Schüssel Joins the Lukoil Supervisory Board – Who are His Colleagues?', *Vindobona. Vienna International News*, 13 March 2019, <https://www.vindobona.org/article/wolfgang-schussel-joins-the-lukoil-supervisory-board-who-are-his-colleagues> (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025).

³⁹ S. Reinfeldt, 'Die SPÖ in bester russischer Gesellschaft. Aus Liebe zur Macht (Update 24. Februar 2022)', *Semiosis*, 2 May 2019, <https://www.semiosis.at/2019/05/02/die-spo-e-in-bester-russischer-gesellschaft-aus-liebe-zur-macht/> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025). Consult also 'Former Austrian Chancellor Lands Russian Job: Christian Kern has joined the board of Russian Railways', *Moscow Times*, 19 July 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/07/19/former-austrian-chancellor-lands-russian-job-a66495> (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025).

⁴⁰ M. Gibala, 'Høvsgaard: Blackmailing and bribery – the story of Nord Stream (INTERVIEW)', *Biznes Alert EN*, 4 Sept. 2017, <https://biznesalert.com/hovsgaard-blackmailing-bribery-story-nord-stream-interview/> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

Silvio Berlusconi were well known, and the brother of the former Chief of Staff of the French Army, Philippe de Villiers, opened businesses in occupied Crimea.⁴¹ The mental state of Western European elites is evidenced by Putin's presence at the wedding of the head of the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Karin Kneissl (18 August 2018).⁴² Examples could be multiplied.

The crowning 'achievement' of that dimension of the Russian influence was Nord Stream 1 and 2. Still, the damages were far more numerous. The presidency of Dmitry Medvedev, hailed as a 'pragmatic liberal', coincided with the above-mentioned German concept of the EU-Russian 'partnership for modernisation'. The EU imagined this modernisation in its own naïve way – as democratisation and civilizational advancement – and Russia in its own way – as assistance in modernising the army-, which is hardly surprising. As a result, Russia helped Germany develop a satellite system, and the German Rheinmetall built the Land Forces Training Centre in Mulino near Novgorod Nizhny in 2011–2014, capable of training 30,000 soldiers a year. The French STX shipyard in Saint-Nazaire, in turn, signed a contract with Russia on the same day as Rheinmetall – i.e., on 17 June 2011 – for the delivery of two Mistral-class helicopter-landing ships for EUR 1.2 billion.⁴³ The aggression against Georgia in 2008 and the public statement of the commander of the Russian Navy, Admiral Vladimir Vysotsky in 2011 that if he had had such ships in 2008, the Black Sea Fleet in the war against Georgia would have fulfilled its mission in 40 minutes, not 36 hours, did not prevent the champions of 'European values' from pursuing these interests. The contracts were broken up after Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2014, but they had been signed before, despite the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008.

The conclusion is – naivety and ignorance about Russia is only a part of reality. There are many Western politicians who know enough about the nature of the Kremlin, yet it is pretty comfortable for them to pretend they believe in the Kremlin's goodwill and cooperative nature. Chancellor Merkel, while promoting Nord Stream 2 and accepting the costs measured in Ukrainian lives, showed it in the most cynical way.⁴⁴

⁴¹ 'Philippe de Villiers' Connections with Russia', *Brussels Watch*, 2 Apr. 2024, <https://brusselswatch.org/philippe-de-villiers-connections-with-russia/> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

⁴² 'Vladimir Putin attends Austrian foreign minister's wedding', *BBC*, 18 Aug. 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45229235> (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025). The issue continued: 'Austrian ex-foreign minister in Putin wedding row set for job in Russia', *BBC*, 4 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56280898> (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025).

⁴³ A. Wilk, 'France and Germany are establishing a closer military co-operation with Russia', *Analyses OSW*, 29 June 2011, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2011-06-29/france-and-germany-are-establishing-a-closer-military-co-operation> (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025).

⁴⁴ As Ulrich Thiele and Steffen Dobbert write, "Naftogaz representatives are dumbfounded. While they are trying to warn against Nord Stream 2 and the associated Russian attack, the Federal Chancellery has long since planned this and factored it into the calculations for Nord Stream 2. The Ukrainians leave the meeting with the conclusion that the German government is fine

'Land for peace' – the illusion of an armistice in the Russian-Ukrainian war based on Ukrainian concessions

Russia is short of many things, but certainly it is not short of territory, and it is not for territorial gains that this war has been started; therefore, it cannot be ended with territorial concessions. The Russian goals were precisely described in the Russian demands to NATO⁴⁵ and the US⁴⁶ on 17 December 2021, and the position taken by Moscow during negotiations in Istanbul in both March–April 2022⁴⁷ and June 2025⁴⁸ proved that nothing has changed since that time. Russia wants the entire Ukraine but not just to digest it in peace but to use its territory and resources for further expansion and for the reshaping of the European order in a way that will turn it back to 1815 – to the European great powers concerto without the US and without the independent Central Europe but with Russia as a major player cooperating with dominated Germany, marginalized France and isolated Great Britain. Russia, while putting forward its demands in December 2021, merely described the would-be zone of its influence that must first be reduced to a state of military impotence vis-à-vis Russian military blackmail and aggression. To achieve that status, Moscow must convince the West to withdraw all the military

with Russia launching an offensive”, U. Thiele, S. Dobbert, *Nord Stream. Wie Deutschland Putins Krieg bezahlt* (Stuttgart, 2025), p. 372.

⁴⁵ ‘Соглашение о мерах обеспечения безопасности Российской Федерации и государств-членов Организации Североатлантического договора’, Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 17 Dec. 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/ (accessed: 21 Dec. 2025).

⁴⁶ ‘Договор между Российской Федерацией и Соединенными Штатами Америки о гарантиях безопасности’, Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 17 Dec. 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/ (accessed: 21 Dec. 2025).

⁴⁷ ‘Treaty on settlement of the situation in Ukraine, its neutrality and security guarantees of Ukraine’, Draft as of 17 March 2022 (22:00), Reconciled text received from the Ukrainian side, with amendments from the Russian side’, <https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/documenttools/e548b273c4d42a3a/5e73b566-full.pdf>, p. 1, <https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/documenttools/e548b273c4d42a3a/5e73b566-full.pdf>. Consult also: A. Troianovski, A. Entous, M. Schwirtz, ‘Ukraine-Russia Peace Is as Elusive as Ever. But in 2022 They Were Talking’, *New York Times*, 15 June 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/06/15/world/europe/ukraine-russia-ceasefire-deal.html>; and: ‘Коммюнике по итогам консультаций 28-30 марта 2022 года Основные положения Договора о гарантиях безопасности Украины’, <https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/documenttools/a5214f759bae786d/166ec410-full.pdf>. See also: ‘Договор о посоянном нейтралитете и гарантиях безопасности Украины, Проект по сосоянию на 15.04.2022 (12.15), Отправлен Президенту РФ 15 апреля 2022 г., Позиция РФ, несогласованная УС, Позиция УС, несогласованная РФ, Вапросы, которые УС отказывается обсуждать, ссылаяс на их отсутствие в “Стамбульском коммюнике”’, <https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/documenttools/17f655b584276917/07ec81ce-full.pdf> (all accessed: 19 Dec. 2025).

⁴⁸ M. Menkiszak, W. Rodkiewicz, ‘Meeting in Istanbul: The Kremlin’s maximalist demands’, *Analyses OSW*, 3 June 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-06-03/meeting-istanbul-kremlins-maximalist-demands>. Consult as well: V. Soldatkin, T. Balmforth, H. Hayatsever, ‘Russia sets out punitive terms at peace talks with Ukraine’, *Reuters*, 3 June 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-ukraine-talk-about-peace-are-still-far-apart-2025-06-02/> (both accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

structures, facilities, and installations from the region. The NATO structures, in their 1997 territorial configuration, fit perfectly into that plan.

Since 2007, Russia and Belarus have been conducting great military manoeuvres every four years known as *Zapad* (the West). A part of those exercises is a training of a *de-escalation nuclear strike* – Russian conventional forces are expected to take territorial spoils (Baltic States, Poland, Danish Bornholm, Swedish Gotland and Finnish Åland Islands) and then launch a nuclear strike against any of the Baltic States capital city or a large city in Poland just to demonstrate Moscow's determination to defend the territorial gains even at the cost of a nuclear war. This is expected to bring the West to the negotiations and compromise NATO as unable to retake the conquered lands. This plan, when combined with Russian demands of December 2021 and an additional one addressed to Denmark in February 2022 (just before the massive invasion of Ukraine), on the non-acceptability of the US troops' presence in Bornholm,⁴⁹ gives us a clear insight into the Russian plans and the scale of the Kremlin's ambitions. Moscow keeps on building political escalation over all the Baltic islands mentioned above,⁵⁰ and only naïve people can think it has abandoned its previous plans. Any hope that those plans will be abandoned if Russia is offered this or that region of Ukraine is an illusion.

Some Western politicians try to justify their 'peace plan' by citing the 'land for peace' deal, pointing to the German Experience. In that logic, the country, even divided and partly occupied, can survive. The unoccupied part of the country can be integrated into the West and, when circumstances allow, the occupied zone can be reintegrated diplomatically, just as Eastern Germany was reunited with the Bundesrepublik after 45 years of Russian occupation.⁵¹ *O sancta simplicitas!*⁵² Russians

⁴⁹ The Russian ambassador to Denmark, Vladimir Barbin, said in February 2022 that an agreement between Denmark and the Soviet Union of 1946, when the Soviet Army troops left Bornholm following the liberation of Denmark at the end of World War II, is still valid and prevents American troops from being deployed on Bornholm. That Russian demand was rejected by Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen; Ritzau, 'Danish PM rebuts Russian ambassador over Bornholm comments', *The Local*, 7 Apr. 2022, <https://www.thelocal.dk/20220407/danish-pm-rebuts-russian-ambassador-over-bornholm-comments> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

⁵⁰ P. Goble, 'Moscow Focusing on Gotland and Other Baltic Sea Islands as Potential Targets', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 21, no. 89 (2024), <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-focusing-on-gotland-and-other-baltic-sea-islands-as-potential-targets/> (accessed: 20 Dec. 2025).

⁵¹ R. Benson, 'Ukraine's Path Forward: Negotiating Peace Amid Competing Futures', *CAP*, 28 Jan. 2025, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/ukraines-path-forward-negotiating-peace-amid-competing-futures/> (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025).

⁵² *Sancta simplicitas* – *Holy simplicity* – an exclamation of Jan Huss of Prague (Czech religious reformist who led the Bohemian reformation a hundred years before Luther and was burned at the stake in 1415), while he saw an old peasant woman who brought a little bundle of fagots and cast them on the pile for the fire to burn more fiercely. Jan Huss understood that she did this, not because she was a wicked woman, but because she really believed Huss was the enemy of God; 'Religion: Sancta Simplicitas', *Time*, 31 March 1924, <https://time.com/archive/6651341/religion-sancta-simplicitas/> (accessed: 19 Dec. 2025).

have never had an ambition to Russify Eastern Germans. Germans under Russian rule were free to use German in administration and education, their history was manipulated, still was taught as German history and not a part of the Russian history, to speak German was not labelled as a demonstration of being 'nazi' while to speak Ukrainian under Russian rule has ever been and still is labelled in that way. Borodzianka, Bucha, Hostomel, Irpien and other still unknown places of Russian massive war crimes on the occupied territories of Ukraine show us more than clearly what is and will be the fate of the Ukrainians and especially Ukrainian elites under Russian occupation. There will be no one to recreate Ukrainian life in those territories after 45 years of *russkiy mir* (Russian world), as there is no one in the Smolensk region to rebuild the Byelorussian character of that land, which was ethnically Byelorussian, nor in the Kuban region, which used to be Ukrainian, etc. The United Kingdom fought the Falkland War (13,000 kilometres – c. 8,000 miles away from Great Britain) to protect British citizens from living under a military dictatorship, which was far more liberal than the Russian one. Why should we expect Ukrainians not defend their compatriots threatened with extermination in their own country?

Let us assume that the peace deal is made that way – what should we expect then? Strategic pause for Russia to train new soldiers, to recreate war resources, to divide the West politically on the Ukrainian issue, to get rid of sanctions, to split the Ukrainian people into 'realists' seeking capitulation and 'patriots' – ready to fight to the bitter end? Then, when the time comes, Russia will restart the war and take what it wants. Did the Vietnam story of 1973 and the 1975 outcome teach us anything about that kind of policy?

Finland saved its independence by giving up 10 per cent of its territories to Russia in 1940, and in 1944, it still gave up empty lands. All the people (12 per cent of the entire Finnish population) were evacuated.⁵³ The Finns knew what their fate would be under Russian rule. Ukraine does not have such comfort. Its citizens are already under occupation. It can liberate them or condemn them to eternal enslavement and, quite frequently, death. Remember – it is not a land one gives up – these are people who are given up to all the cruelties of the 'Russian world'.

Why is the West deaf to the warnings from Central European countries?

The mental geopolitical map of Europe was shaped in the nineteenth century, when Central Europe was a subject of the Russian, Habsburg, and Prussian empires (since 1871 – the *Kaiserreich* – the German Empire united by Prussia). The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (roughly speaking today's Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and

⁵³ J.H. Wuorinen, 'The Finnish Treaty', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 257: *Peace Settlements of World War II* (1948), pp. 87–96.

Ukraine) was dominated by Russia in result of the Northern War (1700–1721) and ceased to be an important player in the international game and then was partitioned and disappeared (it emerged in that game from time to time by making numerous insurrections but stop being perceived as a permanent actor on the European scene for c. 200 years (till 1918). The quasi-state entity of the Kozaks of Zaporozhe (the mental ancestor of Ukraine) was practically erased from the scene in 1709, when, having fought alongside Sweden, they were defeated by Russia. Hungary was conquered by the Ottomans after 1526 and, at the turn of the eighteenth century, by the Habsburgs, and ceased to be a source of independent power. The Czech Kingdom disappeared in 1620, conquered by the Habsburgs too. Romania did not exist until 1859–1860, and then it was too small to be perceived by the great powers as an important actor. Estonia, Finland and Latvia had never existed as states before 1917–1918. The interwar period, when the majority of the nations in question (except for Ukrainians and Belarusians) regained independence, was too short for the West to get used to the geopolitical situation in which Central Europe existed as a source of an independent political will and might. Except for Poland (whose army defeated the Russians in 1920), all the other states of the region were too small to have a decisive impact on the geopolitical situation. Then there was the Second World War that ended with the soviet domination over all the states mentioned above, either in the form of a direct incorporation (the Baltic states), either strict political control by the puppet governments composed with soviet agents (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria) or by the overwhelming political influence known as Finlandization (Finland). The three Caucasian states – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia underwent a similar history, being conquered by Russia first by the tsarist and then by the Bolsheviks and were too peripheral and too weak to influence the Western image of the nature of the Russian policy. As a result, the only states that had a long and profound experience in dealing with Russia and that survived the confrontation in a condition strong enough to keep on playing as independent actors on the international scene were Sweden and Turkey. The first one was too small and too peripheral since 1709, and the last, called in the nineteenth century ‘the sick man of Europe’, was politically too weak and too exotic to influence Western thinking about Russia. The result is that the image of Russia – of its political culture, its way of thinking, the character of its state and its political class, and therefore its political goals and modus operandi - is usually deeply misunderstood by the West. It is too often considered and analysed through the prism of Western mentality, Western type of statehood mechanisms and Western imperial experience, as well as based on the tradition shaped since Enlightenment times when intellectuals like Diderot and Voltaire – paid with Petersburg gold – created the mythical image of the splendid enlightened rulers (Catherine II as ‘Semiramide of the North’).⁵⁴

⁵⁴ The myth is still functioning, as an example, see: R. Zaretsky, *Catherine & Diderot: The Empress, the Philosopher, and the Fate of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA – London, 2019), p. 272.

The first Polish bicameral parliament was founded in 1468. It dominated the country's political life since 1505, and, since 1569, it became a common practice across the entire Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, lasting until 1793. The Polish *Habeas corpus act*, known as *Neminem captivabimus nisi iure victum* (We will not imprison anybody without a proper trial), was adopted in 1430, and religious tolerance became state law in Poland in 1573, adopted under the horrifying impression of the barbaric Night of Saint Bartholomew's Day in Paris.⁵⁵ French democracy was born, in fact, in 1871 – so was the German one, with a break in the years 1933–1949, then reintroduced in Germany by Americans. Despite all those facts, these are still the countries of Central Europe that are labelled 'young democracies', which means they are immature and therefore not worth listening to. That is a long and profound tradition of ignoring Central Europe, and its experience with Russia is no exception. Russia is, therefore, seen through the prism of the French, the German, and the British memory, and – in the twentieth century – the American memory, but not with the participation of those whose experience in dealing with Moscow is the longest. For the West, Russia emerged suddenly in the eighteenth century as a powerful empire ruled by enlightened reformers. That image was later on completed by the image of Russia as "the tamer of Napoleon that released Europe from the French imperialism" or just the opposite – as dreamt 'Great Ally' against Germany in the First World War and the Second World War – idealised both in 1892–1917 – in France and 1941–1945 in the US and UK. That was mixed with the admiration for the military might "that has never been defeated" (despite the Crimean War 1853–1856, Russian-Japanese war 1904–1905, the First World War and the Polish-Soviet one 1919–1920 – to mention only the major battles fought in a modern era and lost by Russia).

Central Europe, deprived of its independent statehood since the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, with a short break between the First and Second World Wars, has disappeared from the West's political radar. The West has grown accustomed to the situation in which what had been agreed upon between Moscow (Petersburg), Berlin, and Vienna regarding that region was habitually implemented without further delay. That way of thinking was a source of the German-Soviet agreement on the Soviet troops' evacuation from Eastern Germany with the use of Polish territory for their transit. Both parties to the deal had 'forgotten' to consult the Polish government about whether foreign troops could enter Polish territory, and then were surprised when the Polish Border Guard did not let them in. They accused Poland of sabotaging the withdrawal of the Russians from Germany.⁵⁶ The same way of thinking was a foundation for France's support for Russia's

⁵⁵ For more on the Central European democratic tradition, consult *Magna Carta: A Central European Perspective of Our Common Heritage of Freedom*, ed. Z. Rau, P. Żurawski vel Grajewski, M. Tracz-Tryniecki (London – New York, 2016).

⁵⁶ J Strzelczyk, *Ucieczka ze Wschodu. Rosja w polskiej polityce 1989–1993* (Warszawa, 2002), pp. 140–146.

demand to create visa-free transit across Poland and Lithuania to the Kaliningrad Region, a promise Jacques Chirac made to Putin in Sochi in 2002 without asking the Poles or Lithuanians for their opinion.⁵⁷ The French 'knew better' how to deal with Russia, at least in their own view. The problem is that reality does not confirm that self-conceited illusion.

Conclusion

In 1492, Isabel of Castilla and Ferdinand of Aragon conquered Granada, thus ending the *Reconquista*; Christopher Columbus discovered America; and Kazimierz IV Jagiellon, the king of Poland and the great duke of Lithuania, died. The Muscovite army of Ivan III attacked Lithuania, and since that year, Poland (alone or as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – meaning acting together with the peoples of the lands that today constitute Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Latvia and Estonia) fought 18 wars with Russia. Some of them were victorious, some lost. We are the most experienced in dealing with Russia among all nations in the world. It is worth listening to what we have to say about it – and we say: do not have any illusions, do not nourish any wishful thinking – Russia will never be part of a democratic world respecting civilised rules. Mind its imperial appetite, understand its game and its methods, beware of Russia's ability to corrupt politicians and seduce public opinion with effective propaganda, never show your weakness, never step back, demonstrate your military might, since that is the only language understood by the Kremlin, and keep your powder dry.

Abstract

The article analyses *the West's misguided policy towards Russia after 1991*. Its goal was to transform Russia into a democratic, stable, and predictable state that would cooperate with the West. In practice, this has turned out to be a complete illusion – Russia has become neither more democratic nor more peaceful. Despite numerous institutional forms of cooperation (Council of Europe, G8, NATO-Russia Council, Partnership for Peace, numerous EU-Russia agreements), this policy failed, culminating in the aggression against Ukraine in 2022. The author points out that *the West has misjudged the nature of Russia*, relying on myths and ignorance, and ignoring the warnings of Central and Eastern European countries. Since the days of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, the West has hoped for a 'good tsar' – a reformer who would democratise Russia. However, successive regimes – from Putin to Medvedev – have continued Russia's imperial, aggressive policies.

According to the author, Russia should not be indulged, but firmly restrained – otherwise it will feel encouraged to continue its aggression. Russia has been the aggressor for its neighbours for centuries. Contrary to Western expectations, it has never been and will never be a desirable ally – its policies are based on corruption, destabilisation, and manipulation. The author stresses

⁵⁷ D. Lynch, 'Russia Faces Europe', *Chaillot Papers*, no. 60 (2003), p. 51.

that *the West does not understand the Russian mentality*, shaped by a lack of civic traditions, private property, and democracy. In his view, the dream of democratising Russia is an illusion. In the final section, the author calls for the knowledge and experience of Central Europe to be used, as the region has had to deal with Russian imperialism for centuries. He concludes that Russia must not be trusted or appeased – the only language the Kremlin understands is *force*. The West should give up any illusion of a partnership with Russia.

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