

## Forum

# Securitisation of history in Russia and prospects for peace in Ukraine



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### Abstract

Der Kreml will sich als unabhängiger Akteur und Schwergewicht in einer multipolaren Weltordnung präsentieren. Wladimir Putin positioniert sich als Verteidiger «traditioneller russischer Werte» und Verfechter der historischen Souveränität über die russische und globale Geschichte. Er stellt sein Land als Festung dar, die von Feinden umzingelt ist. Der Krieg Russlands in der Ukraine hat zu keiner Schwächung des Putin-Regimes geführt – Friede jedoch könnte genau dies bewirken: Ein Ende des Krieges könnte das

Ausmass des angerichteten Schadens für Russland offenbaren und das Regime gefährden. Viele Russinnen und Russen sind für ihren Lebensunterhalt von der Kriegswirtschaft abhängig geworden. Eine Einigung durch ein Friedensabkommen dürfte daher weder dauerhaft noch nachhaltig sein. Angesichts der neuen Realitäten in einer weniger regelbasierten, weniger westlich dominierten und damit gefährlicheren Welt ist die Schweiz gut beraten, an ihrem Commitment zur Wiedererlangung der Verteidigungsfähigkeit festzuhalten.

**Schlüsselbegriffe** Russischer Krieg in der Ukraine; Putin; Geschichtspolitik; Verteidigungsfähigkeit

**Keywords** Russian war in Ukraine; Putin; politics of memory; Swiss defence capability



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The Kremlin aims at presenting itself as an independent stakeholder and heavyweight in a multipolar world order. Vladimir Putin styles himself as a defender of “traditional Russian values”, and as a champion of historical sovereignty over Russian and global history. He portrays his country as a fortress surrounded by enemies. The Russian war in Ukraine has not led to a weakening of Putin’s regime – but peace might: it could reveal the magnitude of the damage done to Russia and put the regime at risk. Many Russians have become dependent on the war economy for their livelihoods. A settlement through a peace deal is therefore unlikely to be long-lasting or sustainable. In view of the new realities in a less rules-based, less Western dominated and consequently more dangerous world, Switzerland is well-advised to stick to its commitment to regain its defence capability.

2025 will mark the 34th anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union (USSR). In Kazakhstan’s then capital Alma-Ata (present-day Almaty), the remaining Soviet republics, including Russia, sealed the dissolution of the USSR on 21 December 1991.

In a speech to the Federal Assembly on 25 April 2005, Russian President Vladimir Putin described the fall of the USSR as follows: “Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration spread to Russia itself.”

In Russia (which became the USSR’s continuer state) and to some extent also in other countries that formerly belonged to Moscow’s orbit, many associate the 1990s with chaos, the decay of values, legal uncertainty, the rise of the oligarchs and an ever-widening gap between rich and poor. Several former republics turned away from the once perceived big brother Russia in the wake of the implosion of the USSR and sought Euro-Atlantic integration through membership in the European Union (EU) or NATO. Ukraine was for a while torn between turning west or stay neutral, but eventually clearly pulled towards Europe. Many Russians to-

day perceive this strategic turn as a betrayal and still suffer from a collective phantom pain triggered by the breakup of the USSR.

Putin, today’s Russia’s strongman leader, witnessed the fall of the Berlin wall and the beginning of the gradual demise of the USSR as a KGB agent in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), one of Moscow’s most loyal proxies. It was a traumatic experience for the then low-level spy at the Dresden *rezidentura*.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Moscow tried to tie the post-Soviet space (what the Kremlin considers its “near abroad” to Russia through either regional organisations or bilateral ties, sometimes also by using military force – carrots and sticks. This has only partly functioned: unlike neighbouring Belarus, Ukraine made it quite clear from the very beginning of its independence that it was not interested in a closer integration. A few examples: despite being a founding state, Kyiv decided to not formally become a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and also chose not to join the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The carrots of joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) were not enticing enough. The pro-Russian government under President Viktor Yanukovich fled during Euromaidan and Kyiv subsequently pivoted towards an association agreement

with the European Union, a process that had previously been stalled under Yanukovich. Moscow resorted to the stick – first in a covert way through the “little green men” who occupied Crimea in late February of 2014, then supporting pro-Russian militias in Donbas and finally overtly launching the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

### Putin’s gradual ascent to power

It was in the turbulent 1990s when Putin’s political career began. He quickly rose through the ranks of the Saint Petersburg city administration up to first deputy head and transitioned into national politics in the late 90s. Putin’s rise to absolute power came *gradually*: Boris Yeltsin, Russia’s first president, made him director of the FSB (the KGB’s main successor agency) in 1998 and prime minister in 1999.

Putin’s first years at the centre of power in Russia were marked by domestic turmoil, the second Chechen war and the perceived sidelining of Russia on the international stage. Especially the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the NATO intervention in Kosovo, a first “war of values”, were a great shock for decision makers in the Kremlin, as they saw parallels: today it’s Yugoslavia, tomorrow it could be a humanitarian intervention in the North Caucasus through bypassing Russia in the UN Security Council.

On New Year’s Eve 1999, the ageing Yeltsin appointed Putin as acting president and laid the groundwork for his tenure as president (or prime minister during a brief interregnum with Dmitry Medvedev from 2008 to 2012) up until this day. A Russian saying goes: “Who is your favourite candidate in the presidential election?” – “Candidate X.” – “And who will you vote for?” – “The president.” Putin won the March 2000 election in the first round.

### Politics of memory in Russian national security thinking

The experiences from the 1990s have led to a victim narrative that has strongly marked Russian security policy since that period. According to Russia expert Natasha Kuhrt, the country is portrayed as some sort of “besieged fortress” surrounded by enemies, which leads to a dangerous dualism: 1) Russia portrays itself as under constant attack, and therefore

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2) constantly needs to expand its own territory and impose the Kremlin’s “values” (e.g. “true Europe” versus decadent “Gayropa”) on the territories that Russia expands into. The thinking that *whoever occupies a territory also imposes its own social system on it* is very much prevalent in Russian national security considerations.

Putin seeks legitimization as Russia’s ruler in imperial success. Despite being a lawyer by training, Putin is obsessed with history and with securing his own place in the chronicles of Russia, overall national considerations seem to come only second. His July 2021 article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, which conditioned the information space for the full-scale invasion seven months later, is an example. In enlarging Russia, he sees himself in the footsteps of czar Peter I, empress Catherine II or perhaps even Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin.

***“Politics of memory play a central role in Russian national security thinking. The linchpin of this securitisation of history is Ukraine.”***

Politics of memory play a central role in Russian national security thinking. The linchpin of this *securitisation of history* is Ukraine. Kyiv is regarded as the “mother of all Russian cities” by Russian nationalists and is a pivotal part of the “Moscow as Third Rome” narrative, carrying forward the legacy of Byzantium as defender of the “true Christian faith”. Crimea and the Northern shores of the Black Sea are also some of the very few areas that were ever under Moscow’s rule that are home to ancient Greek ruins: a nexus to the occident and an important puzzle piece in the “true Europe” lore. Another key aspect is the cult around victory against Nazi Germany. The Kremlin tries to create a linkage of the ongoing war against Ukraine with the Second World War. What is more, according to professor emeritus Andreas Kappeler, Russia and Ukraine have an *asymmetrical relationship*: while Russia likes to view its south-western neighbour as a historical part of its own country and tries to marginalise the Ukrainian

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nation as “Lesser” or “Southern Russia”, the Ukrainians for their part do not deny Russia’s right to statehood in any way.

With the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin’s approval rates skyrocketed. According to the official narrative, Russia rose from its knees, and redressed historical injustice. The “bringing home” of Crimea was a major political success for Putin. Western sanctions on a grand scale did not materialise. In the following years, European and American universities kept sending exchange students to Russian partner institutions, and football fans from all over the world crowded the stadiums and public viewing areas during the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

Economic and political stability, due in large parts to high prices for commodities in the years after Putin’s takeover, were decisive factors that shaped political conditions during the early years of his leadership. It is individual purchasing power and personal prosperity that the population is primarily interested in, not the authoritarian style of leadership, the lack of political plurality or the lack of media freedom. Putin enjoyed high approval ratings, and got hungry for more – through this certainty and the limited resistance to his increasingly aggressive foreign policy by the West, he saw himself encouraged to continue his expansionist and revisionist policy, which ultimately led to the full-scale invasion of 2022.

**The Russian war against Ukraine**

The war, what Russia styles as a “special military operation”, only barely affects the daily life of citizens in cities like Moscow or Saint Petersburg. Putin’s social contract still works for a majority of Russia’s inhabitants. In return for stability, relative economic welfare that still allows for many Russians to travel abroad at least once a year, and the perceived reestablishment of the country as a great power, Putin’s regime does not face any significant opposition. A constant indoctrination via state

television and rabble-rousing commentators like Margarita Simonyan or Vladimir Solovyov characterises the discourse in Russia. Russian émigré writer Michail Schischkin unapologetically said: “As a Russian you have three options – you can sing patriotic songs, you can remain silent or you can emigrate”. Many, especially young and well-educated Russians chose the latter option, especially after a partial mobilisation was announced in September 2022. But even among those who decided not to take part in Russia’s war of conquest in Ukraine, a stance of apathy and a shrug of the shoulders mentality often prevails when it comes to Kremlin politics. In doubt, it’s my country, right or wrong.

**Economy on a war footing**

Russia’s economy is on a war footing and other areas such as consumer industries are gradually being neglected. The shift to a war economy has helped to cushion Western sanctions, which have in turn helped Putin to rally his population around the flag. Unemployment is at a post-Soviet record low. To many dwellers of the underdeveloped and neglected Russian hinterland, the war even became an economic opportunity: signing a contract with the Russian armed forces is a lucrative way to improve one’s own and their families’ financial standing.

***“There are good reasons for Putin to continue the war in Ukraine, and potentially after an eventual peace agreement elsewhere, in order to keep rallying the population around the flag.”***

The number of people employed in the military-industrial sector has significantly increased since the start of the full-scale invasion. Over 10 per cent of Russia’s population depend either directly or indirectly on the Russian defence industry for their livelihoods, on a sector almost entirely contingent on government contracts. There are good reasons for Putin to continue the war in Ukraine, and potentially after an eventual peace agreement elsewhere, in order to keep rallying the population around the flag. Averting from the war economy and his expansionism could reveal the magnitude of the damage done to Russian society, its economy and put the regime at risk.

### What to expect from a potential peace or ceasefire?

A negotiated peace on Russia's terms is unlikely to be sustainable, as Russia is pursuing Salami tactics. Whatever the outcome of the Russian war in Ukraine might be, the Kremlin will most likely remain an expansionist and irredentist actor, with an indoctrinated population and a battle-hardened fighting force. And it has the capacity to underwrite such a policy. Especially in the early stages of the full-scale invasion against its neighbour, Russian military performance was lagging behind expectations. But a steep learning curve can be observed. Putin's generals were able to find ways to cope with the influx of modern, state of the art weaponry the US and other Western allies provided Kyiv with and were able to utilise and integrate new offensive capabilities in a highly technologically advanced conflict, not least *Shahed* drones from Iran. To quote the great British statesman Winston Churchill: *Russia is never as strong as she appears, and never as weak as she seems*. And a next war is rarely ever fought like the one before.

Putin and his entourage would be emboldened by the reward any international recognition of Russia's territorial gains by military force would be. Moreover, it could have an unintended normative character regarding future interactions with the Kremlin. Recent ceasefire phases announced by Moscow turned out to be hollow words. And even if an agreement came to be signed, it is worth remembering how easily the Kremlin can break with its commitments when they no longer serve its foreign and security policy goals. The breach of the Budapest memorandum of 1994, or the unilateral declarations in 2022 that the Minsk agreements "no longer existed" are precedents that should serve as warning signs.

Another military aggression would be a realistic scenario. Various intelligence reports suggest that Putin might also test NATO's mutual defence as enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty in the coming years, potentially in the Baltics.

Should he aim for the integration of ethnically Russian populated areas of Northern Kazakhstan, a Western reaction would probably be less pronounced (Beijing, however, would certainly have objections to such a move), similar to the recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan in 2023 and the resulting exodus of the

local Armenian population or the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014.

### Consequences for Switzerland

Russia's unnecessary and unprovoked war of aggression against its neighbour and the current transatlantic crisis might only be the beginning of a murky new reality in a less rules-based, less Western dominated, more fragmented and consequentially more dangerous world.

***"Peace in Ukraine alone will also not be enough to remain secure – what is needed are solid security and robust defence capabilities."***

Swiss security and defence policy makers and lawmakers alike need to consider that regaining credible defence capabilities will remain crucially important on its own merits. It is also as an act of solidarity with the other European countries and with what after Donald Trump's second presidential take-over remains of the "Western community of values". Even if a certain détente should emerge after any "normalisation" of ties with Moscow, if international corporations should return to Russia after the sanction regime is (partially) lifted or if the Russian national football team is allowed to participate in the 2026 FIFA World Cup in case a settlement of the largest military conflict in Europe since the Second World War materialises, a renewed expansionist military campaign might only be a matter of time. Putin may not be able to "afford peace" if he wishes to remain in power and not face the fate of a demise and potentially even a trial before a Russian or international court. Peace in Ukraine alone will also not be enough to remain secure – what is needed are solid security and robust defence capabilities. Peace is a status between two countries, security, on the other hand, every country's own responsibility. ♦

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