

# One Year Later: No Turning Back

Fredrik Löjdquist  
24 February 2023

*One year after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it is time to reflect on what is at stake and what needs to be done. Democratic rule in Moscow has not been so distant since the fall of communism. What happens next is likely to define Europe, Russia and Ukraine for generations, writes Fredrik Löjdquist, director of the Centre for Eastern European Studies.*

Russia's full-scale invasion since 24 February 2022 is not only a major escalation of a war of aggression against Ukraine that has been going on since 2014. It is the largest and most serious act of war in Europe since the end of the Second World War. The major attack a year ago was not entirely unexpected but, in a sense, a consistent and logical development of processes that have been ongoing for at least 15 years. The ongoing war is the most violent expression of an underlying Russia crisis, which is now evidently a long-term, structural and systemic crisis.

Russia's assault on international law and the European security order, in word and deed, dates back to President Putin's Munich speech in 2007, the attack on Georgia in 2008 and the war on Ukraine since 2014. There is no indication that Putin will give up his goal in relation to Ukraine: political control over the whole country and its incorporation into a Russian sphere of influence. The crisis has been going on for a long time; and there is every reason to believe that it will continue for a long time yet.

The Russia crisis is structural because it is an expression of the country's political regime, its worldview and its historiography. Internal repression feeds external aggression and vice versa. It is systemic because it is an attack on the international rules-based order and the European security order built up after the Second World War and since the end of the Cold War. It is a systemic conflict that constitutes a deliberate and antagonistic attack on free, open and democratic societies, and on prosperity, peace and security in Europe.

## Defining Europe

When one of the world's two leading nuclear powers, which is also a permanent member of the UN Security Council, wages a war of aggression in violation of fundamental principles

of international law – and, according to many observers, also of the Genocide Convention – and threatens to use nuclear weapons, there is no longer any way back to the world as it was before 24 February last year. Putin has crossed the Rubicon. We are outside the comfort zone.

What is happening now is a historic turning point that will define not only Russia, Ukraine and the rest of Eastern Europe for generations to come, but also the European Union and the West, and what constitutes the European project for the foreseeable future. It is therefore not just about Ukraine, but about Sweden, the EU and the wider West. This is not a “Ukraine war” or a “Ukraine conflict”.

It is important to remember that war is not an end in itself, but a means of achieving political objectives. The broader Russian objectives are about regime survival, where the Kremlin perceives democracy, the rule of law and human rights to be a threat to its own rule. This threat can arise not only from within Russia but also from a country like Ukraine. For this reason, the pro-European democracy protests on Maidan in Kiev in 2013–2014 were seen as an existential threat to the Kremlin and the Russian political model. This also includes attacks on and attempts to influence and undermine Western democracies using various hybrid threats.

Russia's objectives are also about the desire to re-establish Russian spheres of influence, where Moscow can dominate its neighbours by virtue of the principle that might is right. This is a direct attack on the fundamental principles of the international order with its emphasis on sovereignty, territorial integrity and self-determination. This objective has existed for a long time, and the creation of the protracted conflicts in Georgia and Moldova, for example, was a means to this end. Ultimately, it is a revisionist and revanchist policy aimed at re-establishing the Soviet and Russian empires. It is a colonial and imperialistic programme.

A third objective is to dismantle the existing European security order. By December 2021, however, a fourth Russian objective was also clear – to alter the military and political balance of power in Europe and globally, pushing the US and NATO out of Central, Eastern and Northern Europe. The Kremlin is now trying to achieve these goals through a large-scale use of military force and other forms of non-military, hybrid threats.

### **A Normal Russia Is Far Away**

A transformation to a different, “normal” Russia – a non-antagonistic, non-imperialistic Russia that respects international law, democracy and human rights – is further away than at any time since the fall of communism. It would require, not least, a reckoning with its totalitarian Leninist-Stalinist communist legacy, and before that imperialist Russia and now this colonial (with characteristics of genocidal) Russia. Putin has focused precisely on historiography, or the falsification of history, making such a turnaround difficult to achieve in the foreseeable future.

The Russia crisis will not end with a possible ceasefire or a freezing of the war on Ukraine. Peace is therefore impossible as long as Russia has a leadership like Putin's, other than by forcing Ukraine to make significant concessions in violation of international law. Such a Russian harvest of the fruits of aggression would have far-reaching and unacceptable consequences for international law and the European security order, and thus for the security of us all.

Accountability for Russia's crimes, particularly under international law, has become essential to winning the peace and restoring a legitimate international order. The Russian crisis is therefore unlikely to be a problem that can be resolved but will have to be managed over a long period of time.

### **The West as Actor, Not Observer**

The evolution of the current crisis will be determined by factors in at least six arenas: (a) developments on the battlefield; (b) collective Western support for Ukraine; (c) Western policy on Russia; (d) Ukraine's internal political, social and economic development, as well as the country's overall resilience; (e) Russia's internal development; and (f) the international community's (particularly the global South's) collective view on the conflict and its willingness to act in a concerted manner. Domestic political opinion in the EU member states, the US and other key Western players will also be important for the outcome of the war.

The outcome of the war – and by extension of the wider Russia crisis – will be largely dependent on Western action, or lack thereof. The West is not an outside observer but an actor that carries responsibility for the outcome. Any scenarios or predictions about the future course of Ukraine, Russia and the war are meaningless unless the willingness and ability of the West to act as a whole is taken into account. This is about us. Therefore, the necessary financial, economic, humanitarian and military support to Ukraine should be understood not as a cost or a burden, but as an investment in the future of Europe and the international rules-based order. We are doing this for our own security, peace and prosperity.

The consequences of various possible outcomes would have a direct impact not only on Ukraine and Russia, but also on the EU, the wider European project and the European security order. Calculations on various outcomes must take opportunity costs into account. What would be the consequences of allowing Putin (and other political leaders) to conclude that wars of aggression and near-totalitarian repression could ever be successful?

The West can directly influence Ukraine, and thus the war and the overall direction of the Russian crisis. However, Western countries have few if any tools for directly influencing Russia's development. The single most important opportunity for indirect influence on Russia in the long term, however, is to ensure that Ukraine manages to survive as a nation, to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and allow it to develop into a modern European state with respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and with a functioning market economy.

### **What Is Required and for How Long?**

The lessons learned since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 now show that there is no safe space between Russia, and the European and transatlantic community based on EU and NATO membership. So-called constructive ambiguity, diplomatic attempts to freeze conflicts created by Russia and a lack of accountability have proved to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Any new ceasefire, freezing of the conflict or renewed attempt to force Ukraine to be a buffer state, a country "in-between", will only exacerbate and prolong the problem.

An active Eastern Europe policy focused on Ukraine is now being formulated involving EU-membership approximation, financial, humanitarian and military assistance, and a reconstruction programme. The West as a whole has taken robust steps that no one could

have foreseen a year ago but, if there is to be a Ukraine left to rebuild and integrate into the European community, much still needs to be done. Hence the urgent focus on military support in the face of a Russian offensive, which may already have begun by the time these lines are published.

The first anniversary of the full-scale invasion is therefore an opportunity to reflect on whether Europe's leaders and voters have fully grasped what is at stake, how long this might take and what is needed to prevent things from deteriorating further. A more strategic, sustainable, comprehensive and long-term policy on Eastern Europe, and on Russia, will have to be developed.

*This text was originally published in Utrikesmagasinet in Swedish, but is here translated to English as part of the SCEEUS Commentary series.*



## **Fredrik Löjdquist**

Director of the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

### **About SCEEUS**

The Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) is an independent Centre, funded by the Swedish Government, established in 2021. The Centre conducts policy relevant analysis on Russia and Eastern Europe and serves as a platform and meeting place for national and international discussions and exchanges on Russia and Eastern Europe. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

© 2023 Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies

### **Previous SCEEUS Publications:**

**Putin's Address: First Impressions by Aleksandr Golts, Victoria Leukavets, Charlotta Rodhe and Andreas Umland**

*SCEEUS Quick Comment, 22 February 2023*

**Learning From Crisis: Civil Society, Resilience and the EU's Eastern Neighbour by Daniela Mussnig**

*SCEEUS Guest Platform for Eastern Europe Policy No. 12 2023, 21 February 2023*