

Russia's War Against Ukraine: A Lithuanian Perspective

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Abstract

In this essay, we present the Lithuanian perspective on Russia's war against Ukraine. We discuss the facts on the ground, the attribution of responsibility, and touch upon the potential ways forward. In Lithuania's view, it is clear that Russia is responsible for the war and all of the associated outcomes, including first and foremost the loss of life and other forms of suffering in Ukraine, the destruction of Ukraine's economy and civil infrastructure, but also the wider repercussions for the world regarding higher prices, increased instability, and heightened political/military tensions. We refute the argument that the enlargement of NATO/EU in any way provoked or posed a threat to Russia and instead argue that this process created conditions for economic growth and stability in the admitted countries. Finally, on both moral and practical grounds, we suggest that the best course of action for creating long-lasting conditions for peace and stability is to support Ukraine in its struggle against the illegal and unprovoked invasion.

1. Introduction

This essay addresses the issue of how Lithuania approaches Russia's war against Ukraine, as well as the logic behind this Baltic country's perspective. The views expressed are those of the authors only; yet we believe that they largely convey the general consensus in Lithuania and other nations with similar historical backgrounds, such as the Estonians, Latvians, or Poles. Since its beginning as a full-scale invasion by Russia in 2022, the war in Ukraine has undoubtedly been a significant international issue and a matter of concern for European countries as well as globally. Therefore, the essay also devotes much attention to a few of the most prominent arguments about the war, which have been part of the relevant discussions among academics, analysts, and politicians in parts of the world outside the West. Divergent perspectives have motivated debates on the war in various countries, remote in geographic and historical terms. This contribution lays grounds for a better understanding of the Baltic perspective, in particular. Our discussion is informed by official positions of governments, including as they appear in the media, reports of international organizations, as well as academic and expert accounts of the events, their significance, and their meaning.

The essay is structured as follows. We first highlight, as a baseline, a few important and widely recognized facts that surround Russia's war against Ukraine. Second, we discuss the issue of responsibility. Third, Russia's credibility is addressed. Finally, conclusions follow.

2. Setting the Scene: A Few Inevitable Facts about the War in Ukraine

First, a few facts seem in order, as they help to provide the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The full-scale war has been going on for more than a year. The war itself started in 2014 when Russia illegally annexed Crimea and backed pro-Russian separatist movements in the Donbas [18, 19, 5, 24]. While no one knows the exact figures, it has been estimated, including by UN authorities, that, since 24 February 2022, thousands of Ukrainian civilians, among them at least several hundred children, have been killed, many more have been injured, and millions have been displaced [29]. There have been numerous reports on and, in fact, independently investigated evidence of torture, rape, forced deportations, attacks on civilian infrastructure, or willful killings committed by Russian soldiers [28]. The International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued an arrest warrant against two Russian individuals, including President Putin, over the alleged "war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and that of unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation" [29]. We do not have good estimates of how many Ukrainian soldiers have died but the figure likely reaches tens of thousands. Estimates of Russian military personnel deaths range from around 65 000 [27] to nearly 200 000 [17].

Furthermore, because of the war, the Ukrainian economy has shrunk by around 30 percent during the first 10 months of the ongoing invasion [1]. The economic prospects of the

country stand extremely dire because of the destruction of infrastructure objects, such as hospitals [15], energy facilities, roads, or bridges, but also countless land mines [15]. Despite some assertions to the contrary, the Russian economy has also suffered significantly. When it comes to the short run, Russian GDP in 2022 contracted by 3 percent, which represents a 6 percentage points fall compared to the pre-invasion forecast of 3 percent [6]. Economists largely agree that Russia's long-run development prospects have been severely hampered. This also means, among other things, that the severe sanctions adopted against Russia are effective, both in terms of reducing the Russian regime's ability to behave aggressively in the future and, more directly, limiting its current military capacity by restricting access to important materials and products.

It is also noteworthy that the consequences of the war have touched not only the countries which are directly involved in the fighting. They have rippled across the world, resulting in higher food and energy prices, as well as heightened risks of a broader military conflict which is even tied to the risk of the use of nuclear weapons.

3. The Issue of Responsibility

At the same time, it is crucial to name the party which is responsible for this situation. Lithuania's perspective and, in fact, position is unequivocal on this issue. Russia chose to wage a full-blown war against Ukraine. Neither such a choice was forced upon Moscow nor was it inevitable. Furthermore, as we argue below, nobody "provoked" Russia. In fact, many global leaders had tried to do their best prior to February 2022 to gain reassurances from Russia that it would not engage in any military activity against Ukraine. For instance, based on French President Macron's account of his long meeting with President Putin in Moscow at the beginning of February 2022, the Kremlin's leader had made a vow that Russia would "not be the cause of escalation" [26]. Yet President Putin ultimately chose war over peace. It is thus only logical that the responsibility for all the devastating war-related consequences that Ukraine and ordinary Ukrainians, as well as the global community more generally, have to endure lies with the Russian side.

There have been efforts, however, to approach the issue of responsibility in broader terms, by going back in time and extending the concept of responsibility. In this regard, perhaps the most prominent counterargument, also upheld by a few well-known Western scholars such as John Mearsheimer, consists in saying that (at least) part of the responsibility also lies with the West [16], and more specifically, with NATO. The argument usually goes as follows: Russia was promised in the 1990s that NATO would not enlarge (a more accurate word than "expand" because all countries joined NATO and EU of their own accord) and was ready to cooperate or at least peacefully coexist with the West. Nevertheless, the West used the opportunity when Russia was weak and pursued "expansion", bringing NATO to Russia's borders. Not only did NATO invite the Baltic countries but also embarked on the project of admitting

Georgia and Ukraine sometime in the future [4]. Russia thus felt threatened and had no choice but to react aggressively (or, to use a milder version of this account, Moscow was provoked).

However, this argument is ultimately untenable empirically and analytically for several reasons. First, Russia was never given an actual promise that NATO (not to mention the EU) would not enlarge, as also admitted by Gorbachev himself [20]. Even if, in 1990, there were talks between the US and Soviet leadership about the fact that NATO would not go beyond East Germany, these talks were constrained to a specific historical moment, in which the Eastern European countries were neither yet free nor independent. This historical moment did not last, as the Soviet Union soon collapsed, thus allowing Eastern European countries to take charge of their destiny and become prosperous democracies.

Very importantly, the narrative built by the Russian government around the mentioned promise tends to omit its own obligations, first and foremost, the Budapest Memorandum (1994), whereby Russia committed to security guarantees to three post-soviet republics, including Ukraine, in exchange for their adherence to the nuclear non-proliferation regime. The NATO-Russia Founding Act (1997) equally committed Russia to be a partner in safeguarding peace and security in the region.

But other reasons, as this essay contends, are perhaps even more important. Significantly, NATO never posed – and does not pose – any military threat to Russia. Russia's own actions, in fact, suggest that it might also adhere to this same line of thinking. When Finland and Sweden declared their willingness to join NATO (which happened in reaction to Russia's aggression against Ukraine [25]), Putin eventually said that he had no problem with this [10]. We can infer that the joining of Finland (or Sweden, for that matter) to NATO was not considered a real threat by Moscow. Furthermore, as if one needed another more tangible proof of Russia's position, the country moved most of the heavy Russian equipment away from the Finnish-Russian border [7]. As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words.

Putting it differently, we believe that the overall evidence points not to the counterfactual of a cooperative, peaceful, and conflict-averse Russia, had NATO not enlarged. Instead, the evidence based on Russia's aggressive policy since 2008, in particular, points to the more realistic counterfactual, whereby Russia is able to dominate what it calls its "near abroad" because NATO did not enlarge. This kind of scenario would likely have resulted in a significantly different existence of the countries of the former Soviet bloc – today, they would be, at best, poorer, less democratic, and more corrupt. At worst, they would have been already directly attacked and/or occupied. These eventualities are very real for the Baltic nations. Since 1991, the Baltic countries have been independent for a shorter period than they had lived under the Soviet occupation. Thus, the painful experience of these nations continues to be part of the living collective memory. They are constantly reinvigorated by too obvious continuities, such as unprovoked aggression against independent states,

between the Soviet regime and the one of today's Russia.

To follow the logic of counterfactuals, the essay suggests yet another one. Had Ukraine been admitted into NATO some years ago (realizing this was essentially off the table realistically at the time), not only would there be no major war in Europe with all of its horrific consequences but, possibly, Russia itself would be better off, not only in terms of avoiding substantial manpower, reputation, and economic losses due to the war but also in those of being less autocratic and kleptocratic. To recap this part of the argument, the essay conjectures that, rather than bringing about instability, the enlargement of NATO and the EU, in fact, contributed to stability, peace, and prosperity in countries that joined these organizations. While we do not contend that NATO or EU membership was a sufficient precondition for such a positive development, it was nevertheless a necessary one.

Russia's neighbors have objective grounds to continue to perceive it as the most significant security threat [2, 30]. Moscow's rhetoric and actions, ranging from economic coercion [12], and political interference to brutal military aggression clearly show that this perception is grounded in reality and does not represent a form of "Russophobia" (a phobia by definition is a fear that is irrational). In stark contrast, it is unimaginable to consider that NATO would be taking any military action to try to take away a part of Russia's sovereign territory. The alliance's forces in the region neighboring Russia are simply too thin for any offensive military activity and are of an entirely defensive character. Furthermore, according to Erik Jones, "Neither the United States nor NATO has ever moved openly against a nuclear power. The deterrent force of mutually assured destruction remains too potent" [11]. NATO's consensus-based decision-making, in fact, fulfills an important checks function and keeps the organization away from unilateral digressions.

A few other elements provide additional empirical evidence for disproving the "NATO as a threat to Russia" thesis. NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) force was decided upon in 2016 and deployed in the Eastern flank countries of the alliance as no other but a direct consequence of Russia's aggressive, threatening, and unlawful policy towards Ukraine, in particular. Moreover, it may be noteworthy to stress here the great lengths to which different leaders of NATO member states went to emphasize that the alliance was not actively participating in the war and was not at war with Russia. NATO members' support for Ukraine, which is provided in pursuance of Ukraine's fundamental right to self-defence enshrined in the UN Charter and according to other instruments of international law, has been implemented in a manner so as to avoid any risk of escalation.

It is curious to observe that when pressed, the proponents of the "NATO as a threat to Russia" argument do not provide specific answers but resort to abstract concepts, such as the one of the balance of power. The high

level of abstraction that such concepts present makes them a tool for a challenging theoretical discussion; yet they are hard to operationalize in concrete empirical contexts, which determine real-world politics. Concepts cannot answer questions about the origins of war – one has to look at what happened (or has been happening) concretely [8]. Such a task also includes challenging the claim that NATO has been threatening Russia, and submitting it to empirical testing: What is the factual evidence to prove such a threat? Or has the NATO factor been merely instrumentalized to pursue a neo-imperialist policy?

In fact, there is one way in which the enlargement of NATO and the EU poses a threat, yet, certainly not for Russia but specifically for its current political regime. The fact that Russia's neighboring countries have become democratic, richer, and less corrupt makes the Russian regime fearful of popular discontent among its own population. The prospect of Ukraine following such a path would have significantly added to this fear. Yet, this may not be the kind of "threat" that those equating the EU/NATO enlargement with a "provocation" have in mind.

Furthermore, as already mentioned, all countries that joined the EU and NATO chose to do so of their own volition. As the subsequent events showed, they did this for very good reasons. Dismissing the fact that European countries made an actual political choice to join these organizations equates with neglecting significant objective realities, such as the fact that these same countries had to implement numerous reforms to achieve their objective of full-fledged membership. This also clearly speaks to the issue of states' sovereignty and independence, specifically, to nations' free and democratic decisions regarding their future, which is inconsistent with yet another ambiguous abstract notion of "zones of influence".

Finally, it denies agency to these countries and thus agrees with the colonialist and (neo)imperialist line of thinking, implying that the destinies and will of small(er) and less powerful peoples do not count. Keen and close observers of Russia, including in academia, have forcefully made the argument regarding Russia's "past and current" imperialism [23]. Despite a few apparent breaking points in the country's history, there is a significant amount of continuity in Russia's political development and uninterrupted ambitions. For example, Botakoz Kassymbekova, a Soviet studies expert, contends that the "Soviet imperial discourse in Central Asia told the local population that they were liberated from Russian tsarism and prevented from falling prey to British colonialism" [23]. Yet, the discourse on "liberation" was just a propaganda tool, as Stalin had no intention to let go of the "Russian imperial borders and had adopted the same toolkit – ethnic cleansing, crushing dissent, destroying national movements, privileging Russian ethnicity and culture – that tsarist Russia used to maintain them" [13]. The "liberation" theme is also common in the current Russian regime's rhetoric surrounding its war against Ukraine, which is only

consistent with President Putin's deploring the collapse of the Soviet Union and depicting it as a tragedy [3].

4. The Lack of Russia's Credibility

From an international law (or legal) and moral point of view, Russia's war against Ukraine is clearly wrong and deserves to be condemned. Russia is entirely responsible for the war, and there are no "two sides". There is, furthermore, a very easy way for Russia to end this war – it can simply withdraw its forces from the Ukrainian territory, and the war stops tomorrow.

Despite agreeing with this legal and moral side of the argument, one may still maintain that we need to "look the reality in the face" and stop the war, whatever it takes [22]. There have been calls for immediate peace and cease-fire, as well as talks about "compromises" with Russia (presumably including territorial concessions and perhaps additional conditions, such as those concerning Ukraine's military, or its neutrality status). Otherwise – the argument goes – not only will people keep dying, and the global economy will keep suffering, but there is an actual risk of the war spreading, including the risk of World War III and of the prospect of the use of nuclear weapons. It is further suggested (or perhaps sometimes implied) that the West, by supplying weapons to Ukraine, is exacerbating the conflict, leading to more deaths and increased levels of the mentioned risks.

Even if we set the legal (and moral) issues aside, the problem with this argument is that such a strategy has already been tried, time and again. Russia was met essentially with a slap on the wrist after its actions of military aggression in Georgia in 2008, of invading and illegally annexing Crimea in 2014, of backing and arming pro-Russian separatist forces in the Donbas in Eastern Ukraine, or its military involvement, from 2015, in Syria, where Russia's actions already amounted to the war crime of indiscriminate attacks in civilian populated areas [21].

Every action towards appeasement (or "compromise", or "taking into consideration" Russia's interests) was interpreted by the Russian government as a weakness and a call for further aggressive action. Moreover, one may not need an explicit answer to the question of what message yet another effort of appeasement towards Russia would send to all those actors seeking to subvert international law and order. So a systematic pattern of the Russian regime's past behavior logically suggests that appeasement will most likely lead to emboldening the Russian regime and will give it time to regain its forces. It should not be forgotten that Russia has already used nuclear blackmail numerous times in the course of its war against Ukraine, which, once again, attests to Russia's irresponsible and extremely dangerous behavior.

We find ourselves in a situation in which the current Russian regime has essentially no credibility. Notably, it unleashed a major war against its neighbor, which it had committed to protect under the Budapest Memorandum. So,

it had time and again broken international law commitments and lied, including by spreading disinformation. Among the Russian government's lies, one may refer to the following ones: it had stated numerous times that it was not going to invade Ukraine; it has claimed – and continues to do so – that there is "no war" in Ukraine; it had claimed that there had been no Russian forces in Crimea ("the green men"); that Ukraine was ruled by a Nazi regime (President Zelensky is, in fact, Jewish); or that biological weapons had been developed in Ukraine.

Given all that has been discussed above, the question is how it is possible to trust Russia's current regime and any agreement that it signs. The only realistic way of ensuring long-run stability and peace is to create a situation where Russia is sufficiently deterred from relaunching its aggression. Realistic scenarios for this would include sufficient security guarantees (such as NATO membership) to Ukraine and/or prop up Ukraine's military capabilities in a more significant manner to deter further Russian aggression in the future. Otherwise, Russia will very likely re-engage in pursuing its aggressive behavior once it sees an opportunity presenting itself. Consequently, a new wave of cruelty will descend upon Ukraine, along with the associated negative consequences for the region and the wider world.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, supporting Ukraine and seeking peace by restoring the territorial integrity of Ukraine and its future safety against further aggression is not only the right thing to do morally but also pragmatically (it is "realist", for lack of a better word). Such a course of action will contribute to bolstering a rules-based world order and encourage global economic and political stability. This, as we see it, is also at the core of India's long-run national interest and the reflection of the ideals India holds dear. Not because "the West" or the US or Lithuanians think so but because it is the right thing to do and the practical thing to do.

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