

[Open Peer Review on Qeios](#)

# [Commentary] Ukraine on the brink – Is Western appeasement plunging Europe into a catastrophe?

Georg Oesterdiekhoff<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Karlsruhe Institute of Technology

**Funding:** No specific funding was received for this work.

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

## Abstract

The article describes interior problems, coming from the inefficiency of the Russian socioeconomic system, play a greater part than geopolitical struggles in impinging the Kremlin politics towards Ukraine. The Russian elite wants to impede that Ukraine develops better than Russia and Belarus, when entering EU and furnishing democratic structures. The power elite would lose control when the people of Russia and Belarus would wish to follow the example given by a free and prosperous Ukraine. It is maintained that only a determined Western power politics will have the effect to deter Russia from the invasion and occupation of the entire Ukraine. The deployment of Nato troops in Ukraine is required to urge Russia to refrain from any forms of occupation.

The protests in Kiev, which led to the fall of the Yanukovich government and a decision in favor of rapprochement with the European Union, were interpreted by the Kremlin as the threat of Ukraine losing its place in the Eurasian economic zone and post-Soviet Union of states to be formed under the leadership of Russia. This union of states is intended to play the role of a successor to the Soviet Union, which is geared towards gaining and maintaining power externally and authoritarian control of society internally.<sup>1</sup>

The underlying social concept is not based on democracy and the rule of law, but on an authoritarian state and social order that is commonly referred to as semi-democracy or semi-dictatorship. The state elite enters into a coalition with an oligarchy that jointly appropriates a large part of the national economic surplus and usually does not invest it in the future of its own country, but in lucrative financial centers in London or New York. An entrepreneurial middle class, which alone could provide the country with dynamic development, has only limited opportunities, as the kleptocracy allows itself the possibility of expropriation at any time. Alexander Gentelev and others have therefore described Russia under Putin as a neo-feudal economic and social system. Neither owners of condominiums nor owners of small businesses or large corporations can be sure of being able to protect their property against arbitrary expropriation without compensation at any time. These expropriations, which permeate the economy like a cancer, are covered up by corrupt judges, public prosecutors and police officers and carried out by thugs known as "raiders". On the one hand, the top echelons of the state receive their share of these raids and, on the other, secure a loyal following.

The unprotected property rights correspond to the insecure status of civil and human rights. Citizens have little or no

chance of protecting their rights against an overpowering state. People who resist the theft of their property or express criticism of the government can be sentenced and imprisoned without any hope of a fair trial. The tender seedling of democracy and the rule of law that blossomed under Gorbachev and Yeltsin has been suffocated again under Putin. Opposition parties have hardly any opportunities to develop, the media are tightly controlled, and the state order is maintained through violence, threats and manipulation, not through participation, civic engagement and civil liberties. The discussion and reappraisal of the Stalin era and the Soviet dictatorship that took place under Yeltsin was discontinued under Putin. Today, this past is no longer criticized, but heroized.

This social and economic model is neither attractive nor sustainable. It is backward-looking and outdated. Gagged people can neither build a dynamic economy based on a broad middle class nor a modern constitutional state and democracy. If it were not for the wealth of raw materials, this archaic system would hardly have been able to survive for so long.

Only against the background of this characterization of Russia can the current crisis in Ukraine be appropriately classified. The Kremlin sees Ukraine's impending drift towards the EU and NATO as a geopolitical, economic and military threat. The comment often made these days that a "Eurasian economic zone" cannot be realized without Ukraine is of course exaggerated. It would only be a little smaller, namely about 3% of its geographical size. Furthermore, it will probably be many, many years before Ukraine can become a full member of the EU. But even then, the Russian economy would not be at a disadvantage, but rather at an advantage. A dynamically developing Ukrainian economy within the framework of the EU would offer the Russian economy more trade advantages than a Ukrainian economy that continues to be stifled by kleptocracy. It is therefore not economic reasons of the traditional kind that are driving Russia's current aggressive policy towards Ukraine. Rather, they fear a further encirclement of Russia by NATO if Ukraine were to become a member. It is understandable that such a development would give the Kremlin a stomachache.

First of all, it should be pointed out that the West has had no interest in either EU membership or Nato membership for Ukraine in recent years. Ukraine's accession to NATO would not increase the security of NATO members, but rather reduce it, as it was believed in the last years widely. However, if Russia is putting pressure on Ukraine, then Ukraine's NATO membership is a means of guaranteeing the security of this country. It is therefore rooted in moral rather than geopolitical motives. This membership would be no more a threat to Russia than Poland or the Baltic states. In fact, Ukrainian membership of the EU and NATO would not threaten Russian economic or security interests. So, there is a gulf, which is not easy to explain, between the understandable stomachache and the Russian policy of the day, which could potentially plunge Russia economically, politically and socially into the sidelines or into chaos. This obvious disparity is not the result of "rationality" and "interest politics", if one understands this to mean the pursuit of a clever foreign and economic policy.

In my opinion, the current aggressive Russian policy can therefore only be understood if it is placed in the context of the peculiarities of the social and state order analyzed above. The Kremlin's motives are therefore more differentiated, contradictory and confused than assumed. The following contradictory mixture of motives and guiding ideas seems to me to be central. Turning Ukraine towards the rule of law, democracy and the EU would give the country a dynamic and better position that would have a knock-on effect on Belarus and Russia. The neo-Soviet model of society and state in

these two countries would lose acceptance among their populations. They would want to follow Ukraine's example sooner rather than later. The Russian government therefore seems to be of the opinion that only force is capable of putting a stop to this development. The question then arises as to why the Russian government is not following Ukraine's example, given the obvious superiority of the Western model. The main reason is, of course, the sheer interests of the ruling class. The Russian state elite would lose power and wealth if the state and economy were to follow the Western model. Furthermore, an end to Russian semi-democracy would lead to the prosecution of members of the government. Finally, if one examines Putin's statements, he seems to regard the neo-Soviet model as at least equivalent, if not superior, to the Western model. In this respect, his mental attitude must be seen as openly contradictory.

His attempt to keep Ukraine in the Russian sphere of influence by force presupposes that he actually believes that this policy could be crowned with success in the medium or long term. However, this policy can only make sense if he believes in the systemic equivalence of the neo-Soviet model of state and society. He would hardly accept a world crisis such as the current one if he knew that the neo-Soviet model had no future in either Russia or Ukraine. Ultimately, however, this belief has its roots in ideologies that have outlived their historical usefulness and must even be described as pre-Enlightenment. It is the belief that only a strictly authoritarian state order can secure militant and imperial world prestige. It is quite obvious that the move towards humanist values, the overcoming of imperialist attitudes and the end of bloc thinking, which have been observed in Europe in particular, but not only there, in recent decades, have not been received and supported by the Kremlin.

The current crisis can only be assessed against the background of these considerations. The gradual occupation and annexation of Crimea does not primarily serve to secure the naval base of the Black Sea Fleet. This would not even be threatened by Ukraine's membership of NATO. Crimea was seized because its geographical peripheral location, the presence of the Black Sea Fleet and the high proportion of ethnic Russians made its occupation and annexation the easiest option. The reason why these processes were so gradual and cumulative was that Putin had a wide range of possible responses to international reactions at his disposal. If he had been completely indifferent to possible international reactions, he could have carried out and named the annexation immediately. The weak reactions of the so-called international community, which he was able to evaluate over a period of days, showed him that annexation would not meet with insurmountable resistance. A very harsh and very determined reaction from the international community in the first few days would have motivated him to withdraw, as his denial that the Russian government was behind the appearance and influx of armed forces in Crimea sufficiently indicates. But the politicians of the West hastened to repeat, like a prayer wheel, that all diplomatic channels must be pursued, that "oil must not be poured on the fire" and that any provocation must be avoided at all costs. The use of military means was ruled out from the outset. It is now one thing not to want to use them, and another thing to announce this to the violent aggressor from the outset and without necessity. These declarations showed the Ukrainians that the world was not prepared to defend them militarily, and the aggressor that he could safely achieve his desired goals, by force if necessary. These declarations by do-gooders in critical leadership positions were nothing more than *carte blanche* for the raid, an invitation to escalate and seize land. Could it be that top politicians have neither read Machiavelli and von Clausewitz nor a history of the Second World War? In any case, these declarations transformed the idea and plan for the annexation of Crimea into action and implementation.

If the Ukrainians cut off Crimea's supply routes or if pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine and Odessa hold referendums in favor of joining Russia, then a violent conflict can hardly be avoided. If Russian blood flows, then the likelihood of Russian military forces crossing the borders to protect Russians in Ukraine against the "fascists" increases. The mixture of a Russian military presence and ethnic Russians will ensure the dubious holding of referendums, the results of which will be prejudicial, if only because international observers will be kept away. Putin can calmly await the opportune moment to order these actions in a cascade. The first steps have already been taken in eastern Ukraine.

If Russian blood flows, then even Western threats of sanctions with a somewhat tougher stance will have little effect. Instead, the third stage can then be tackled. As soon as clashes between the Ukrainian and Russian military take place in eastern Ukraine, Crimea or Odessa, the Kremlin will see every reason to set its sights on its real target. It can then attempt to march on Kiev in order to reinstate the "legitimate government" there and end the rule of the "fascists". After all, Medvedev already announced last week that there would be "further revolutions" in Kiev. Ukraine's course towards the West will then be halted and the country's political dependence on Russia restored. Of course, it will then be necessary to keep a strong Russian military permanently in the country, following the tried and tested Soviet model.

There is no doubt that this goal is the Russian government's actual desired objective. Whether it will carry out all three stages or stop at the first or second stage depends on the development of internal and external circumstances, on the resistance of the Ukrainians and the international community.

The passive and purely reactive behavior of the international community is extremely dangerous. How will it behave if there are a few thousand deaths as a result of the clashes? What will it do when the threatened Kiev and Lviv residents call for help and support? The opinion sometimes expressed that the Russian people will withdraw their allegiance from the Kremlin as soon as their Ukrainian brothers are attacked is pure wishful thinking. The majority of the Russian people already believed last week that hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians had fled Ukraine and that "fascists" would rule Kiev. Then they will probably also believe propaganda lies about atrocities and support the Kremlin in "liberating" Ukraine with bloodshed on both sides.

If stage three is carried out, the international community will be plunged into the most serious moral crisis in a long time. However, it will then only be able to respond with tough sanctions and no longer with a military presence. What would Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Konrad Adenauer, Winston Churchill and Georg W. Bush junior actually do in this situation? Would they have obtained the consent of the interim government in Kiev last week and quickly deployed NATO troops to Ukraine's eastern border? A massive and determined NATO presence on the eastern border would certainly have put a stop to any attempts to even try stages two and three. However, once Russian troops are in eastern Ukraine, it will be almost impossible for NATO troops to enter the country. The danger of a military conflict is then too great.

Whatever the outcome of this terrible conflict, everyone involved will be a loser. Putin has caused immense damage to Russia's economy, state and society for a very long time. He has ruined Russia's reputation in the world and poisoned the climate between the two brother nations. If the international community is not able to resolve this conflict and preserve Ukraine's security, it may take decades to restore its moral integrity. But perhaps in 10 years we will see important

representatives of the Russian government in The Hague again.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> This article was written in spring 2014 shortly after the Russian occupation of Crimea but was never published before. As it proposed massive intervention undertaken by the West at that time, major parts of the article are still relevant and useful today, in 2023 or 2024.