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## **Before and after 24.02.2022: Neighbouring Russia and Ukraine's mission**

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## **До і після 24.02.2022: сусідство з Росією та місія України**

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Russia's geographical neighbours have long been familiar with the significant security threat posed by the common border with this country. The events after 24 February 2022, as well as cases of nuclear blackmail by the Russian government, have extended this threat beyond Europe and Asia. It has become clear that the problem of neighbouring Russia has acquired a global dimension.

Among the 14 countries that share land borders with the Russian Federation, six of them have joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and are under the Alliance's nuclear protection. Each of these countries, except for Norway, joined NATO after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), influenced by the fact that they had repeatedly been the target of Russian (Soviet) expansion in the past, losing sovereignty or a significant part of their land.

As of 2023, territorial disputes between Russia and its Baltic neighbours, as well as Japan, are still ongoing. Under the direct influence of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Finland joined NATO and the accession of traditionally neutral Sweden is being finalised. In September 2022, Ukraine applied for fast-track accession to NATO, which was supported by many NATO members, primarily Russia's current and former neighbours. Proclaimed by the revanchist leadership of the nuclear superpower Russia to justify the occupation of Ukraine's territories, the concept of "historical lands" directly threatens the

territorial integrity and sovereignty of several countries. Like Ukraine, the territories of 15 other states: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan were part of the Russian Empire or the USSR in the last century.

Kazakhstan, unlike Ukraine, did not even have the status of a "union republic" until 1936 and was part of Russia as an autonomous region, with its then-capital located in Orenburg, the administrative centre of one of the modern regions of the Russian Federation. Countries sharing a border with Muscovy (which was transformed into Russia, the USSR, and other configurations) often found themselves under the influence or control of this state. The periods of independence of these countries were followed by periods of loss. Some formerly sovereign states became part of Russia, as was the case with the former Kazan, Crimean, Astrakhan, and Kalmyk Khanates, as well as Tuva. Russia's ambitions to the south are confirmed by the history of many conflicts with Turkey and Persia, as well as the Soviet invasions of Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Syria. Russia had imperial aspirations that extended beyond its borders to the Black Sea straits and the Balkans region.

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, control over Ukraine and its resources has played a key role in the realisation of Moscow's imperial aspirations on all azimuths, especially the

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European one. The Balkan campaigns and the seizure of Crimea, the conquest of Siberia and the Caucasus, and the conquests in Central Asia and the Far East were made possible by using Ukraine's potential. At the beginning of the Second World War, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) launched an aggression against Poland and Romania. After 1945, when Hungary and Czechoslovakia became the USSR's new neighbours, Soviet troops invaded from the same territory during the memorable years of the Hungarian Uprising (1956) and the Prague Spring (1968).

In some countries, not everyone remembers how, during the Soviet era, the Ukrainian SSR was used as an anti-Western foothold, where a million-strong military force was deployed, primarily aimed at the Mediterranean. Destroyed by the collapse of the USSR and de-Europeanised by the secession of Ukraine and other European "union republics", Russia has lost resources but not imperial illusions and claims at least to dominate Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

Russia's possession of one of the two largest nuclear arsenals has created a sense of permissiveness and impunity among its leadership, and the unexpected military resistance to Russian aggression by Ukraine, along with the unprecedented support of Kyiv by the united West, and the failure of energy blackmail, have prompted the Kremlin to use nuclear intimidation. However, this is not accepted even by China, which is loyal to Russia and has not forgotten that before it acquired nuclear status in 1964, Moscow repeatedly tested its neighbour. Beijing seems also wary of the possible desire to acquire nuclear weapons by some countries neighbouring China, which have certain concerns about it and, on the example of Ukraine, have seen the potential threat of aggression from a neighbour that possesses them.

Its own experience of dominating its neighbours prevents Moscow from realising the geopolitical realities of a globalised world where it has become an object of external governance to a greater extent than the larger and more autocratic USSR or the Russian Empire. After the end of the Eastern (Crimean) War (1853-1856), Russia was banned from having a navy, fortresses, and arsenals in the Black Sea. Measures were taken to demilitarise the ports of Sevastopol and Mykolaiv. After the defeat of the war with Japan (1904-1905), Russia lost South Sakhalin, the Liaodong Peninsula and control of the Port Arthur fortress.

The Brest-Litovsk Separate Peace Agreement of 1918 sealed Russia's defeat in World War I and the loss of Ukraine, the Baltic States, Belarus, and Georgia. The loss in the Soviet-Polish war of 1919-1920 forced Moscow to cede territories to a much smaller young state supported by the West. The most striking example of external pressure, and in fact, the management of a nuclear Russia-USSR, was the containment of its expansion during the Cold War, which naturally resulted in the defeat and collapse of the USSR. This was preceded by the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the flight of vassals in Europe, and the disappearance of zones of influence in Africa and America.

Separated from Western countries and under pressure from them, the Russian Federation is trying to play the "Chinese card", exploiting the possibility of getting closer to China in the context of confrontation with the United States. At the same time, it is trying not to recognise its secondary importance in relations with Beijing. Russia's centuries-old geopolitical ambitions as a link between the West and the East pose a danger to the Russian Federation and its neighbours. It is likely to be difficult to avoid this geopolitical tension, which dates to the time of Muscovy, without transforming the largest hereditary chain of the former USSR, which became the Russian Federation, into a democratic state with abandoned imperial ambitions or even dividing it into several independent countries. The experience of the restoration of authoritarianism in Russia after 1917 and 1991 should not be a verdict on the prospects for democratic development in the post-Putin space. Although in both cases the government in Moscow remained authoritarian, independent states emerged on the ruins of the Russian-USSR, choosing and winning the democratic path of development. Russia and some of its territories may have certain traditions and potential for such development. The change of generations and the awareness of its own vulnerability in a globalised environment may in the future facilitate Russia's integration into the Euro-Atlantic community, to which it is geographically, historically, and culturally inclined.

The Russian Empire was an ally of the influential European powers, and the USSR would hardly have survived World War II without the support of the United States and the United Kingdom. Ukraine's unique vocation as a civilisational entity that professes common civilisational values with the West is to carry out a twofold strategic mission in relation to neighbouring Russia and Belarus. This refers to repelling the expansion of Russian imperialism in southeastern Europe and building a democratic society and modern economy alongside Russia after the war. A large European post-Soviet state, Slavic and predominantly Orthodox Ukraine is intended to become the most understandable and attractive example and model of successful development for most Russians.

Ukraine's external influence on Muscovy-Russia has a long history, and the two Kyiv Maidans revealed Kyiv's leadership as a carrier of democratic traditions, due to its affiliation with Western civilisation. Ukraine's assets include a civil society, freedom of the media, and a functioning parliament, even under martial law.

Therewith, Ukrainian democracy as a model of promising development for Russia will only work if there is reliable protection against Russian expansion based on the military, political, financial, and economic institutionalisation of Ukraine's membership of the Western community. Ukraine's membership in NATO and the EU can free Russia from its eternal desire to own the Ukrainian state, help it get rid of its imperial syndrome and learn to live alongside its neighbours.