

POLICYBRIEF

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One Year Later: What Lessons Should Policymakers and Scholars From the EU Draw From Russia's Invasion of Ukraine?

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Highlights

1. This policy brief argues that scholars should no longer study the countries in Eastern Europe from the angle of EU-Russia competition, rather they need to account more explicitly for the agency of these countries.
2. The war has painstakingly revealed that policymakers and scholars knew little about Ukraine. This lack of knowledge led to significant misinterpretations of Ukraine as a country and its relationship with Russia.
3. Ukraine occupies a central role in Russia's historical imagination and identity construction. Even if a peace agreement is reached between Ukraine and Russia, it is highly likely that Russia will continue to harass Ukraine, because in Moscow's view, Ukraine has no historical right to exist as a sovereign state.
4. Now that the EU has fully embraced Ukraine by offering it unprecedented military, moral and financial support to fight Russia, as well as by offering it a membership perspective, the EU needs to move to a Russia-second and others-first policy.

Correcting Assumptions

This policy brief focuses on the lessons that policymakers and scholars from the European Union (EU) can draw from Russia's war against Ukraine for the EU's future relations with Ukraine and with Russia.

First of all, for scholars like myself who study the EU's engagement with the post-Soviet region, one crucial lesson that has emerged from this war is that we have for too long overlooked the agency of the so-called in-between countries. For too long, we have been preoccupied with looking at the region through the prism of EU-Russia competition over their so-called 'shared' neighbourhood; and in doing so, we were obsessed with the agency of the EU and Russia, and fatally ignored the agency of the countries situated between the EU and Russia.

If there is one thing that this war has shown us, it is that those so-called in-between countries undoubtedly have agency, and their agency matters. We can no longer study the countries in the region purely from the angle of EU-Russia competition, instead, we need to account more explicitly for the agency of the countries in the region. When it comes to acknowledging the agency of Ukraine, the war has painstakingly revealed that we know embarrassingly little about this country.

Both scholars and policymakers have to admit that up until the start of the war, Ukraine remained a black hole for them, beyond the rather generic knowledge that they had about the country. The little knowledge they had of Ukraine proved to be either incorrect or biased.

If we had had more knowledge about Ukraine, we might not have been surprised at Ukraine's exceptional resilience against Russia's military invasion. Indeed, the country that we had described as being corrupt, dysfunctional, and deeply divided, turned out to be quite strong, institutionally robust and united by civic nationalism. The country that the EU until last year looked down upon for its backwardness, endemic corruption

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and hybrid democracy is now hailed by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen as leading the battle of the liberal world against the illiberal world.

Moreover, the war revealed that Ukraine is not Russia, or rather, that Ukrainians are not Russians. We mistakenly thought that Ukrainians and Russians are very proximate, that they are an intertwined people. In fact, they are very dissimilar; they are very different societies and, actually, different civilizations.

Little did we know that Ukrainians look at their relationship with Russia in postcolonial terms. If we had, we would very easily understand why Ukrainians are fighting so bravely. For them, the current war is the final stage of the 300-year war of national liberation, which they saw as postponed but not fully completed in 1991 with the collapse of the USSR.

As debates within the EU are now starting to focus on the possible peaceful solutions to Russia's war against Ukraine, these insights need to be taken into account. Clearly, the EU and its member states will want to be on the right side of history, and they will want to claim a stake in any peaceful solution that will follow the war.

A Voice of Their Own

Irrespective of how the war will further evolve, we need to understand why Ukrainians will be sceptical about any calls for peace, including those coming from Western capitals. While the West and Europe are seen as Ukraine's allies, the EU and its member states have to be careful not to fall into the trap of imposing their worldview onto Ukraine; instead, they need to acknowledge Ukraine's agency. As the Ukrainian intellectual Mykola Ryabchuk has said, there is a fear among many Ukrainians that peaceful solutions emanating from the West will reflect the old-fashioned imperial view of the 'Orient' as lacking agency of its own and which, therefore, should be managed by Western masters, peacekeepers and intermediaries within agreed spheres of influence. Now that the EU is serious about being a geopolitical actor, it will certainly want to certify its sphere of influence in any post-war scenario for Ukraine.

This brings us to the question of what agency Ukraine will be given by the EU in the country's post-war recovery. In the post-war era, the EU will want to profile itself as a benign power, which is so generous to offer billions of aid to help poor Ukraine recover and to become resilient; not only against Russia, but also against the dark forces of illiberalism and democratic backsliding.

And, of course, as a candidate member of the EU, Ukraine will also be offered specific aid from the EU to help the country prepare for its accession. But what voice will Ukraine be given in all of this? And will Ukraine be entitled to have a voice, or is it merely expected to accept and follow without any grudge the instructions and requirements of its generous benefactor in Brussels?

It is not exaggerated to state that the likelihood of Ukraine becoming a member state in the near future is rather low. In fact, it seems much more likely that Ukraine, just like the Western Balkans countries, will end up being frustrated with the EU, as its accession process is bound to enter a protracted stalemate. Under such circumstances, Ukrainian critiques of the EU acting as a postcolonial power that ignores the voice and agency of its subordinates risks backfiring and creating a backlash.

Ukraine, along with Moldova, is likely to join an ever-growing group of countries that are stuck in the EU's waiting room.

This is a potentially explosive situation, and therefore it is immensely important that the EU critically reflects on its enlargement policy and, in doing so, gives voice to those in its waiting room.

On this point, let us turn to the lessons that we can draw from Russia's invasion of Ukraine for the EU's relations with Russia.

Rewriting History

To start, it is important to point out that it is clear that Russia is currently not just at war with Ukraine, but also with the West. This has been evidenced in both the discourse and the actions of the Kremlin. While Moscow is fighting a military battle against Ukraine, it is raging a hybrid war against the EU and NATO, whereby it uses gas and cyber security as its main strategic weapons.

Of course, we cannot predict the future, but the prospect of Moscow backing down, leaving Ukraine alone and ending its hybrid war against the West seems almost non-existing, at least in the near future. Even if a peace agreement is reached between Ukraine and Russia, it is very likely that Russia will continue to harass Ukraine and will continue to uphold anti-western positions.

This becomes clear when you take into account the factors that triggered Russia to start the invasion of Ukraine. In this regard, both scholars and policymakers in the EU have been blatantly ignorant of the central place that Ukraine occupies in Russia's historical imagination and identity construction, and even more so of the extreme extent to which Moscow is ready to go to regain Ukraine, or destroy it trying.

This policy brief does not afford us the space to elaborate extensively on the factors that drove Russia's decision to launch the invasion of Ukraine, but in a nutshell, it concerns a combination of Russia's deeply-ingrained feeling of vulnerability and insecurity towards the West and Russia's great-power ambitions that include the conviction that Russia is entitled to having a sphere of influence in its backyard. Of all countries in Russia's backyard, Ukraine stands out for Russia as the one country that it cannot risk losing if it is to fulfil its great power ambitions. This is not only for economic

reasons but, even more so, for historical and cultural reasons. Bluntly put, the Kremlin believes Russia as a nation to be incomplete without Ukraine. It is difficult to disentangle Moscow's propaganda from its actual position and beliefs, but in Moscow's view, Ukraine has no historical right to exist as a sovereign state.

This historically unfounded belief has its origins in tsarist times, when imperial Russia appropriated the medieval history of the Kievan Rus and purposively reimagined it as a Russo-centric story in order to legitimize Russia's imperialist ambitions over Belarus and Ukraine. Ever since, there has been no place in this Russian imagination for real Ukrainians and Belarusians, as they were considered Russians. The more Ukrainians tried to develop their own historical, cultural and political agency, the harsher Russia's repressions.

For the elites in Moscow, Ukraine was unlawfully taken from Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union. The Kremlin sees the collapse of the Soviet Union as the "disintegration of historical Russia." Putin and other Russian elites thus see the existence of an independent Ukraine as a symbol of the unjust post-Soviet arrangement, and they see Ukraine's embrace of the West as an existential threat to Russia. Therefore, for Moscow, if gaining back Ukraine is not possible, then it is better to destroy Ukraine as a state and nation.

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This is the reality that the EU is faced with in dealing with Russia, and it is this reality that will form the basis for any post-war settlement. It begs the question of how the EU and Ukraine can regain their trust in Russia. It is a question with no obvious answer. One can only hope for Russia's regime to collapse due to an implosion of the country's economy, but so far Russia's economy seems to be quite resilient, and Russia has powerful allies with a vested interest in keeping the situation relatively close to the status quo. Even in the case of a collapse of the regime, it is far from certain whether this would provide the basis for a more positive relationship between Russia and Ukraine, as the underlying ideology that has led us to this point permeates the minds of many potential Putin successors.

In any case, now that the EU has fully embraced Ukraine by offering it unprecedented military, moral and financial support to fight Russia, as well as by offering it a membership perspective, the EU can no longer bet on two horses. There is no room anymore for a Russia-first policy in the EU. From now on, the EU needs to move to a Russia-second, and others-first policy. This implies, among other things, urgently further decreasing the EU's energy dependence on Russia and giving more agency to Ukraine and the other Eastern Partnership countries in their relations with the EU.

While we can question the effectiveness of the sanctions that the EU has imposed on Russia, it should continue to impose them as long as Russia wages war against Ukraine, and as long as Russia fails to acknowledge its accountability for the war crimes it has committed. Until then, there can be no return to normal relations with Russia. Even in the longer term, if a return to normal relations is up for discussion, the EU will have to be careful about not repeating the same mistakes again. The German policy of *Wandel durch Handel* has proven to be completely flawed and miscalculated.

As long as there is no restoration of trust on both sides, any attempt to build a sustainable relationship with Russia is likely to prove ineffective.

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