

# THE GEOPOLITICAL ZEITENWENDE

Emil Brix

ON February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the Russian Federation's attack on neighboring Ukraine marked a geopolitical turning point, comparable in scale only to the collapse of the communist regimes in Europe from 1989 to 1992. This grand and ambitious term “*Zeitenwende*,” whose meaning roughly translates to “historical shift” or “turning point,” was introduced by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz just four days after the beginning of the Russian military invasion, in a groundbreaking speech in the German Bundestag. In 2022, it shaped international relations and analyses of a fragmented world order: “The world after is no longer the same as the world before.” And it was once again the German Chancellor at the end of 2022 who attempted to explain these tectonic shifts in an article for *Foreign Affairs* “The Global *Zeitenwende*: How to Avoid

a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era.” Neither the American political-military dominance of the last 30 years nor the strategy of “change through trade” by democratically inclined market economies could ensure a resilient world order.

China's economic rise and Russia's revisionist imperialism had long been signs of a new unstable and fragmented world order before 2022. Olaf Scholz writes in *Foreign Affairs*:

In 2007, Putin delivered an aggressive speech at the Munich Security Conference, deriding the rules-based international order as a mere tool of American dominance. The following year, Russia launched a war against Georgia. In 2014, Russia occupied and annexed Crimea and sent its forces into parts of the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, in direct

*Emil Brix is Director of the Vienna School of International Studies (the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna), having formerly served as Director-General of Foreign Cultural Policy of the Austrian Ministry of European and International Affairs and Austria's Ambassador to the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation. You may follow him on Twitter @Amb\_EmilBrix. This is a translated and revised version of a German-language essay entitled “Die geopolitische Zeitenwende”, originally published in Österreichisches Jahrbuch für Politik 2022 (Böhlau, Wien 2023), 411-425.*



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Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivering the “*Zeitenwende*” speech to the Bundestag on February 27th, 2022

violation of international law and Moscow's own treaty commitments. The years that followed saw the Kremlin undercut arms control treaties and expand its military capabilities, poison and murder Russian dissidents, crack down on civil society, and carry out a brutal military intervention in support of the Assad regime in Syria. Step by step, Putin's Russia chose a path that took it further from Europe and further from a cooperative, peaceful order.

## THE END OF THE POST-WAR ERA

One can already argue that “the era in which peace was created with fewer and fewer weapons and mainly

through economic power” is over. This marks the end of the post-war period for Europe, which promised a common, stable, and permanent European security architecture with the Charter of Paris in 1990 after decades of the Cold War.

Availability of resources rather than the extent of reserves will become a geopolitical weapon. Internationally connected energy markets and their physical infrastructure create political dependencies. Following this logic, it is conceivable (although not proven) that the sabotage attack on the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022 was carried out by Russia. The strengthening

of Ukrainian state identity due to the Russian aggression and the Ukrainian military resilience with the help of Western support is a result of fundamental miscalculations of the Russian leadership. This war does not only represent a temporary culmination of Russia's historical justification of its imperial ambitions but can also be interpreted as a direct consequence of the newly adopted Russian "National Security Strategy" in the summer of 2021. The danger of "Westernization" (*vesternizatsiya*) of the Russian world is declared an existential threat in the strategy, and the defense of "historical truth" and the fight against any historical revisionism are named as the foundations of the security strategy.

The war against Ukraine, which can only be referred to as a "military operation" for the "denazification" and "demilitarization" of Ukraine and preventing a "genocide" against the Russian-speaking population of the Donbass under penalty of law in Russia, was announced by Russian President Vladimir Putin on Russian state television on February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022, with a detailed denial of independent Ukrainian history and identity. After almost a millennium of shared history within the Russian world, the Soviet Union had created a "Soviet Ukraine" that had separated one people: Russians and

Ukrainians. As Putin repeatedly declared, "Ukraine is not just a neighboring country for us. It is an integral part of our own history."

At the time of this writing, the war in Ukraine has not yet been militarily or politically decided. However, it can already be analyzed that the Russian President was able to use imperial memory policy as a justification for a war against Ukraine without this "historical narrative" being questioned by a majority of the Russian population. The same applies to the fact that President Putin has declared the end of the post-Cold War era geopolitically, for he explicitly refers to the war against Ukraine as a fight against the "West" and its liberal world order.

February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022 marks a deep break in relations between Europe and Russia. It has probably destroyed the hope of finding a trustworthy relationship through closer cooperation of universities, civil society, but also business partners for a long time. Despite initial Western sanctions in response to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, contracts for the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline were still signed in EU states. The EU member states responded quickly and jointly with economic measures to Russia's illegal war of aggression

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against Ukraine. They have adopted 10 sanction packages against Russia since 2022. The sanctions are aimed primarily at weakening the Russian economy and the regime's political elite massively. Almost every month, the EU—and all Western allies—have imposed new additional economic sanctions against Russia. There has never been a comparable time since the end of World War II. One must assume that a fairly impenetrable new wall is currently emerging between Russia and the rest of Europe.

The war is also a significant setback for the Russians. It is expected that Russia will emerge from this war weak and isolated. This affects not only the economy and politics, but also contacts in cultural and scientific fields, and even cooperation between sports organizations. While many organizations try to maintain contacts as much as possible—and rightfully so, as far as they are not politically controlled—this can only succeed in part, and it is expected that we will have to deal with even stronger nationalism from the Russian side. The leadership in the Kremlin has decided to focus on isolation, military strength, and strong control of its own population. It obviously accepts that this will bring disadvantages for the Russian population as a whole.

**CENTRAL EUROPE: PERIPHERY OR FRONTLINE STATES IN AN EPOCHAL SHIFT?**

It is safe to say that with the beginning of the Russian war of aggression against the Central European neighboring state of Ukraine, the much hoped-for establishment of a democratically organized and stable European political architecture has failed. Since the end of the ideological East-West division of Europe, most Central European states have become part of the

European Union in the last three decades. Also, for the states of the Western Balkans, there is a realistic prospect of EU membership. Additionally, states such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, and perhaps the dictatorial regime in Belarus, began to feel as parts of the new Central European architecture. In many ways, they remained a periphery between the EU and Russia, but they were at least able to develop their national identities. Central Europe had moved eastward on the map, and the band of Central European states from the Baltic region through the "Visegrád countries" to Romania and Bulgaria became the eastern periphery of the "West" within the EU. For these states, it was about adapting to the norms and rules of what was still a Western European-dominated EU. They were offered little attention and hardly any leadership and shaping

power within this Union. When conservative governments in Poland and Hungary were criticized for violations of democracy and the rule of law, the response was often that they had not shaken off the yoke of the communist Soviet Union only to be ruled by the EU Commission in Brussels.

In fact, the future of the European integration process will depend on the success of the mental integration of this region as well. The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine has changed the conditions and chances for these states, because through Russia's actions, all of Central Europe become frontline states of an epochal shift instead of being a periphery. These new EU states had long warned of Russia's imperialist policies and criticized the EU's security naivety and energy dependence. The term "epochal shift" also applies to the new significance of Central Europe for containing Russian imperialism, from which Europeans can only hope that it will not permanently lead to a new ideological frontline across Europe. It is not surprising that Poland has taken in the largest number of Ukrainian refugees, provides the largest humanitarian and military assistance in Europe, and is most interested in further strengthening the transatlantic partnership. An example of the dynamics,

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which were inadvertently triggered by Russia, is the fact that in June 2022, Ukraine was unanimously granted candidate status for EU membership by all EU member states.

**TURNING POINT AND THE LONG SHADOW OF HISTORY**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the pro-European Russian philosopher Pyotr Chaadayev, criticized the European image of Russia: "The people in Europe are peculiarly wrong about us; they insist on regarding us as Eastern; through a kind of European instinct, they push us towards the Orient, so as not to see us in the West anymore."

What does this assessment have to do with the Russian war in Ukraine? From the perspective of the Russian leadership and a majority of the population, this war is a conflict over Russian identity, a struggle over history and geography. It is not just Putin's war. It is a war for an imperial Russian self-understanding, for a geopolitical claim. The guiding ideas are: the world has become multipolar after the end of the Pax Americana, in which great powers compete for spheres of influence. Russia and its Orthodox Church are a distinct civilization that cannot be described as either European or Asian.

Putin's longtime "philosophical" advisor (and former Ukraine envoy), Vladislav Surkov, wrote in 2018 about Russia's geopolitical mission under the title "The Loneliness of a Half-Breed": "Beyond 2014 there lies an indefinitely long period, Era 14 Plus, in which we are destined to a hundred years (or possibly two hundred or three hundred) of geopolitical loneliness. Westernization attempts, so lightmindedly started by False Dmitry and resolutely continued by Peter the Great, varied in nature and scale. [...] The Russian army attained triumphant victories in all big wars in Europe, whose record of military conflicts is a reason enough to rate it as a continent more bloodthirsty and more prone to mass violence than any other. With its great victories and tremendous sacrifices Russia gained many territories in the West but made no friends."

**THE UKRAINE WAR AS A CONFLICT OVER VALUES**

When more than 300 years ago, Tsar Peter the Great founded St. Petersburg and later, Catherine the Great hired Russian and Western geographers to describe the Ural Mountains as the "natural" geographic boundary of Europe, the political will to be a part of

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Europe and the "Enlightenment" zone was evident. This cultural tradition was also reflected in the communist experiment from the October Revolution until the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, as a worldview that originated in Europe and gained popularity in Russia, communism made it clear that the love-hate relationship between Europe and Russia is ambivalent. Historian Orlando Figes begins his account of Russia's cultural history with the famous scene from Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace*, in which the young Princess Natasha hears an unknown folk song and instinctively begins to dance to the melody. This scene illustrates that there is no definitive answer to the question of the European character of Russian culture and that, at least for Tolstoy, a parallel existence between modern European life and Russian traditions remains essential.

These images of Russia illustrate that since the end of the East-West conflict in Europe, cultural conceptions of communities and their borders have become more geographical and historical. It is not surprising that geopolitical considerations are once again playing a

role in Russia and elsewhere. Geopolitics usually focuses on realpolitik-based national interests, but in the current discussion, mutual propaganda accusations create the ideological picture of a liberal-decadent West facing a conservative-authoritarian Russia. The cultural differences are emphasized, which are then “underpinned”

with realpolitik facts that are quite understandable (NATO expansion, “legitimate” security interests, human rights discussions, war crimes). Culture becomes once again an argument for political interests. Milan Kundera gave the model for this development in his famous essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe” in 1983. Using the example of Russian soldiers who threw Frederick Chopin’s piano out of the window during their occupation of Warsaw, Kundera describes Russia as an Asian power that forced the “Easternization” of Central Europe after 1945.

The editor-in-chief of “Ekho Moskv,” a radio station banned by Russian authorities in 2022, Alexei Venediktov, recently dryly observed: “Living in a history book is a catastrophe.” Russia justifies the war with cultural arguments, but the truth is that war crimes are being committed.

**THE GREAT THEATER OF THE WORLD**

The world is in motion. Geopolitics is once again on the agenda on the world stage. After all, after the end of World War II, everything was in such a stable order. There was the First, Second, and Third World. Then the Second

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World yielded to the First, and the Third was promised that it could become similar to the First with a little more democracy and market economy. Today, however, it seems to many that the world is in disarray and must be brought back into a stable order. Even in ancient times, historians knew instinctively that “geopolitics”

encompassed more than just understanding the role of history and geography in international relations.

With the developments of 2022, the entire world order is being renegotiated. Who will guarantee security in Europe in the future? Is Germany, with its radical shift in security policy, on the path to becoming a major political power? Is there a future for the OSCE, or will NATO—which as recently as 2019 was described as “brain dead” by the French President Emmanuel Macron—remain the only credible and effective defense alliance of the democratic free world

for the foreseeable future? Will a militarily and politically weakened Russia after the Ukraine war be part of a new European security architecture, or will it be part of an Asian world where China, and in certain matters, India and Turkey are the dominant powers? Will there be a new form of colonialism,

with a race for political zones of influence, resources, and supply chains in Africa or even the Arctic? Will the threat of use of nuclear weapons become a realistic military and political option again?

The multilateral world order, as designed after 1945, no longer seems to correspond to the likes of

Putin, Xi Jinping, and Trump. What connects them in their criticism is the accusation that the world order is too “liberal,” too liberal for capitalist Trump, communist Xi, and autocratic Putin. This picture also includes the many supporting actors who also like to justify their national identity politics with the weaknesses of liberal social designs. For the Orbans, Salvini, Erdoğan, Modi, and Bolsonaro of this world, the world has become too “politically correct.” The few who want to stick to their socialist order ideas, the Kim Jong-uns, Maduro, and Diaz-Canel of this world,

rightly fear a fateful transformation of their national theaters. To understand the political situation in the world, it is worth taking a look at the major players and whether they even mean the same thing when they describe their role in world politics.

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The political, military, and economic dominance of the United States has increased rather than decreased since the end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, America’s position in international relations was weakened after the humiliating withdrawal of allied troops from Afghanistan in September 2021, increasingly strong European efforts

for an independent global role, and increasing rivalry with China in the months preceding the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Even the annual Munich Security Conference adopted the motto “Westlessness” in 2020, describing a West that is internally divided and driven by illiberal forces. This was how the geopolitical situation was at least perceived by Russia. In addition, a newly elected democratic American administration, led by President Joe Biden, had to deal with overcoming the domestic polarization left by President Trump. It is therefore all

the more surprising that the Russian war in Ukraine was not only predicted with remarkable accuracy by American intelligence services but also led to a Western alliance under American leadership to support Ukraine, initiate economic sanctions, and provide enormous economic and humanitarian

aid to Ukraine while increasingly promising military support to the Ukrainian Army. Contrary to Russian, and probably Chinese, expectations, there is an undisputedly reinvigorated transatlantic partnership today due to Russian aggression, the kind that was not expected since the end

of the division of Europe between East and West. And all of this is happening under the umbrella of a NATO led primarily by the United States, which is even admitting new members like Sweden and Finland. In addition, all European NATO members are increasing their military spending, as has been an American demand of its European allies since at least President Obama's time. Even in Austria, where there has been no serious political discussion about the new security challenges, defense spending will be significantly increased from 2023, and cooperation with NATO will be as close as neutral-policy allows.

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But there is another aspect that indicates that the United States will be crucially affected by the *Zeitenwende*. Henry Kissinger writes in his book *World Order* (2014) that the rules-based order is facing major challenges. The constant in American foreign policy seems to be that it wants to secure uni-

lateral dominance of the United States through a multilateral foreign policy based on the geopolitical system of 1945.

The American consensus established after World War II was based on the idea of a steadily expanding, cooperative order of states that follow common rules and norms,

have liberal economic systems, and democratic rule. The United States so clearly dominated the non-communist world that it could benefit from this system, although or even because itself invested "more than its fair share" into this system. This sounds different today. The Americans demand stronger participation in defense spending from their Western allies, and in the increasingly fragmented international trade and financial order, they demand more say and better conditions.

But is the United States still the main actor on the world stage, or do the statements supported by increasingly numerical data that China has overtaken "the

throne" make sense? In fact, China's economic and social development over the past few decades has been more than impressive, but China is also primarily concerned with its own development and stability in the medium term. The world's second-largest economy has not had the ambition to be the politically dominant world power for a chang-

ing of the guard towards a China-dominated world order. The negative economic effects of the COVID epidemic and the attempt to take a neutral position in the Ukraine war left China with no geopolitical gains in 2022. Even after

the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of China, their self-description remains unchanged as being the world's largest developing country. However, the rhetoric is beginning to shift. At the end of 2022, the then-Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi described relations with other great powers such as Russia, the United States, and the EU as the core of Chinese geopolitics in a telling speech. The goal is a "great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics." China sees the recently formalized "comprehensive strategic partnership" with Russia as a significant factor in their influence and success, which now resembles a partnership with Russia as a junior partner, particularly due to the war in Ukraine.

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But Russia, which triggered this "turning point" in 2022, demands its equal place at the table of great powers as the world's largest country by area. As the world's second-strongest military power with the largely intact nuclear arsenal of the former Soviet Union, and supplier of natural resources from natural gas to diamonds, Russia

had good cards to play. Moscow was actually in a position to demand respect for itself in a multipolar world order before it decided to go to war against Ukraine. Since President Putin took office in 2000, the Russian Federation has

been a revisionist great power in which issues of democracy, economic order, and the rule of law are systematically subordinated to its great power claims. Since the end of communist rule and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the question of Russian national identity has been unresolved. The great power claim and the question of national identity are the decisive factors of current Russian policy of retaining a great power status in a multipolar world at almost any cost.

The domestic power relations are stable. Therefore, it is likely that Russia will maintain its current course at least until the presidential elections in 2024. Russia is expected to continue focusing on

internal security—thereby also controlling and further restricting the space of civil society—moderate modernization of the economy without major structural reforms, resumption of a policy of foreign spheres of influence and a corresponding geopolitical restructuring.

The Russian president needs state-affiliated oligarchs with the greatest personal dependence on him and direct influence on all economic sectors to maintain his power base. However, as this system can only expect growth rates of the Russian economy again in 2024 at the earliest—due to Western economic sanctions—the probability of further foreign policy adventures and patriotic mobilizations to distract from the lack of economic and social success increases. Today, among all great powers, the Russian leadership is the one that knows most precisely the great importance of “hard power” in the future world order. What counts in Russian strategic analysis are natural resources, transportation routes, and military strength. Therefore, the world will have to prepare for the unpleasant scenario that nuclear deterrence will be used again as a potential threat of power politics. This is the last remaining area in which Russia can credibly assert its great power claim.

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And what role remains on this world stage for Europe? In any case, there is still no phone number that a successor to Kissinger could call to learn the political position of the EU or even all of Europe. A genuine “federal” union with a common foreign, security, and defense policy could probably

help to give this continent—with the world’s largest market power and social systems that serve as a global role model—a role in shaping the world order in the twenty-first century. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte is one of those who demand that “Europe should be less naive and more realistic.”

The cultural diversity and attractiveness of the social market economy are part of the power of the EU: people will continue to come to Europe, and Europe needs immigration. Therefore, the EU must come up with an immigration strategy that is pragmatic and in line with European values. This means curbing irregular migration while strengthening legal ways to come to Europe, especially for the skilled workers needed in the labor market.

The year 2022 was apparently not a good year for liberal democracies, as even devoted idealists must act in realpolitik. When economic competitiveness

and national security become the top priority of political action in democracies, new opportunities for autocrats emerge. That is the geopolitical truth of our days. If more and more small states follow this logic, then the consequence is that the multilateral world order based on liberal universal values will continue as a stage, but the music will be played louder and louder by a few big players.

On the program of the great world theater, it says: the United States will remain number one for a long time. The world will become militarily and politically more dangerous, from hybrid to atomic. The authentic interpretation of international law is challenged by the deal-making of a “director’s theater.” It is not clear whether Europe will stand on this program as an actor or a stage set.

Russia’s aggressive war may have triggered the turning point, but the tectonic shifts are much more far-reaching. The

end of the Cold War did not mean, as some predicted, the “end of history.” But history does not repeat itself either. Many believe that we are at the beginning of a new era of bipolarity within the international order. They see a new cold war looming that pits the United States and China as adversaries. We are

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currently witnessing the end of an exceptional phase of globalization and a historic change that, while accelerated by external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s war in Ukraine, was not caused solely by them. Russia is just the Serbia of this new turning point.

Now is the hour of diplomacy. This applies not only to negotiations for an end to the war in Ukraine but also to stable geopolitical solutions for a European security architecture, the world trade system, the global health order, and, in particular, the global climate crisis and the universal system of the United Nations. ●