


# Forum: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: What Did We Miss?

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**Abstract:** This forum focuses on the overlooked areas of the moment surrounding the nature and progression of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It brings together scholars of different disciplines, backgrounds, and locations to provide analyses of the Russian aggression from varying perspectives such as history, law, military studies, politics, and media and communications, to name a few, encouraging the authors to focus on intricacies to deliver a deeper analysis of the invasion. Each author offers a unique take on the analyses of the past and present. The forum has two aims. First, the collection raises the question "What did we miss?" and it aims to highlight the lack of attention by Western scholars to Russian perceptions of Western threats and the concerns of former Soviet countries regarding Russia's aggressive foreign policy. Second, the forum intends to start a conversation on different non-Western perspectives of thinking about the Russian invasion. The forum covers the events of the period from the beginning of the invasion up to July 2022, with some post-revision comments in the introduction and conclusion mentioning the events up to February 2023.

**Resumen:** Este foro se centra en las áreas que están siendo pasadas, de momento, por alto que rodean la naturaleza y la progresión de la invasión de Ucrania por parte de Rusia en 2022. El foro reúne a académicos de diferentes disciplinas, antecedentes y procedencias con el fin de proporcionar unos análisis de la agresión por parte de Rusia desde diversas perspectivas tales como historia, derecho, estudios militares, política y comunicación

y medios, por nombrar algunos, alentando a los autores a centrarse en las complejidades con el fin de ofrecer un análisis más profundo de la invasión. Cada autor ofrece una visión única de los análisis del pasado y el presente. El foro tiene dos objetivos. En primer lugar, esta recopilación plantea la pregunta «¿Qué nos hemos perdido?» y tiene como objetivo resaltar la falta de atención por parte de los académicos occidentales con relación a las percepciones rusas de las amenazas occidentales y a las preocupaciones de los antiguos países soviéticos con respecto a la política exterior agresiva de Rusia. En segundo lugar, el foro intenta iniciar una conversación sobre las diferentes perspectivas no occidentales de pensamiento sobre la invasión por parte de Rusia. El foro abarca los eventos ocurridos en el período desde el comienzo de la invasión hasta julio de 2022, incluyendo algunos comentarios, posteriores a la revisión, en la introducción y en la conclusión que mencionan eventos ocurridos hasta febrero de 2023.

**Résumé:** Ce forum est axé sur les aspects mésestimés de la nature et de la progression de l'invasion de l'Ukraine par la Russie en 2022. Il rassemble des chercheurs-euses issus de différentes disciplines et géographies et présentant des profils divers, qui présenteront leurs analyses de l'agression russe depuis de multiples perspectives : histoire, droit, études militaires, politique, ou encore médias et communication. Les intervenant-es sont encouragé-es à mettre l'accent sur les subtilités de chaque approche afin de proposer un examen approfondi de l'invasion et un point de vue unique sur les analyses passées et présentes. Ce forum poursuit deux principaux objectifs. Tout d'abord, il vise à répondre à la question suivante : « Qu'avons-nous manqué ? ». Il s'agit en effet de souligner le manque d'attention accordé par les chercheurs-euses occidentaux-ales aux perceptions russes des menaces que représente l'Occident ainsi qu'aux inquiétudes des anciennes nations soviétiques concernant la politique étrangère agressive de la Russie. Deuxièmement, le forum vise à générer un débat autour de différentes perspectives non occidentales relatives à l'invasion russe. Il couvrira une période commençant au début de l'invasion jusqu'au mois de juillet 2022, avec mention d'événements allant jusqu'à février 2023 dans des commentaires ultérieurs ajoutés en introduction et en conclusion.

**Keywords:** Policy-relevant, Russia, Ukraine, war, threat perception, propaganda, shared past

**Palabras clave:** Relevante para la política, Rusia, Ucrania, guerra, percepción de amenaza, propaganda, pasado común

**Mots clés:** pertinence politique, Russie, Ukraine, guerre, perception des menaces, propagande, histoire commune

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## Introduction to the Forum

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On the morning of February 24, 2022, Russia launched an all-out invasion of Ukraine, calling it a “special military operation.” Following the recognition of two

breakaway regions in the Donbas, which surprised scholars and commentators worldwide, Russian President Vladimir Putin questioned Ukraine's sovereignty, a move he justified as a correction of history. The West retaliated with sanctions designed to cripple the Russian economy, especially groups and people close to the Kremlin. Ukraine quickly saw increased military support as the country descended into a humanitarian crisis amid heavy shelling. Russia, meanwhile, has been officially denying that it is at war with Ukraine and until the counterattack of the Ukrainian forces in August–September 2022 has been claiming success over its action in Ukraine. Russia has been adamant that the “special operation” is going according to plan, despite the financial difficulties, military setbacks, and the absence of any significant military advances. Russia's invasion resulted in a massive outflow of refugees fleeing the war. Ukraine's neighboring countries had to deal rapidly with thousands of refugees, providing basic necessities and future opportunities as the war continued. Russia saw an exodus of independent journalists, scholars, and the intelligentsia, following the regime's tightening grip on the freedom of speech, movement, and protest.

The invasion and the subsequent remake of European security have sparked a scholarly rethink of Russia's and Ukraine's place in the world. There is a need to review our assumptions about the Kremlin's ambitions, the voices of European powers concerning the conflict, and the general quality of analysis regarding the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Western politicians' attitudes to Russia and the readiness of western alliances to defend smaller, historically marginalized nations need to be discussed in order to understand the clash of narratives regarding the invasion. This collection of articles has grown out of the International Studies Association's (ISA) forum *Ukraine: Terra Incognita*, a discussion of multipolar, nuanced approaches to the Russia–Ukraine conflict from historical and modern perspectives.<sup>1</sup> The panelists concluded that there is a desperate need to give voice to various takes on the war in Ukraine and bring the focus away from the “good West versus bad Russia” dichotomy. The panelists who contributed to this forum come from different countries, fields, and occupations, but either are from the former Soviet space or have been living and working there extensively. Thus, the forum's authors' positionality as scholars from/of the former Soviet space informs the forum's discussions. However, the case studies and perspectives discussed in this forum are not an exhaustive list of potential approaches to analyzing the Russian invasion. The issues discussed are related to the countries in the Russian political circle, and the forum's analysis means to address the immediate consequences that the Russian invasion brings to said countries. This forum aims to address the need for more nuanced analysis of the invasion by creating a space for scholars from the region and beyond to share their views of the underlying causes of Russia's aggression, its consequences, and lessons to learn that are already arising.

The day Russia invaded Ukraine shocked many, but looking back at the events pre-empting the invasion, such as Russia-backed separatism in Eastern Ukraine or the annexation of Crimea in 2014, one could see an almost palpable feeling of Russia's unfinished business in Ukraine. Some scholars assumed that hostility, if any, would start from the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, and few were expecting a Russian military exercise in Belarus, which was not uncommon, to turn out to be a long preparation for an attack. While the war in Ukraine is still ongoing, this forum analyzes the invasion from different perspectives: first, it reflects on how the histories of Ukraine and Russia are intertwined and codependent and it discusses the ways the war has created and is fueling the refugee crisis in Europe.

In order to understand why Russia would not let go of the Ukrainian question, this forum opens with a historical perspective of the invasion by James C. Pearce. Pearce looks deeply into Ukraine's and Russia's shared past to stress the intercon-

<sup>1</sup> A recording of the webinar can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nsyuWdligs>.

nectedness of the two states, explaining the Kremlin's obsession with the past and Vladimir Putin's latest attempts to rewrite it. He unravels how the past became operational in the eyes of the Kremlin, which helps to understand how and why the questions of Ukrainian identity and statehood are at the forefront of the conflict. In addition, he brings in a Ukrainian perspective of the shared past with Russia, showing how it has been an important political tool for the Kyiv regime as well. In the next paper, Andrei Korobkov investigates the human cost of the war in Ukraine as he discusses the refugee flows, both external and domestic, that have been generated by the war. Korobkov's paper analyzes not only the existing refugee crisis in Ukraine but also its consequences that Ukraine and the region are seeing. He concludes with a few questions to help picture the complex refugee situation in Ukraine.

Second, the issues of propaganda, misinformation, and information dissemination are discussed. The Russian language is the second most popular on the internet, even though it has seen a slight decline in the past 2 years from 8.5 percent in 2020 to 5.5 percent in 2022 (UNESCO 2021; W3Techs 2022). Yet, even in Ukraine, most internet searches are conducted in Russian, and it is not at all uncommon to find residents in the annexed regions who wholeheartedly support the Kremlin propaganda. If Moscow does not have a large and stable international platform, it certainly possesses a loud megaphone. The next two authors discuss the discourse surrounding the invasion from the military and the media perspective. Anastasiya Mahon analyzes the Kremlin's propaganda rhetoric that shaped the causes of the invasion, using securitization theory as an analytic lens. She argues that the Kremlin's rhetoric regarding Ukraine has been created and reworked for the last 10 years, culminating in Putin's speech on February 24 legitimizing the invasion. Moreover, she discusses the impact of the latest legislative changes in Russia (known as fake news laws) that not only approved and reinforced the Kremlin's propaganda but also made it illegal to have any other opinion than the one assigned by the regime. Rashid Gabdulhakov looks at the media disinformation narrative on the example of *Odnoklassniki*, a Russian social media network, particularly among Russian Germans. He reflects on the scarce access that Russian residents have to critical and analytical media outlets, emphasizing the importance of *Odnoklassniki* as an alternative media channel that contributed to disinformation spreading. Gabdulhakov addresses the main themes that appeared in the discussion of the invasion of Ukraine between the first attack and the Vinnytsia missile strike, such as dehumanizing the people of Ukraine, ridiculing President Zelenskyy, and discrediting the political leadership in Germany.

Third, authors analyze the political, economic, and legal consequences of the Russian invasion for some of the countries in Russia's immediate political circle. The cases of Georgia, Moldova, and Romania are discussed to show significant negative changes that these countries are facing both following the 2022 invasion and after being somewhat disregarded by the West after the Soviet Union's collapse. Nino Gozalishvili and Revaz Topuria argue that for Georgia, the invasion of Ukraine was a turning point in how they see the future of the country and its place in the region. While not on the best terms with Russia after the 2008 war, Georgia has successfully defended its right to make independent political choices and follow its own path of development. They analyze how the disinformation spread by the Russian media resulted in the invocation of the politics of fear in Georgia, which aimed to make Georgians rethink their allegiance to the West. The paper discusses how the invasion discourse was shaped by the far-right political wing in Georgia, focusing on the "us versus them" politicization, the overrepresentation of Russia's military capabilities, and widespread pro-Russia propaganda.

Natalia Stercul discusses the economic and security consequences of the Ukraine invasion for Moldova. She argues that because of a difficult political situation in the Transnistrian region, Moldova cannot be as anti-Russia as many other European

nations. Such a complicated political situation combined with a weak economy resulted in Moldova only partially supporting the European sanctions against Russia. Stercul analyzes the challenges that the invasion has posed for Moldova, especially a huge refugee crisis and the rising insecurity of energy supply. In the next paper, Marius Vacarelu looks at the example of Romania as he reflects on whether the Ukrainian invasion was a surprise for Romania in particular, and for Europe more generally. Vacarelu analyzes the Romanian response to the invasion from a historical and legal perspective, arguing that the lack of interest and, consequently, funding in Russian affairs after the collapse of the Soviet Union discouraged many European nations from taking a closer look at Russia's political goals, which resulted in a hindered understanding of Russia's political aspirations. Vacarelu discusses how this situation came to be and what it means for Romania.

This forum attempts to reflect on the invasion of Ukraine as it happens from scholars from the region and beyond. To recall the argument on the importance of closer analysis and research into Russia's political affairs and aspirations, the hope is that this forum will one day become one of the artifacts of the 2022 war in Ukraine that future generations of researchers can use in their work. The authors of this forum hope that their work would contribute to a rapidly growing body of literature on Ukraine–Russia relations, adding a more nuanced and bottom-up take on the events of February–July 2022.

## The Shared History: National and State Identity in Contemporary Russia and Ukraine

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History is very present in the Kremlin (Pearce 2020; Weiss-Wendt and Adler 2021), so much so that on the eve of the invasion, the shared history between Russia and Ukraine became the pretext for starting the war. This paper attempts to highlight the fundamental differences between the two countries' historical mythologies.

Since 2011, Putin has written several essays in conservative newspapers about Russia's past. That year, he published "Russia Muscles Up" in *Izvestia*, which laid out a future vision for Russia based on cherry-picked past glories in response to the "snow revolution" (2011–2013 Russian protests) (Putin 2012). On the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Great Patriotic War, he wrote in *The National Review* about the importance of Russia's victory to European history (Putin 2020). In 2021, Putin wrote that Russians and Ukrainians are part of the same Slavic nation that occupied one historical and spiritual space (Putin 2021). It revived thinking from before the 1917 revolutions, which applied "Russian" indiscriminately, as Velikorosy, Malorosy, and Belorusy (Great, Little, and White Russians) coexisted (Zorin 2022). Russians retained the notion of "brotherly" relations but only from the position when Russians played the elder brother role. This type of rhetoric, based on the shared past, became fundamental for the Kremlin regime in legitimizing the war in Ukraine.

Russia's modern historical narrative is largely defined by huge transformations and world changing triumphs. Different subplots (uprisings, revolutions, etc.) paint Russia as on the brink of disintegration when a strong leader emerges, mobilizes the nation, and leads them to an immense (and inevitable) victory. Russia's interpretation of all the major wars it participated in follows the same pattern, as does the state's handling of the Stalin era and revolutionary period (Pearce 2019). Putin has continued to exploit this narrative. State propaganda across the media, arts, and education spheres has attempted to convince Russians that the collapse of the USSR was a "catastrophe" and then turned into a glorious victory, utilizing recent historical memory. This process of state propaganda aiding the Kremlin's politics in

Ukraine can be seen since the Crimean annexation (Pearce and Yuchshenko 2018). According to the pro-Kremlin groups, the reunification of this somewhat broken Slavic body would bring Belarus, Ukraine, and Orthodox Moldova back under the protection of Great Russia (Patriarchia 2009).

Kyiv is held up as “the mother of all Russian cities.” It slowly became the source of Russia’s religion, culture, language, and a network of dynastic and military connections (Bremer 2013). Putin presents himself and the current state as the natural heirs of Kyivan traditions and the knights of Old Rus’. Next to the Kremlin, a statue of Prince Vladimir, who Christianized the Rus, was unveiled in 2016. Effectively, it claimed Kyiv as an inseparable part of Russian history, but to equally demonstrate Russia’s long-held place within European history.

The Kyivan dynasty, fraught with succession problems and invasions, struggled to control the surrounding regions. Eventually, they were all united under Byzantine Christianity. Amid the continued chaos was growing economic activity in new areas in the north and east with an abundance of natural resources that were protected from steppe invaders by vast forestry and rivers. Junior princes founded new towns and used them as bases for securing their own authority. Kyiv’s political power eventually transferred to the fortress city of Vladimir, where the princes began to predominate over the democratic and aristocratic members of society, perhaps birthing Russian autocracy. Yet, the Grand Princes and Metropolitans in Vladimir kept “Kiev” in their titles, even when moving the center of Russian culture and spirituality. This would later shift to Moscow, whose power was established and grew under Mongol rule through the means of tax collection, bribery, nepotism, and disobedience to Kyivan traditions. With Moscow’s power expansion came the incorporation of new lands, ruling over rival princes, and multiplying the number of monasteries and churches (Plokhy 2017). After liberating itself from Mongol rule, Russia’s new rulers—the tsars based in Moscow—reaffirmed their direct lineage from the Rurikids (the Kyivan dynasty). The title of “tsar” was recognized by the patriarch of Constantinople in 1558 and after “regathering the Russian lands,” the tsar had consolidated his power through terror and spreading Orthodox Christianity. Russia was now the free Orthodox nation and easternmost point of Christianity. Moscow became a patriarchy on par with Constantinople, Jerusalem, and Antioch: the Third Rome, never to be followed by a fourth.

In contrast, the Ukrainian identity was built in contradistinction to the “Mosicals.” Ukraine’s political imagination is based on the legacy of the Zaporozhskaya Sich rather than a powerful autocrat. This Cossack military democracy was stuck in the crosshairs between Russia, Poland, and Turkey for over 200 years. The Sich managed to sustain independence until the Treaty of Pereyaslav in 1654. The treaty secured military protection in exchange for an oath of allegiance to the Tsar from the Cossacks, church members, and inhabitants of the Cossack Hetmanate (Pearce 2022). Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky signed the treaty that took Kyiv and huge parts of Ukraine back into Russia’s orbit, and Poland later ceded this territory. Between the Mongol invasion and 1654, Kyiv exited Russian history and shared the fate of the Lithuanian Principality. Other parts of modern-day Ukraine spent lengthy periods under Hungarian and Romanian rule, with some not under Moscow rule until the twentieth century.

Many Ukrainians have enjoyed grand careers ever since, as they have held positions of power, such as governors and ministers, generals, and clergy. Yet, many times in the past four centuries, the Ukrainian national, cultural, and linguistic specificity has been actively suppressed. On several occasions, Putin has sought to depict much of Ukraine’s territory as a “gift” of the Bolsheviks (Associated Press 2016).

Nostalgia for Ukraine’s past independence was never fully abandoned as the ideal of the Zaporozhskaya Sich lingers on and was present in the hearts of communist apparatchiks, such as Leonid Kravchuk, the last leader of Soviet Ukraine who took it

to independence. Ukraine's identity is now closely connected to its national survival with a traumatic past. [Oksana Zabuzhko \(1996\)](#) once called it a choice between nonexistence and one that kills you.

Russia's leaders, and prominent dissidents and liberals, have never truly accepted the idea of Ukraine as a separate nation ([Trofimov 2022](#)). After the USSR's collapse, Russian elite saw Ukraine's intention to ally itself with the West as a betrayal of Russian–Ukrainian familial ties and shared future. In the past, Russian state and church propaganda has used this rhetoric before, for example, when they accused the Poles of a similar crime of betraying the brotherhood of Slavic Orthodox nations in the nineteenth century and Teutonic Knights of betraying their fellow Christians ([Bremer 2013](#)).

Russian and Ukrainian history are designed to include each other, but both can sever the other from their national histories at multiple points. Russia wanted its version of the shared history to prevail and used it to launch a patriotic-esque war effort. Moreover, while the invasion, perhaps inevitably, pushes Ukraine away from Russia in the short term and its people have a right to assert their own historical narratives, it would not be possible to ignore the shared history and cultural ties with its neighbor in the long term.

## The Human Cost of the War in Ukraine: The Migration Dimension

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, caused the formation of massive forced migration flows, both international and domestic, including the waves of refugees<sup>2</sup> and the internally displaced persons (IDPs),<sup>3</sup> far exceeding in scale the previous forced migration movements in Europe, associated with the Balkan wars of the 1990s and the first, 2014–2015, crisis in Ukraine. The paper considers the major characteristics of the current flows, their impact on Ukraine, and the migrant receiving and transit states, and discusses the effectiveness of international response to the refugee crisis.

### The Refugee Situation

Considering the origins, dynamics, territorial orientation, and structure of the current refugee flow, one needs to take into account the background of the refugee crisis. First, Ukraine's population had already declined by about 15 percent, from 51.4 million in 1989 ([Goskomstat SSSR 1991](#), 12) to 43.8 million in 2021 ([The World Bank 2022b](#)). These losses were the result of declining birth rates and the increasing mortality rates. In particular, Ukraine's fertility rate has fallen from 2.1 births per woman in 1986 to 1.2 in 2020 ([The World Bank 2022a](#)). Also, the massive labor outmigration has contributed to the decline: by 2020, between 2.2 and 2.7 million workers were living abroad, an equivalent to 13–16 percent of Ukraine's total

<sup>2</sup>The UN defines a refugee as a person who, "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable to, or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" ([UNHCR 2010a](#), 14).

<sup>3</sup>According to UN's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, the IDPs are "persons or groups who have been forced or obligated to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border" ([UNHCR 2010b](#), 8).

employment (Pienkowski 2020, 5). In addition, the de facto loss of Crimea and a significant share of the Donbas region (the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics) in 2014 provoked large-scale refugee flows directed both within and outside Ukraine. At the peak of hostilities in 2015, the government reported some 1.5 million IDPs, with the vast majority coming from eastern Ukraine and around 50,000, from Crimea (Jaroszewicz 2019). Thus, that the current flow is drastically larger than that in 2014-15, and proceeds under the conditions of massive statewide missile and artillery attacks on infrastructure, housing areas, and civil population.

Second, the speed and effectiveness of the current international response must be considered, including certain states' ability and willingness to accommodate the refugees and labor migrants from Ukraine contrasts with previous cases, especially those involving large-scale migration from the Global South, causing tensions and criticisms. In particular, Filippo Grandi, the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees, characterizing the current international response as "exemplary," also noted that "Heads of government in Europe spent hours, days negotiating where, who should take a hundred people floating on a boat in the Mediterranean" during refugee waves from non-European countries (Associated Press 2022). "And then contrary to that, millions (of Ukrainians were) embraced, accepted, allowed to have access to services in a very effective manner...Declarations that I have heard from some politicians (were) saying the Ukrainians are real refugees ... and the others are not real refugees. That's racist. Full stop" (Associated Press 2022).

Third, the current flows' intensity and structure are influenced by Ukraine's internal situation and governmental policies. Migration mostly remains a personal matter for migrants, lacking much governmental support. The decision to ban the able-bodied men aged 18–60 years from leaving the country results in the asymmetrical character of the refugee flow, dominated by women and children.<sup>4</sup>

Fourth, many refugees are moving to Russia and Belarus raising questions about the reasons underlying these movements (voluntary versus forced migration, geographic closeness and location, family and/or diasporic ties, or the ethnic, socioeconomic, and/or political considerations). Understanding the origins and logic of these particular flows is important for defining their durability and the return migration potential.

Finally, the current crisis is to a large extent defined by the actions of Russia's President Vladimir Putin. Putin views this as part of his dual historical mission: rejecting the legitimacy of Ukrainian state and the validity of Ukrainian nationhood, he aims to bring the Eastern Slavic peoples under a single, Russian, umbrella in the framework of "a single large nation, a triune nation... (of) Russians, Ukrainians, or Belarusians" (Putin 2021). He also aspires to destroy the eroding Global North monopoly, claiming that "the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world... (A)t its basis there is and can be no moral foundations for modern civilization..." (Putin 2007). This complicates the achievement of a political compromise to end the hostilities, aggravates and enhances the suffering, and migration push factors.

Numbering 26.6 million at the beginning of 2022, refugees represent an important component of the 281 million-strong international migration flow (International Organization for Migration 2022). There are also 4.4 million asylum seekers and 50.9 million IDPs (Batalova 2022). All represent the most vulnerable category of migrants. Although reliable statistical data might not be accessible for a while (Ukraine, in particular, did not have a Census since 2001 and does not control a significant portion of its borders and national territory), it is clear that at the peak of the crisis, the number of those crossing the border significantly exceeded the largest refugee exoduses of the last 50 years: according to the Pew Research

<sup>4</sup>Various sources estimate the women's share in this refugee flow at 62–84 percent. See, for instance, Jurić (2022).

Center, in excess of 6.8 million left Syria in the 2010s, while the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979–1989 resulted in a refugee flow above 6.3 million. The largest refugee crisis in Europe, associated with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, had an approximate scale of 1 million (DeSilver 2022).

### The Consequences of the Refugee Crisis

Meanwhile, on November 1, 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office recorded 7,786,195 Ukrainian refugees in Europe alone, with 4,459,647 registered for Temporary Protection or similar national protection schemes. The largest refugee groups were located in Poland, 1,469,032, and the Czech Republic, 455,539. Among other neighboring states, Slovakia recorded 99,393 refugees from Ukraine in its territory; Moldova, 95,473; Romania, 87,853; and Hungary, 32,290 (UNHCR 2022). The aforementioned peculiar aspect of the crisis is a huge number of refugees recorded in the territory of Russia, 2,852,395, and a relatively small, but still visible, in Belarus: 16,195 (UNHCR 2022).

Ella Libanova, the head of Ukraine's Demography Institute, estimates the overall number of people who moved to other countries in February–September 2022 at 8.4 million. At the same time, Libanova claims that up to 7.2 million returned to Ukraine (Gritsenko 2022). If correct, these figures would be atypical, considering that the crisis continues, and hostilities might not have reached their peak yet. This estimate also does not take into account the scale of the IDPs' flows. Likewise, it is not quite clear what was the basis for this estimate: the reported border crossings (usually highly unreliable) or some other data.

Migration is directed primarily toward the neighboring countries and within Europe—providing for a much shorter migrants' cultural distance from the receiving states' populations than in most recent cases. The majority of migrants, at least initially, moved to countries that encountered similar incursions by powerful neighbors (including the USSR and Germany). Historical memories, along with the ethnic and cultural closeness, provide for a relatively welcoming environment, particularly in the former Soviet republics and Eastern European countries. Large numbers of refugees in neighboring states simplify both their return migration and accommodation in the host countries. A special feature of the current situation is also the existence of substantial and well-organized Ukrainian diasporas—both in Europe and a number of other states, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and Israel.

In a visible contrast to other crises, the European Union (EU) expeditiously invoked its Temporary Protection Directive, offering migrants from Ukraine the fast-track access to legal status, entitling them to employment, social services, and benefits. In Poland, about 30 percent of working-age migrants had found a job 3 months after the start of the war, while in the Czech Republic, about 40 percent were working 6 months on (Desiderio and Hooper 2022). Meanwhile, Libanova emphasizes that the receiving states "should not be viewed as Ukraine's benefactors" (Gritsenko 2022). The high shares of young women and children within this flow, the refugees' elevated educational levels, and the cultural closeness make them quite appealing to the host countries. Experiencing demographic problems and labor shortages, they could try to retain these migrants on a permanent basis, aggravating Ukraine's long-term problems.

Visible is a significant differentiation among the receiving states in the intensity and effectiveness of their refugee accommodation policies. In particular, the Conservative UK governments, while offering Ukraine a substantial political, economic, and military support, showed less enthusiasm than most continental counterparts in terms of accommodating the Ukrainian migrants, even though numbers there are large, 140,300 as of October 24, 2022 (Desiderio and Hooper 2022).

The Biden administration promised to drastically expand the refugee quotas: from 18,000 in 2020, the last year of Trump's presidency, to 62,500 in 2021 and 125,000 in 2022, and to accept 100,000 Ukrainian refugees during the 2022–2023 2-year period. The administration extended the legal stay in the United States for up to 18 months for those 75,000 Ukrainians who were in the country legally on temporary visas by the start of invasion. The Temporary Protected Status entitles them to work permits, social security cards, and driving licenses (Sacchetti 2022). However, the Trump years' restrictive policy heritage and the deep divisions on migration issue both between and within the two main parties slow down the process.

### Conclusion

The preponderance of women and children in the current migrant flow poses a very important question for the future: will they return or be joined abroad by their families? Libanova estimates that Ukraine already lost 1.2 million—those who left at the early stages of the war and did not come back. In her view, the country might lose another 500,000–5,000,000, depending on the conflict's duration: “There is a risk, and it's very serious...If the war lasts for a year, we will not be able to bring the bulk of them back” (Gritsenko 2022). Whichever trend prevails could frame the demographic, economic, and political future of Ukraine and that of the newly forming Ukrainian diasporas abroad.

Defining the return migration prospects requires resolving a number of other puzzles, for example, assessing what would happen if Russian advances came back, provoking new refugee outflows. In addition, the destruction of housing, the social, transportation, and energy infrastructure, and Ukraine government's social policies undeniably affect the returning migrants' readjustment to a peaceful life. What will be the long-term impact of the war on refugee families? Also, the crisis will impact the demographic indicators (age and gender structure) and the population dynamics for years to come. These extensive issues could play a decisive role in defining the future of both the state of Ukraine and the Ukrainian nation.

## The Kremlin's Propaganda: Terrorism Securitization, Denazification, and the Laws on Fake News

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This paper discusses the securitization rhetoric produced by the Kremlin to legitimize its advances in Ukraine. Putin's portrayal of Russia's military attack on Ukraine has been consistently shaped as a “response to the aggression of the West/Nazis” (Sanders and Tuck 2020; Dudko 2022; Fortuin 2022). Examples of this narrative can be found in state-controlled media, such as the Russian Information Agency Novosti (RIA Novosti) and Russia Today news agencies, as well as in official transcripts of Putin's speeches that are publicly available. These examples illustrate the formation and development of the securitization rhetoric that laid the foundation for the state's propaganda. In addition, following the invasion in February 2022, the regime has been making legislative changes aimed to curb the spread of “fake news”—a move that has drastically restricted freedom of speech in the Russian Federation and resulted in an exodus of its intelligentsia and foreign correspondents and experts. I argue that the Kremlin follows a strategy that creates a concerted message about the danger to the Russian population from the West via securitization rhetoric. While such a strategy combines limiting the population's access to alternative news sources and restricting free speech, it isolates the audience, making it susceptible to securitization. The combination of securitization rhetoric

and the introduction of criminal responsibility for any but the Kremlin's opinion on the war in Ukraine has shrunk the Russian public space to an extent where it is almost impossible to oppose the Kremlin's propaganda machine.

Securitization is not a part of regular or ordinary politics. It is a process that allows a political actor to circumvent normal political processes and gain power and resources based on the premise of fighting an existential threat. Securitization is possible even without a tangible military threat (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998). In the case of Russia, the Kremlin has been portraying the Russian Federation as routinely attacked by the West because it rejects western values that are often represented as alien to Russian people, as well as seeing the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a direct threat to Russia's security and power (Bacon, Cooper, and Renz 2013; Putin 2022). The creation of this rhetoric started before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. For example, at the 2018 counterterrorism conference in Krasnoyarsk, one of the papers has clearly shown the regime's take on the terrorist threat: the paper stated that the hostile attitude from the West is nothing less than a terrorist act: "A real genocide of the population is being carried out [in Donbass], which the West activates and supports by supplying lethal weapons, blaming Russia for everything" (Pfanenshtil' and Chizhevskaja 2018, 150). The securitization rhetoric has constantly been produced to fuel the Kremlin's stance on the Donbas question as part of protecting Russia from external threats.

The usage of the terrorism discourse for securitization purposes continues as Russia Today calls Ukraine's strikes on the market in Donetsk "a terrorist act," arguing that neither Ukraine nor the West care about casualties in the Donbas (Barlett 2022a, 2022b). It can, therefore, be seen that the Kremlin's securitization rhetoric has evolved since at least 2013, finally culminating in the invasion of Ukraine. On February 24, 2022, the Kremlin's securitization rhetoric changed from gathering public support and resources for potential hostile actions from the West to propaganda supporting an act of war. This propaganda has not been immediately rejected by the Russian public (such reluctance was surprising for western observers) due to its familiarity: the Kremlin stuck to its party line of the hostile West and an active attack on Russia's values and way of life (Putin 2022). The securitization rhetoric has gradually become more protective of the regime since the invasion, as Russia started denying its attacks on civilian targets, such as the attack on the shopping center in Kremenchuk (RT International 2022).

Vladimir Putin's speech on February 24 was exemplary of the Kremlin's securitization rhetoric, emphasizing the deceiving, treacherous West, nostalgia for the power of the USSR, and the sadness of the sacrifices Russia made for the sake of international peace that went unnoticed (Putin 2022). Putin has openly used the securitization narrative: "we are acting to defend ourselves from the threats created for us and from a worse peril than what is happening now" (Putin 2022). Russia Today, RIA Novosti, and TASS have used similar language to cover the invasion. RIA Novosti reported that the execution of civilians in Bucha was staged by Ukrainian forces and argued that the West does not care how many Russians die in the conflict because "For Anglo-Saxons, Russians are [...] second class people" (Akopov 2022). Such rhetoric, showing Russia as being surrounded by enemies that aim to destroy it because the enemies see the Russian people as inferior, has created and continues to shape the Kremlin's propaganda. Ironically, the Kremlin has used similar rhetoric to support the need to invade Ukraine to "denazify" it, implying that Ukrainians cannot govern themselves or not even a people (Regnum 2022).

The "western threat" is tightly connected to the idea of the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*)—a way of seeing all Russian people (by origin and ethnicity, not citizenship) as part of the Russian World and, by extension, as Russia's subjects who need protecting (Kudors and Orttung 2010). This concept echoes the Kremlin's patriotic rhetoric that has been promoted, for example, in slogans such as "No one left

behind” (*Svoikh ne brosaem*), which resulted in initiatives such as the one by All Russia People’s Front (ONE, a party coalition under the leadership of Vladimir Putin) that aims to help Russian people abroad, supporting the concept of *Russkiy Mir* and Russia’s ability to stretch its power way beyond its borders.<sup>5</sup> The Kremlin constantly molds and reuses the threat to the Russian World and the need for the Russian people to unite as a premise for its foreign policy decisions—similar rhetoric was used in the annexation of Crimea (Leonaite and Zalimas 2016; Teper 2016; Pearce and Yuchshenko 2018).

The part of the securitization rhetoric aimed at portraying Russia as surrounded by enemies is intended to create a sense of unity in the face of western pressure, providing a fertile ground for propaganda. This is especially true for the rhetoric rooted in the idea of protecting the Russian World from extinction. Thus, isolated from the rest of the world, the Russian public was left to consume the Kremlin’s propaganda from almost every media outlet. However, the Kremlin served the last blow to the free media and freedom of speech by introducing a selection of federal laws establishing censorship and prohibiting any antiwar sentiment, dubbed the Russian fake news laws (Reuters 2022a). The laws introduced criminal responsibility for publicly sharing any information about the Russian Army, the special operation (the only appropriate way of calling the invasion of Ukraine according to the Kremlin), or anything else that could potentially discredit the Russian military forces (Duma 2022). Thus, the law created an additional coercive mechanism to silence dissent (which is now any opinion but the wholehearted support of the special military operation in Ukraine). The law has drastically limited the variety of opinions shared and accessed by the people in Russia, thereby decreasing the public’s exposure to critical and analytical materials on the war in Ukraine, as well as the West’s view of the current events. The introduction of the fake news laws has resulted in many public figures, who were openly criticizing the special operation, leaving Russia fearing enormous fines and criminal prosecution.

To conclude, the securitization rhetoric has been evolving for the better part of a decade to create a sense of alienation from, and fear of, the West among the Russian public, which in turn was used to justify the invasion of Ukraine. Unsurprisingly, the securitization rhetoric produced by the Kremlin has been advancing during the war in Ukraine to support the Kremlin’s propaganda machine and protect the regime from possible public unrest at home by either denying or concealing the attacks on the civilian population in Ukraine. The law on fake news, which has been used to silence the voices of antiwar supporters in Russia, resulted in the Russian intelligentsia leaving Russia and triggered the closures of foreign and independent media outlets, depriving Russians of easy access to critical and analytical coverage of the war in Ukraine. Thus, the securitization rhetoric embedded in Russia’s political discourse, combined with potential criminal prosecution for any antiwar support, has created the propaganda machine that fuels Russia’s foreign and domestic politics.

## Countering Russian Disinformation in Europe: The Case of Odnoklassniki

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### Introduction

Amid the most recent wave of new legislation in Russia, referring to its actions in Ukraine as “war” or disapproving of its military forces can lead to criminal charges,

<sup>5</sup>“No one left behind” (*Svoikh ne brosaem*) project can be found at <http://svoikhnebrosaem.onf.ru/>.

hefty fines, and imprisonment of up to 15 years (AFP 2022). As a result of this, realistic reporting from inside the country became nearly impossible and independent as well as foreign media outlets were forced to relocate (Jovanovski 2022), leaving the domestic audiences with hardly any access to factual stories. Moreover, engaging with counter-state narratives is a dangerous endeavor in Russia, as even emojis left under social media posts challenging the official position can lead to hefty fines (RFE/RL's North Realities 2022).

Meanwhile, to address the threat of Russia's disinformation spreading beyond its borders, policymakers in the EU have banned state-supported international broadcasters Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik (European Commission 2022). As the current study demonstrates, despite this ban, Moscow's destructive narratives on Ukraine are reaching audiences in Europe through thematic publics on state-controlled social media platforms such as Odnoklassniki. This paper offers insights into the narratives shared on an Odnoklassniki public group targeting the so-called Russian Germans—ethnic Germans repatriated from former USSR when it ceased to exist. Based on a qualitative thematic content analysis of posts made in the selected thematic group, the paper identifies three core themes that inform its members: (1) dehumanizing/demonizing Ukrainians; (2) discrediting Volodymyr Zelenskyy; and (3) discrediting the German establishment. The influence power of social media is especially alarming in the context where those who are potentially swayed by pro-Kremlin narratives are European citizens whose votes impact the national and EU-level policies. Amid western sanctions and information security strategies countering the Kremlin's disinformation, neglecting to address the online domain as a platform for influence operations is an omission.

The case of Russian Germans is of particular societal significance and academic relevance, as the group is an ardent supporter of a populist, Euroskeptic, anti-immigrant, radical right party "AfD"—*Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany). At the same time, important nuances of news-sharing practices impacting this group's political perceptions are lacking in scholarship. Among the few academic works, one of the studies demonstrates that despite being immigrants themselves, those Russian Germans whose ethnic identity is strong but economic and social integration in Germany is low tend to vote for AfD (Spies et al. 2023). The party, in its turn, has been lobbying for closer ties between Germany and Russia (Deutsche Welle 2022a).

This paper proceeds to address the role of thematic social media groups in informing audiences. It then elaborates on its method and presents the identified themes targeting Ukraine, its leadership, and the German political establishment. In conclusion, the paper offers some policy recommendations and makes suggestions for further research.

### Thematic Social Media Groups as Opinion Influencers

While scholars debate the significance of algorithmic filter bubbles (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2016), both the scholarly and the policy worlds are neglecting to consider the power of thematic social media groups that can, in fact, complement or surpass algorithms in exposing individuals to politically opinionated content (Gabdulhakov and Trottier 2020). Thematic social media groups present unique spaces where group admins and active members can obtain powers of informal news spreaders and public opinion influencers.

When members join thematic groups that connect them with other like-minded individuals, be it political views or a shared ethnic/linguistic identity, they join the "mini kingdoms" of those who organize and moderate these environments. Group admins can decide what content to approve and remove, what individual to ban, and what thematic content to spread. In this regard, admins can resemble authoritarian leaders who "garden" the publics in their pursuit of controlling the media

(Litvinenko and Toepfl 2019). As such, thematic social media groups have the potential of influencing opinions and contributing to the political polarization of the society.

### Method

The study is inductive in nature, meaning that themes were derived from the data after a rigorous qualitative analysis. In this pursuit, the paper relied on [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) thematic analysis approach. While Odnoklassniki is home to over 3,000 thematic groups for Russian Germans, this paper selected one group with a significant membership (over 10,000 people). Due to the ethical considerations, the author worked with a public group that required no admin approval for joining. Given the sensitivity of the topic and with the aim of avoiding to cause any harm to individual members of this public group, the group's exact name, exact membership number, or other potentially revealing descriptions are concealed. The data consist of posts made between February 24, 2022 (the first day of the invasion) and July 14, 2022 (Vinnitsa missile strike).

### Findings

In the selected group, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been absent in discussions until March 7, 2022, when the topic was indirectly addressed in the context of sanctions that would jeopardize gas supply to Europe. At this point, the shared posts framed the proposed Western sanctions as "unwise." From mid-April 2022 onward, topics related to Ukraine have increased in number and appeared in the group's feed at least once per day, often dominating the thematic agenda in the absence of other discussion points. It is worth noting that posts from other publics tend to penetrate the discussion. Some of these groups are openly racist, but due to low moderation standards on Odnoklassniki, they are able to actively generate content and reach audiences in Europe. Group members are also periodically invited to engage with more content on thematic channels on Telegram messenger and are promised even less moderation on this platform. While there were no direct references to "war" or the "special military operation" (as the Kremlin frames its invasion of Ukraine), there are posts addressing the "denazification" of Ukraine. Content shared in the selected group tends to demonize Ukrainians, ridicule Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and criticize Germany's political leadership. In what follows, each identified thematic cluster will be addressed with examples.

#### *Dehumanizing/Demonizing Ukrainians*

Several posts feature confession-style content where allegedly random and apolitical users share their stories of having been attacked by Ukrainians; the latter are framed as violent and aggressive "Russophobes." One such video features a Russian female who claims to be living in Sweden. The video is taken as an outdoor hand-held "selfie," but does not demonstrate any recognizable objects that could indicate the author's precise location. At the same time, claiming to be physically in Sweden, the author emphasizes that Europe is becoming unsafe because of refugees, who behave violently even in such a peaceful country as Sweden. The woman in the video explains that she was talking on the phone with her father in Russian, when suddenly Ukrainian Russophobes attacked her for this deed. The author emphasizes that it is no longer possible to be silent.

Another example of posts that demonize Ukrainian refugees demonstrates a trashed apartment of a "shocked European woman" who let them in. Refugees are accused of being not only ungrateful, but also violent and dangerous. More posts emphasize the high costs that Germany pays per each Ukrainian refugee family,

“supporting” these arguments with such numbers as 3,600 euros spent by the state on a refugee family’s rent alone. Moreover, with notes of sarcasm, some posts state that the longer Ukrainian refugees are in Europe, the more Europeans are likely to start wishing Russia success in the denazification of Ukraine. The essence of the post is the dangerous nature of Ukrainian refugees, as the author is stressing that once Europeans get to know Ukrainians in person, they are likely to see who they are really dealing with. Given the inflow of Ukrainian refugees into the EU generally and Germany in particular, the demonization of Ukrainians in this thematic group is alarming.

#### *Discrediting Volodymyr Zelenskyy*

Ukraine’s president is essentially framed as a nazi, drug user, homosexual, and a puppet of the West. Ignoring his Jewish ancestry, posts featuring Zelenskyy compare him to Hitler, all while making such statements as “we will fight to the last Ukrainian.” The vast majority of the posts are memes, some of which feature short poems where Zelenskyy is ridiculed as a loser who has no money, no army, and now no territory. Several posts accuse him of drug abuse and claim that he is having “marijuana withdrawals.” These narratives go hand in hand with the official statements coming from the Kremlin, as Putin has called the government of Ukraine a “band of drug addicts and neo-Nazis” (Epstein and Haltiwanger 2022).

The theme of homosexuality is omnipresent in the posts targeting Ukraine and is intertwined with all other themes. This topic is presented both through the angle of nostalgia for the morally superior Soviet past and the perceived promiscuity of the collective West. Zelenskyy is often portrayed with rainbow flags photoshopped in the background. Some posts feature him hugging and kissing other male political leaders, while he stands still with no physical contact next to a female leader, stressing that he prefers to touch men and not women. Such homophobic narratives too are a reflection of Russia’s official stance on the issue, claiming that the safety of sexual minorities in the country is in increasing jeopardy (Kirillova 2022).

With the tightened legislation on foreign agents, and amid the current propositions to toughen the existing anti-LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual) legislation, the state is grouping together themes that it wants the citizen to perceive as immoral and alien to Russia, something that is imposed by the “evil West.” Homosexuality has even been used by Patriarch Kirill—the head of the Russian Orthodox Church—as a topic to justify Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to save the people from gay parades (Rhodes 2022). Posts continuously stress that Zelenskyy is nothing but the puppet of the West. One example is an image of Zelenskyy surrounded by Western political leaders and the caption states “puppy exhibition was a success story,” stressing that Zelenskyy is not a mature politician and that there is a power disbalance between him and Western leaders who really rule over Ukraine.

#### *Discrediting the German Leaders*

The so-called collective West, the German political establishment in general, and Chancellor Olaf Scholz in particular are criticized for their incompetence in handling the conflict and spoiling the relations with Russia. The common “mismanagement” criticism concerns energy security and inflation. Some posts feature memes of Scholz looking for Russian gas in the empty pipes; these posts warn that Germany might close schools due to the inability to heat the buildings. Moreover, the German leadership is accused of wasting money on refugees and causing inflation by default of adopting sanctions against Russia. The work of the government is described as “a complete failure.” Several posts call for Scholz’s immediate resignation.

These narratives complement both the official rhetoric in Russia and the position of AfD regarding the German leadership and EU stance on Russia’s gas. When the

German government halted the “Nord Stream 2” pipeline project amid Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the AfD opposed such sanctions, stressing the potential harms to the German economy (Oltermann 2022). The Kremlin has been using Europe’s gas dependency as a political card for years and, amid the current tension, has already completely or partially stopped supplying gas to a dozen European states (Hernandez and Jack 2022).

### Conclusion

This paper addressed thematic social media groups on Odnoklassniki as channels for spreading disinformation and distractive narratives dehumanizing the people of Ukraine, ridiculing President Zelenskyy, and discrediting the political leadership in Germany. Citizens of Germany and the EU more broadly are exposed to Moscow’s propaganda reaching the audiences online despite the ban on its key international broadcasters. In this regard, policymakers in the EU should pay particular attention to the digital domain and ensure stricter online community moderation policies. The German government should launch a multilingual online media campaign to reach the Russian Germans and inform them about Russia’s actions in Ukraine, the real stories of Ukrainian refugees, and the logic behind EU sanctions against Russia. Failing to do so threatens to undermine and jeopardize EU policies from within.

Both the scholarly and the policy worlds are in a dire need of studies addressing Moscow’s online influence operations targeting global audiences. Further studies should conduct various focus group interviews and experiments to assess the potential impact of specific online messages on people’s perception of Russia’s actions in Ukraine and potential voting decisions.

## The War in Ukraine as a New Disinformation Reference Point in Georgia

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The Kremlin authorized a so-called special operation, which ostensibly sought the *de-nazification* and *de-militarization* of Ukraine. Far-right groups in Georgia immediately localized disinformation narratives according to this Russian interpretation and activated the politics of fear. Narratives centered on Ukraine being “abandoned by the West” implied ways of rethinking Georgia’s policies on Western integration. Thus, the war appeared as a new reference point for legitimizing the previously veiled narratives regarding Georgia’s foreign orientation toward Russia, as seen by its far right. Moreover, narratives related to the war enabled instrumentalizing of the local trauma of the war via politics of fear. Interpreting and referring to the disinformation narratives around the war in Ukraine exacerbated the bigger informational weapon of Russia regarding its invincibility used in the region for years. This paper demonstrates how the war in Ukraine served as a new disinformation reference point in Georgia.

### Domesticating the Regional Issue

Elements of the global political scene and society have regarded the war as a domestic issue. For instance, the 2022 parliamentary elections in Hungary were closely accompanied by discussions about the war in Ukraine, where the incumbent Fidesz

party managed to instrumentalize the war as a peace brand for itself ([Deutsche Welle 2022b](#)). While both the opposition and Prime Minister framed the issue as an existential question, the latter advanced by equalizing his opponents with the horrors of getting involved in the war vis-à-vis his “peace and stability” promise ([Inotai 2022](#)). In Georgia, the events in Ukraine were also domesticized. While criticizing the opposition for being “too active” on the issue of war and instrumentalizing it, the government itself did not wait long to use the war for capitalizing on Georgia’s political polarization.<sup>6</sup> In the governing party’s narratives, the opposition was painted as a radical “war party” ([Interpressnews 2022](#)). Yet, the overwhelming majority of Georgia’s population has expressed its support toward Ukraine, demonstrated by various public polls and pro-Ukrainian rallies ([RFE/RL’s Georgian Service 2022](#)).

Three days before the Russian invasion, fifty-three mostly far-right<sup>7</sup> organizations and political parties in Georgia issued a joint open letter in Russian directed to Vladimir Putin. The appeal stated that Georgia and Ukraine should not join NATO, and that Georgia should declare military neutrality ([Gozalishvili and Kalandadze 2022](#)). It was one of the first signs of how the far right would later insert the war into its own narratives. The narratives regarding the neutrality, similar-to-Ukraine fate of Georgia vis-à-vis Russia’s advancement, Western indifference, and the domestic opposition’s destructive nature have all been wrapped under the politics of fear.

### Reinforcing the Politics of Fear

Fear “obscures reason, intensifies emotions and makes it easier for demagogic politicians to mobilize the public on behalf of the policies they want to pursue” ([Brzezinski 2007](#), para. 3). Fear has become practically a mainstream political tool used by divergent political actors all over the world. If instrumentalized, “fear can trigger the temptation to surrender freedom to a demagogue promising strength and security in return,” neutralizing the capacity for reason in a society ([Gore 2017](#), 95).

Rather than rational thinking or informed debates, the “politics of fear” and push for snap decisions are designed for instant survival. Within the latter, there is rarely a space for reflective differentiation between real and imagined danger ([Altheide 2002](#)). [Ruth Wodak \(2015\)](#) observed the exploitation of fear in far-right discourses, where fear glues together the version of the doomed reality and the necessity of the radical changes both offered by right-wing populist actors. Through the normalization of nationalistic, xenophobic, racist, and antisemitic rhetoric, such actors tend to capitalize on real and imaginary threats used for constructing conspiracies, scapegoats, and consequent exclusionary narratives ([Wodak 2021](#)). While the crisis serves as a platform for far-right actors in general ([Moffitt 2015](#)), a depiction of war threats offers these actors a ready-made frame for offering a “savior” ([Albertazzi 2007](#)).

Fear depicts the trend of reactivating and reimposing traumatic experiences. As [Gore \(2017, 116\)](#) notes: “If a subsequent experience is even superficially similar to a traumatic memory, it can wield incredible power over emotions and can trigger the same fear responses evoked by the original trauma.” Georgia has an experience of being at war with the same invader who used similar legitimizing clauses; hence, the war in Ukraine awakens not only new emotions but also trauma and fear of anticipation in Georgian society. The effectiveness of the politics of fear in the country must be understood in the framework of the war-related memory in the society.

<sup>6</sup>The opposition has called for an extraordinary session after the Russian invasion in Ukraine, which was neglected by the governing majority.

<sup>7</sup>Far right, as deployed in this analysis, is an umbrella term to characterize radical and extreme right-wing political actors. These categories in turn are composed of the right-wing nationalist, populist, national-populist, and nativist subcategories ([Mudde 2017](#); [Pirro 2022](#)).

Alt-Info, a prominent far-right political actor recently transformed into the Conservative Movement party, and its counterparts used the situation in Ukraine with the aim of instilling fear in the Georgian population, arguing that if the country did not immediately sort out its relations with Russia, Georgia would share Ukraine's fate (Gigauri 2022).

Georgian far-right actors have deployed the forms of media communication well comprehended by experts in the field: "interrupt other discussants, repeat the main points very loudly, change topics abruptly and viciously attack their opponents" (Wodak 2021, 171). In order to halt public support and channel it in different directions, far-right parties and the government often exploit public fears to alter people's decisions. Various disinformation narratives, such as the prospect of Georgia being dragged into the war, sanctions imposed on Russia hurting the Georgian economy, and Georgia being Russia's next victim, were intensively spread with the intention of amplifying fear.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, Georgia signed onto most of the western sanctions even though the government has publicly insisted that it would not impose bilateral sanctions on Russia for economic reasons (FactCheck 2022). The Prime Minister claimed that sanctions were not effective measures and would have dire consequences for Georgia (Civil 2022). The governing party's rhetoric once again aimed to infuse fears of economic sanctions and possible repercussions for Georgian citizens. The same rhetoric is found in the far right's discourse, which, in its part, bore considerable resemblance to the Russian disinformation narratives. Both Russian and Georgian sources have accused the West of inciting war and promoting a military solution to the conflict (Gigauri 2022). However, this narrative was soon followed by a controversial one about the West abandoning Ukraine. Consequently, the allegations of opening a second front and plunging Georgia into war were further leveled against the Ukrainian government (Talakhadze 2022). Far-right propaganda outlets continued to spread messages from Ukraine about the threat and fear of war escalating in Georgia, with the ruling party chanting the same narrative in response to critical claims against them (Kupreishvili 2022). Such rhetoric required the far right to offer a villain or a fearful scenario on the other end.

The "us" and "them" division is at the core of far-right discourse, where the out-group is not only constructed as fundamentally different but also deemed responsible for the real or imagined threats that "the people" face and must be shielded from (Wodak 2009). Aligning with Russia would have been difficult given the massive global support for Ukraine. Instead, the far right equated any potential assistance to Ukraine with the opening of a second front in the country. Various disinformation narratives blamed the external forces, such as the West, the United States, or Ukraine, which were pushing Georgia to engage in war against Russia (FactCheck 2022). The same message was found in the rhetoric of the ruling party, which stated that "everyone [who criticizes government policy] is trying to drag Georgia into the war" (Tabula 2022). Using these narratives, Georgian Dream has labeled opposition parties and anyone who criticizes Georgia's relatively passive policy toward Ukraine as a "war-monger," while portraying itself as the peaceful "pro-Georgian savior." This very division was prepared and disseminated by far-right groups via their media outlets online and on TV.

### Rethinking Geopolitics

Throughout, the far right has forecasted Ukraine's swift defeat against a powerful Russia. As Alt-Info's leading member stated, the defeat is just a matter of time and "sooner or later, this small clash and obstacle [would] be overtaken by such a large

<sup>8</sup>The narratives were closely monitored and analyzed by Media Development Foundation's monitoring project Myth Detector as well as by the Georgia's Reforms Associates project FactCheck.

military vehicle” (Alt-Info 2022a). A similar narrative was disseminated by another Alt-Info member: “in 2–3 days, Ukraine will not exist like this at all. Capitulation will take place in about a week” (Alt-Info 2022b). The existing narrative of Russia’s invincibility was thus appropriated by far-right groups. Once Ukraine’s defeat narrative was set, far-right groups began discussing alternatives for Georgia. “What has been found out during these two days is the following: Either we do what we [Alt-Info] say, or what is happening next to me [the events in Ukraine] is happening in Georgia. There is no other alternative,” claimed the Conservative Movement’s leader (Alt-Info 2022c). As these groups mostly blamed the West for abandoning Ukraine during the war, while simultaneously insisting that they were trying to drag Georgia into the war, the alternative advocated by the far right was not hard to estimate. By using the politics of fear, the far right instrumentalized the war to legitimize their skepticism and denial toward European and Euro-Atlantic integration: “we must cooperate with Russia so that what happened to Ukraine does not happen to us. We say exactly that!” (Alt-Info 2022c).

To summarize, Georgia’s far right framed the war as a domestic issue and dressed it up with disinformation narratives. The far right stands at the forefront of reinforcing the politics of fear, mostly instrumentalizing the experience of war in Georgia. Via basing the discourse of Russian invincibility at the grounds of its mobilizing narrative, the far right did not only seize the moment for legitimizing its anti-Western attitudes but also justified formerly somewhat veiled preference toward cooperating with Russia.

## Consequences of the Full-Scale Russian Invasion of Ukraine for the Republic of Moldova

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### Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has raised significant alarm in the Republic of Moldova in terms of security aggravation and the wider regional political and strategic ramifications. This paper presents an overview of the most dangerous period in Moldova’s history since independence. It considers the actions of Moldova’s government, potential threats to national security, and the main consequences of the war, which will have far-reaching effects in a variety of different areas. Despite the condemnation of this war, Moldova decided to follow the constitutional neutrality principle and has been reluctant to join any international sanctions against Russia. Moldova was vulnerable on both its economic and security front, more than any country except Ukraine.

Moldova’s response to the consequences of the war in Ukraine does not have any significant impact on the concerns about increasing risks for national security. The Transnistrian region, which is completely under Russian control, remains one of the most serious problems. The current situation in the Transnistria has only worsened. This region there is in the focus of repetitive grave tensions and provocative incidents.

One of the major factors that influence the vulnerability of the country to the consequences of the war is the massive displacement of the Ukrainian people. The large wave of refugees put pressure on basic services in Moldova, which required the external help for surviving the pressure of humanitarian crisis. In the Republic of

Moldova, rising food and energy prices are exacerbating poverty and issues related to steep losses in the agricultural sector, food insecurity, energy vulnerability, and heightening inflation pressures are coming to the fore. Given the current threat environment, there is a need for carefully calibrated policies to ensure, in practice, functional effectiveness with special crisis response measures.

War in Ukraine is the tragic realization of Russia's imperial ambitions against a backdrop of increasing authoritarianism. Losing its capacity to influence Ukraine, the story is similar in the Republic of Moldova (IDEA 2022). The invasion has caused unprecedented challenges and consequences for both countries. In the immediate short term, it caused a partial geopolitical turn of Moldova toward the EU and away from Russia. This pivot for the Moldovan pro-European political establishment is a means to an end (joining the EU). And yet, the situation in Moldova was far worse than acknowledged in the media and growing scholarship.

### **State of Emergency and Constitutional Neutrality in Conditions of Regional Insecurity**

During the early hours of the invasion, Moldova's President Maia Sandu condemned the act of war by Russia against Ukraine, calling it a blatant breach of international law (@sandumaiamd, February 24, 2022). Under a state of emergency, a special regime was established for entering and exiting Moldova's airspace, as well as the control of people's movement and goods was introduced (Civil Aviation Authority Republic of Moldova 2022; News.cn Europe 2022). This also implied a special working regime for the economic agents and public institutions to restrict mass gatherings. However, Moldova decided to uphold its constitutional neutrality principle in lieu of the Ukraine situation (Cenuşa 2022). The concept of neutrality has always been a highly politicized and divisive issue. It has been a key argument from the political elites for maintaining regional security. According to the president, introducing sanctions against Russia would not be possible due to her country's multiple economic and security "vulnerabilities" (Ukrinform 2022).

The decision was anticipated as the Moldovan economy is very dependent on Russia, especially its key sectors. However, the invasion of Ukraine immediately sent shockwaves across Moldova, caused by the massive displacement of people and influx of refugees. Over 460 thousand refugees from Ukraine entered Moldova and nearly 100 thousand of them decided to settle until they are able to return safely (Stepanenko et al. 2022). Without external help, it is almost impossible for Moldova to survive the pressure of the humanitarian crisis. There are currently sixteen UN agencies and several international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in Moldova, and the EU is working to provide emergency assistance to people in need, in particular by supporting Moldova in strengthening their response. The appropriate response and approach of Moldovan authorities to managing the refugee flows is an ongoing process that is more complex and requires long-term mechanisms, assistance, plans, resources, and effective refugee crisis management.

### **Growing Tensions in Transnistria**

Tensions in Transnistria rang the loudest alarm bells out of a deep-rooted fear that the Russian military operation could extend to Moldova (Euronews 2022). One of the main military aims of Russia is the creation of a Russia-controlled land corridor through Ukraine (Hedenskog 2022). This would, effectively, block Ukraine's access to the Black Sea, having far-reaching economic effects. Further was the map displayed by Belarus' dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko, which indicated a potential

amphibious attack near Odesa. In this case, the Russians could advance toward Transnistria (Anderson 2022).

The Moldovan authorities argued that no changes had occurred due to the military escalation in Ukraine, but the situation in Transnistria worsened (Brewster 2022). One goal of Russia's renewed war in Ukraine was to create a corridor to the Transnistrian region with the aim to put an end of infringement of the Russian-speaking population (Hedenskog 2022). It is doubtful that Moscow can push West along the Ukrainian coast to the Transnistrian region, but the announcement highlighted Moldova's precarious position (CurrentTime 2022). Such a scenario would expand the war zone. The Transnistrian issue will largely depend on the outcome of the war in Ukraine. A side effect of Ukraine's victory could be the curtailment of the pro-Russian separatist regime in Tiraspol.

The invasion finally caused Moldova to rethink its approach toward modernizing the military. Moldova does not have the means to defend itself in the face of a military threat. Despite the fact that Moldova has allocated 0.3 percent of its 2022 GDP (gross domestic product), that is, 773 million lei or approximately 39 million euro, to bolster its defense spending, the country lacks defensive capabilities (Banila 2022). The investment was essential for the security and defense infrastructure of the state, but it did not resolve the issue of possible military threats and Moldova's military capacity.

### Economic and Energy Crises in the Changing Geopolitical Dynamic

Rising food and energy prices are exacerbating the nation's poverty, food insecurity, and heightening inflation pressures that were already building. Moreover, the supply of natural gas is in jeopardy and one of the most sensitive political issues. Moldova was severely hit by the rise in natural gas prices. The recent sharp increase in gas prices became perhaps one of the most acute economic problems for Moldova's population. *Gazprom* is continuing to put supply pressure on Moldova, and solutions are few and far between. The difficult economic situation and the increase in gas and energy prices exacerbate poverty and lead to an increase in protest moods of the population. The magnitude of the impact of the Russian war in Ukraine for the Republic of Moldova depends on how long will the war last, on the efficiency of the Ukrainian resistance, and on the consistency of Western military supplies, as well as on the effectiveness of international sanctions to weaken Russia with the aim to prevent its aggression.

### Conclusion

Moldova's case has its peculiarities being Ukraine's immediate neighbor with a large Russian population and economic reliance on Russia, which stretches the nation thin. Moldova's ability to handle the spillover effects requires a delicately coordinated response at the national, regional, and potentially global levels. The biggest challenge for Moldova is the unresolved Transnistrian conflict, which is unreasonably prolonged, and tensions around it have arisen amid the intensification of the Russo-Ukrainian war, which aggravated Moldova's security problems. The intensification of potential security threat has led to a rethinking of the importance of military modernization of the country and strengthening defense capabilities. It is essential for the Moldovan authorities to condemn any provocations and attempts to draw it into actions that may endanger its domestic peace, particularly with regards to the Transnistrian conflict.

## Was Eastern Europe Surprised? Some Romanian Answers

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For many people, February 24 was a surprising flashpoint. Yet, now we can divide the world in some specific areas just by taking into consideration this element of “surprise.” Not every country saw the invasion as unexpected, and it was a moment when a clear line between knowledge of post-Soviet space was drawn, keeping in mind every country’s historical experiences. A possible war in Europe was almost universally rejected in the western part of the continent between 2014 and 2022, but not in the eastern one. This paper takes a long view in assessing why Eastern European voices, particularly in Romania, a NATO and EU member, went unheeded. While Romania could not have prevented the invasion, and suggesting so would be absurd, its stance and suspicions were undervalued as part of a broader effort to counter potential Russian aggression against its neighbors.

### After 1991: Eastern Europe and the World

“The world will never be the same again ... we did not expect this” is a common affirmation since February 24, 2022. However, the same affirmation was thrown around in 1989, because the Eastern bloc had “returned” to Europe and the “right side of history” (Antohei and Tismaneanu 2000). On September 11, 2001, after Crimea’s annexation in 2014, and during the Coronavirus pandemic, the same phrases were resurrected. One might conclude that politicians, journalists, and scholars were all unable to imagine or comprehend such atrocities and upheavals, because the general population desires predictable governance. The very concept of predictable governance includes two specific obligations for political rulers: to prevent events that worsen the standard and quality of living and to control any possible bad event. In such a paradigm, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine exposed a new division between European states. Western European countries were, in general, surprised at Russia’s actions (Gardner 2022; Popescu-Zamfir 2022). Eastern Europe, now struggling far worse economically in the energy and food sectors, and to provide humanitarian assistance, was long suspicious of Moscow’s intentions toward its neighbors.

Western Europe has long suffered from a lack of knowledge about the eastern half of the continent, including parts of the former Russian Empire. Most of the western hemisphere’s interest was dedicated to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) and Communist Party Politburo. There was, in practice, little concern about the other nationalities and rivalries within the Soviet-lead communist bloc. This lack of knowledge and understanding continued after 1991, and only increased after some countries joined NATO and the EU. This was felt in many universities and EU administrative branches, but it was especially true in 2004–2007. This was in part because joining both organizations (NATO and EU) was considered an instantaneous cure to all the member states’ problems. Instead, other concerns appeared in many areas where NATO and the EU have a small presence or limited interest. Consequently, the study of the post-Soviet space witnessed decreased budgets and fewer researchers (Horowitz 2014; Schrad 2014; Yalowitz and Rojansky 2014; Owens 2022). There were some exceptions in bridging this knowledge deficit. Baltic Studies became important in parts of Europe and North America, whereas Central Asia has struggled to gain any foothold in academic institutions. In contrast, in 2017 there were 525 Confucius institutes worldwide (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence 2018). The vacuum left by the USSR’s collapse allowed Chinese political and economic practices to

impress and attract politicians and scholars alike (Charon and Jeangène Vilmer 2021). China's economic progress fascinated and became more interesting to study, changing priorities within international relations' research departments (Nolan 2012; Le Corre 2018; Dian 2022).

Concerning Ukraine, it was too big to ignore but never as close to Western Europe as the Baltic states. The same was also true of other European regions such as Black Sea area, Balkans, and Caucasus, areas on Europe's periphery, where few reports and official studies were released. A war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine was considered impossible by politicians and scholars before 2014 and even before 2022; some concerns existed on specific topics, but were not able to provoke a war—such as Crimea's fleet situation, Russian separatism in Crimea, gas contracts and their execution, and ethnic relations between Russians and Ukrainians (Zaborsky 1995; Austin and Bergne 2004; Lynch 2004; D'anieri 2007; Mizrokhi 2009; Pifer 2009; Shumylo-Tapiola 2012). Parts of the Russian and Ukrainian economies remained heavily intertwined long after 1991. Along with Belarus, the two had an open border policy until 2014. If bilateral ties were strong, starting a war would have been “bad for business”; this rule was presumed as fully understood and respected even in the new post-Soviet space (Cottey 2022).

However, disregarding parts of Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space came at a cost to western countries. The continued spread of liberal democracy was considered an obvious next step and opposition to it unthinkable. Any conflicts between the newly independent states of the former USSR and Warsaw Pact were considered “local.” They had little to no impact on the global or continental political stage and many, such as Transnistria and Abkhazia, were not even fringe issues. The West largely left Moscow to manage these conflicts—and without much hesitation.

### Geopolitical Surprises, Geography, and History

In Putin's famous Munich Speech in 2007, Eastern Europe listened far more carefully than the West. Former communist countries read the key political messages from Moscow differently (Adomeit 2007, 2011; Lau 2022; Morawiecki 2022; Gabriel n.d.) and claimed that their warnings about Russian geopolitical behavior were not considered by the West and—in many cases—were outrightly rejected or discredited (Gosu 2022; in the same way Lucas 2013). Meanwhile, the West and many other countries, while surprised initially, were not so concerned by the Munich speech; in July 2007, they voted for Sochi to host the Olympic Games in 2014. This policy continued even after the Russian–Georgian war in 2008. A NATO summit the same year rejected Georgia and Ukraine's accession to the alliance, despite lobbying from Romania, Poland, and the Baltic states. In December 2010, the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) then voted for Russia to host the 2018 Football World Cup. Eastern Europe watched the West's advances to Russia carefully and even developed a lack of trust in some western leaders (Dempsey 2022; Hughes 2022; Lau 2022; Valica 2022).

However, Romania and Ukraine have a shared interest in the Black Sea region. Their main commercial routes use the former Soviet infrastructure—pipelines, roads, and railways—and big quantities flow through the Black Sea corridor into the Mediterranean Sea. However, before 2014, the Black Sea region was less important for Western Europe, written off as the area with Europe's poorest countries (The World Bank 2022c). And yet, Romania was the only country raising concerns about possible actions from Russia in the region. Since 2005, the president of Romania Traian Basescu has spoken many times about a real danger of Moscow “transforming the Black Sea into a Russian Lake” (Joja 2018). In March 2014, after the Crimean annexation, he spoke about the danger to Romania's eastern borders (The Moscow Times 2014). Ukraine did not heed Romania's warnings before 2014 and only after Crimea was annexed did Kyiv grow concerned about threats along the Black Sea.

From the start of the war in the Donbas, some scholars discussed a “Transnistrian model” replica in eastern Ukraine (Corboy, Courtney, and Yalowitz 2014; Grossman 2018; de Waal and von Twickel 2020). Bucharest also expressed concern over the Russian-built bridge over Kerch to Crimea, fearing that it could later be a platform for an encroach into Ukraine’s territory (Rosu and Ionita 2021), particularly in lieu of the illegal navigation restrictions imposed by Russia on the Ukrainian Black Sea ports in raw material exports (Parmley and Pedrozo 2021).

Economic differences between Western and Eastern Europe are well known: the technological superiority of the western hemisphere is ensured by the satellites that play a significant role in information management. Interpretation of many data is a complex problem to solve by the human mind in the twenty-first century, and some leaders from the most developed countries were not able to perform to the same level as technology bring information. For Eastern Europe—a less developed space—the lack of data must be replaced by a stronger knowledge of history, geography, and any other relevant information from an analyzed area. When technology is not strongly involved a geopolitical brain should act with more caution, searching to prevent any unpleasant surprises.

A combination of historic wisdom augmented by a coherent interpretation of geography and economy caused the Romanian government—like many other Eastern European countries—to have less trust in Moscow politicians, no matter their position (Sipos et al. 2010). The Russian strategic surprise of 2014—as US analysts describe it—could be prevented if geography, history, and psychology of leaders were better understood (Davis 2014). However, today it appears that there are important data points that have been missed in these areas by worldwide governmental offices, universities, and analytical centers. If Romania and other Eastern European countries were able to understand faster some of Russia’s geopolitical actions, few other nations appeared to benefit from it. Its knowledge would have been useful for European countries. Smaller states such as Romania may encounter challenges in having their voices heard within the EU and NATO, which can be attributed to the hierarchical order that exists within these organizations. Decision-making processes are often dominated by larger and more influential states, while the concerns and perspectives of smaller states may not receive adequate attention. It is paramount to learn from the mistakes that made the invasion of Ukraine possible and listen to the viewpoints of all NATO allies to prevent any new loses.

## Conclusion to the Forum

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This forum’s impact is to shed some light on the lack of attention paid by most in the West to Russian perceptions of Western threats and the Kremlin’s concerns of Russia being under attack, following the demise of the Soviet Union, after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and particularly after Russian invaded Ukraine in 2022. This forum has shown that a fundamental lack of understanding and attention was paid to Eastern European countries individually, the intertwined history of them, and the development of Kremlin rhetoric. Those with an understanding of Eastern European politics could have reasonably expected some kind of conflict to flare up between Russia and the West in Eastern Europe in the twenty-first century, even in Ukraine. Ukraine’s government has long feared disintegration and struggled to form a monolithic cultural and state identity. Ukraine’s first President told the then US President Bill Clinton that he feared Ukraine could be dismembered, region by region, and suffer the same fate as Yugoslavia. He specifically highlighted the

Donetsk miners “seeking a return to socialism” (National Security Archive 1993). In 1994, his successor, Leonid Kuchma feared that the Ukrainian nation might be destroyed if the economy remained weak and that turning toward Russia would inevitably follow (Kuchma 1994). In 1996, he then insisted that the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) economic integration was politically motivated to be Russia-centric and keep Ukraine within its influence (Kuchma 1996). And yet national governments, media organizations, and the academic community underdelivered in a number of critical areas highlighted in the forum. There was a failure not just to consider the implications of Kremlin policy and rhetoric, but their actual severity and potential to do political and economic damage. As international interest dwindled in the region, governments and international organizations lessened their focus and attention to potential security threats and the consequences. The West has dismissed online propaganda, securitization, and historical rewrites as typical of an autocracy and assumed that it was not a part of a potential war machine in the making. This was misleading and prevented many from imagining an invasion as ever likely.

Concerning Pearce’s paper, memory studies’ scholarship on the postcommunist space has seen an explosion in recent years (Saunders 2020). Despite its continuing popularity and focus, including on militarization, the failure to consider the closeness of the past to Russia’s elite and history’s presence in the Kremlin as a genuine motivator for reasserting imperial ambitions, rather than a tool for political legitimacy, might have been a mistake. Previously assumed to be civic institutionalism designed to increase loyalty to the state (Pearce 2020), in President Putin’s speech, before recognizing the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, Ukraine’s sovereignty became an open question for the Kremlin (Putin 2022).

Regarding Mahon’s contribution, the securitization rhetoric used to justify the invasion has been evolving for the best part of a decade. It created and shaped the propaganda, forming new layers of meaning for the Russian public. The Kremlin’s rhetoric became embedded in Russia’s domestic politics, even though many dismissed it to be hollow and a ghost of the Soviet and imperial past. The subsequent laws introducing criminal liability for challenging the regime’s version of the military operation, the national history, and restricting the internet confirmed that Russia was prepared to go further than many anticipated. As Gabdulhakov noted, EU citizens are also still exposed to Moscow’s online propaganda despite the ban on its key international broadcasters. While regulating that the internet is contentious, Moscow’s messaging and audiences to its online propaganda did not receive equal attention. As such, the actual impact was unknown before the invasion and remains so. Additional study in this sphere is desperately needed.

In Romania and Moldova, the dynamics of the crisis provoked by the war and its overspill proved complex. As Europe’s poorest country, Moldova was always likely to struggle as it lacked the infrastructure to deal with the refugee crisis that followed the invasion. Its economic reliance on Russia, the Transnistrian conflict, and the government’s official position of neutrality leave it quite exposed and vulnerable to any worsening of relations between Russia and the West. As Vacarelu aptly highlighted, the inability or unwillingness of Western Europe to adapt its security on the Eastern flank means that Eastern Europe and the states bordering Ukraine are now entirely reliant on the international community to handle the influx of refugees. For Moldova to decrease its reliance on Russia, it would need to solely rely on the EU, which will hamper and slow down its accession to the bloc. Romania, meanwhile, had long and deep-held suspicions of Moscow that ultimately went unheeded by the western alliances. Western Europe’s concerns about Romania’s own progression since becoming an EU member likely led to its warnings’ dismissals.

Georgia’s internal politics made its response to the invasion much more complicated than many in the West initially thought—and likely contributed to it not gaining EU candidate status. Georgia and Moldova could not simply sever all

economic ties with Russia, explaining why both did not propose their own sanctions. The level of support for the invasion on Georgia's political right, while not totally unexpected, meant that the government's condemnations lacked agency. The invasion appeared to confirm that Georgia's European or Western turn is not set in stone, highlighting the very real obstacles many former Soviet republics face in democratizing and westernizing.

The Kremlin's propaganda, the flow of refugees, national history, or securitization rhetoric is not likely to subside. As of May 2023, no diplomatic solution has been found to the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Moldova and Georgia's positions had not changed, although thousands took part in anti-government protests in Moldova that September over rising fuel prices and inflation as a result of the invasion (Reuters 2022b). The refugee crisis is still underway, with the expectation that, unless a ceasefire occurs, more refugees will leave Ukraine. Following this forum's conclusions, there are many possible areas of research going forward and unanswered questions to consider.

First, Ukraine's military advances in late 2022, border disputes along the Kyrgyz–Tajikistan border, and inflamed tensions in the Nagorno–Karabakh region have raised questions about Moscow's ability to continue to exercise its influence in the post-Soviet space. The first big question from this forum is that of Transnistria. A situation few predicted at the start of the invasion, the future of Russia's troops stationed there looks extremely uncertain. Second, there is a similar concern emerging in Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia as military tensions rise and its denied EU candidate status has changed dynamics in its domestic politics. Equally, Ukraine's other neighbors of Poland, Belarus, and Hungary are in need of examining, as are others' response to the invasion, such as the Baltic states, Central Asia, Finland, and Armenia.

Third, this forum has shown that further study on the role of propaganda and shared history is crucial. Kremlin propaganda outlets were not blocked in the Global South. Countries in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East could regularly access the well-funded broadcast media after the invasion. Russia Today has expanded its broadcast in Arabic and is interested in expanding its presence in South Africa in the near future. In addition, the Russian state and its outlets have worked hard to find ways around any restrictions that have been imposed, for example, by informing its audience how to download a Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) or uploading its video and news content to *Rumble* or *Odysee*. At the time of writing, it appeared that people in these countries, particularly in Latin America, were not especially interested in the Kremlin's propaganda (The Economist 2022). However, as demonstrated in this forum, the internet will remain the battleground for mis- and disinformation as the regime's propaganda machine is well funded; it is an integral part of Russia's domestic and foreign policy.

Fourth, there is a need for further multidisciplinary discussions about the impact of sanctions on the Russian population and those surrounding Putin. Even though the sanctions are among the heaviest ever seen, Russia will emerge in better shape than Ukraine after the war. As long as the sanctions do not ensure economic hardship that goes beyond a small strata of Russia's middle class, they will not outweigh the regime's propaganda and ultra-patriotism. The fighting has not taken place on Russian soil, its infrastructure is still intact, the economy is readapting, and the regime could weather an uprising. The siloviki elites who surround Putin—Igor Sechin, Nikolai Patrushev, Sergey Ivanov, Dmitry Rogozin, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and others—see the world in a similar fashion to him. Their shared worldview is shaped by Russian strategic culture, ruled by the desire for power and ultranationalism. When Putin's time in office comes to an end, however it may occur, Russia's political life will inevitably change. Whether it is a worse-case scenario when his successor could be dangerous and unpredictable or a promising prospect of a more pro-democracy leader, Russia will see significant political change. Our forum

concludes that governments, universities, and international organizations need more expertise on the post-socialist space stretching from Eastern Europe and across Central Asia. As many wrongly predicted the invasion's likelihood, we assume that was because not enough people were looking in the right places or even at all.

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