



Is the Ukraine War a Territorial Dispute? Geographical Contributions to Understanding and Resolving the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

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Recibido: 23 de mayo de 2024 / Aceptado: 11 de junio de 2024

Abstract. What would a peaceful resolution of the Russia-Ukraine war look like? To begin to answer that this article views the origins of the conflict through a geographical lens rather than the reductive historical framing that has dominated political punditry in the US and UK. Located in comparative literature on nationalism which suggests that territorial disputes are the norm rather than the exception in post-Soviet borderlands, it explores how the Ukraine conflict demonstrates a series of political geographical issues at the local, regional, and national scales. Following Millar in adopting a trans-scalar conception of the inter-relation of peace and conflict, it draws on comparative examples to suggest creative ways in which these issues might be addressed in future peace negotiations.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian Conflict; territorial disputes; conflict resolution; Nation-State; NATO.

[es] ¿Es la guerra de Ucrania una disputa territorial? Contribuciones geográficas para comprender y resolver el conflicto ruso-ucraniano

Resumen. ¿Cómo sería una resolución pacífica de la guerra entre Rusia y Ucrania? Para empezar a responder esa pregunta este artículo mira a los orígenes del conflicto a través de una lente geográfica en lugar del marco histórico reduccionista que ha dominado a los expertos políticos en Estados Unidos y el Reino Unido. Ubicado en la literatura comparada sobre nacionalismo que sugiere que las disputas territoriales son la norma y no la excepción en las zonas fronterizas postsoviéticas, explora cómo el conflicto de Ucrania demuestra una serie de cuestiones políticas geográficas a escalas local, regional y nacional. Siguiendo a Millar al adoptar una concepción transescalar de la interrelación entre la paz y el conflicto, se basa en ejemplos comparativos para sugerir formas creativas en las que estas cuestiones podrían abordarse en futuras negociaciones de paz.

Palabras clave: conflicto ruso-ucraniano; disputas territoriales; resolución de conflictos; Estado-nación; OTAN.

[pt] A guerra na Ucrânia é uma disputa territorial? Contribuições geográficas para a compreensão e resolução do conflito russo-ucraniano

Resumo. Como seria uma resolução pacífica para a guerra entre a Rússia e a Ucrânia? Para começar a responder a esta questão, este artigo analisa as origens do conflito através de uma lente geográfica, em

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vez do quadro histórico reducionista que dominou os especialistas políticos nos Estados Unidos e no Reino Unido. Localizado na literatura comparada sobre o nacionalismo que sugere que as disputas territoriais são a norma e não a exceção nas fronteiras pós-soviéticas, explora como o conflito na Ucrânia demonstra uma série de questões políticas geográficas às escalas local, regional e nacional. Seguindo Millar na adoção de uma concepção transescalar da inter-relação entre paz e conflito, baseia-se em exemplos comparativos para sugerir formas criativas através das quais estas questões poderiam ser abordadas em futuras negociações de paz.

Palavras-chave: Conflito Russo-Ucraniano; disputas territoriais; resolução de conflitos; Estado-nação; OTAN.

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Cómo citar: Megoran, N. (2024). Is the Ukraine War a Territorial Dispute? Geographical Contributions to Understanding and Resolving the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict. *Geopolítica(s). Revista de estudios sobre espacio y poder*, 15(1), 33-57. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/geop.96493>

Introduction

In this essay I argue that geography is important for understanding the reasons for the Russian-Ukraine war, and is therefore also important in negotiating long-term peace.

In his 1934 Association of American Geographers' presidential address, Wallace Atwood (1935, pp. 15-16) claimed that geography has a "supreme responsibility" to foster a "worldwide enthusiasm for peace" and help stamp out "the damnable practices of war." Running against dominant North American and European framings of the Russo-Ukrainian war, I seek to rise to Atwood's challenge by exploring some ways in which the conflict can be understood – and even resolved – through a geographical lens.

To do this I interrogate a 2021 essay purportedly by Vladimir Putin on Russian-Ukrainian relations. This text has been widely critiqued by historians, who tend to explain the war as being driven by hyper-nationalistic readings of an imperial past. Without denying the importance of historical imaginations, I contend that they are insufficient to explain the serious deterioration in Russian-Ukrainian/Western relations that led to Russia attacking Ukraine from 2014 onwards. Instead, I read the article for what it reveals about Russian views on the geographical issues at stake in the war. I follow Millar (2020) in using a trans-scalar conception of how conflict and peace are interrelated at different scales. This recognises that "peace has a spatial component" (Björkdahl, 2021, p.139) and is a contested and dynamic spatial process composed of practices and actors at multiple scales (McConnell, Megoran, & Williams, 2014). The issues I identify are not exceptional or unusual, being traditional political geographical concerns about minorities, boundaries, and territories in the age of the nation-state following the collapse of multi-ethnic empires. They are also all resolvable, and I will draw on comparable examples to demonstrate how these issues might be approached in future negotiations to end the war.

My focus is on understanding stated Russian grievances and explanations of the war. This might appear objectionable to some, given the atrocities that the country has inflicted on Ukraine. But explanation must not be confused with justification. Influenced by a pacifist tradition of Christian anarchism which informs my sense that geography should be a discipline for peace (Megoran, 2010), I am not remotely sympathetic to Russia's war which I utterly abhor in both its conception and conduct. I focus on Russia's reasons for the war simply because Russia began it so understanding them is self-evidently important. Further, its grievances will need to be considered during the negotiations that will be required to establish long-term peace.

The article begins by arguing that a geographical framing of the war is a necessary counterpart to the dominant historical framings. After introducing Putin's essay, the remaining four sections unpick the war's multi-scalar political geographies, drawing on wider literatures to suggest ways in which the issues identified could be addressed.

1. Geography matters

In February 2023 Florida Governor Ron DeSantis caused controversy when he described the war as "a territorial dispute." Ukraine's Ministry for Foreign Affairs – worried that a potential next US president might be unwilling to continue Joe Biden's military support of their side in the war – issued a statement rebutting this view of the conflict and inviting DeSantis "to visit Ukraine to get a deeper understanding of Russia's full-scale invasion and the threats it poses to US interests" (Garcia, 2023). At home, following criticism by politicians of all stripes, the usually-belligerent DeSantis rapidly walked back his comments (Kinnard, 2023).

This furore indicates that making claims about the geography of this war is controversial. This is in part because the dominant frame for explaining Russia's 2022 invasion has been that of history. According to this view, Russian foreign policy can be understood as the expression of Vladimir Putin's understanding of the past. "Why does President Putin object to Ukraine?," asked esteemed British historian of Russia and Ukraine, David Saunders (2022). His answer is that Putin's reading of history led him to conclude that Russians and Ukrainians are a single people and Russia needed to act militarily to transform this historical truth into political reality.

The best-known version of this reasoning has been advanced by Timothy Snyder, another veteran historian of East Europe who has emerged as a major pundit on Russian foreign policy. Snyder attempts to make sense of Putin's shift from positive relations with the west to cyber-terrorism, extra-judicial killings, election meddling and, since 2014-onwards, the war on Ukraine. Rather than write an evidence-based history of this period he turns to the explanation of "the politics of eternity" (Snyder, 2018, p. 8). According to this account, advanced by 1920s philosopher Ivan Ilyin, the world was made from the corrupt detritus of God's failed creation. Russia somehow escaped this corruption to find itself trapped outside time, experiencing repeated cycles of endangerment and defense with war-making being the proper release of excess energies. Putin, according to Snyder, is a disciple of Ilyin, and this explains both his domestic and foreign policy.²

² For a detailed, critical examination of this argument, see Laruelle (2021, pp.140-141).

As a causal explanation for this war this approach is plagued with problems. As McGlynn (2023, p.5) argues it views the war as the product of “just one bad Tsar” rather than the more complex sociological formation of modern Russia. Most significantly, it does not account for the timing of the war which began in 2014 and escalated into a full-scale invasion in 2022. For example, it does not recognise that Russia joined NATO’s 1990s ‘Partnership for Peace’ programme and that Putin openly discussed possible Russian EU and NATO membership. It ignores Russian willingness to cooperate with NATO powers in their anti-terror campaigns of the 2000s. It cannot make sense of why Russia was previously willing to affirm Ukraine’s existence by signing up to various international agreements including the landmark “Treaty between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the Ukrainian-Russian State border,” concluded by Putin in 2003. It overlooks what Pinkham (2018) calls the “specific geopolitical reasons” for Russia’s growing hostility to the West, including NATO expansion at the same time as the organisation seemed increasingly ready to attack other states such as Yugoslavia and Libya. Instead, Russian hostility to Ukraine and the West is presented as primordial, timeless, and ontological. The Ukraine war is placed beyond the realm of politics, as being impossible to comprehend in any rational way and therefore impossible to address through any political or diplomatic processes of negotiation. An obvious politics follows this view: if the core issue is an unchanging Russian historical imperial imagination, then a negotiated outcome is inconceivable because one side cannot easily insist on a state accepting another’s version of history in a peace treaty. Indeed, following the logic of this argument the only rational response is counter-violence and the continuation of a war that (depending on sources) has killed tens- or hundreds-of-thousands of people at the time of writing. There has thus been little reflection on what a just, long-term peace would look like, and the possibility of non-violent alternatives to responding to the Russian invasion virtually ignored (Koopman, 2022).

I do not advocate an ahistorical reading of the war. Kappeler (2014, p.108) argues that the legacy of a Tsarist and Soviet “imperial past” is “an important factor” in post-Soviet Russian politics in relation to Ukraine and I do not doubt that this dangerously potent consciousness both enables and generates Russian support for the war on Ukraine. But alone it cannot account for the present conflict, and if taken as the predominant frame for understanding the conflict it virtually rules out any hope of de-escalation or negotiation.

2. Political geographies of the Ukraine war

Given that discussion of history only takes us so far, I want to shift the conversation to geography. By this, I don’t mean the slew of pop-geopolitics commentators who argue that the physical geography of Eastern Europe can explain Russian military interventions in Ukraine. For example, in his bestselling book *Prisoners of Geography*, journalist Tim Marshall suggests that although mountains protect most of Russia from land attack, the ‘Great European Plain’ through Poland and Ukraine is a weak point. “Putin has no choice,” Marshall declares in opening his book published soon after the annexation of Crimea: “he must at least attempt to control the flatlands to the West” (Marshall, 2015, p.vii).

This geographical determinism can be readily dismissed. Moscow certainly *did* have choices about its string of post-2014 military interventions in Ukraine. It is in the more pertinent geography of the political geography of post-Soviet, post-Cold War nation-building that this article is located. Independent Russia and Ukraine were born into a world of nation-states, with nationalism's model of the coincidence of state boundaries and an ethnically-based nation (Ther, 2014). This was always a fiction anywhere, but it is particularly fantastical in the former Soviet Union. By late 1991, Baev calculates, there had been some 170 ethno-territorial disputes in the former USSR, 73 of which directly concerned Russia's boundaries. He notes that there were only two out of twenty-three inter-republican boundaries within former Soviet territory that were *not* in dispute (Baev, 1995, p.92).

It is against this background of territorial disputes being the norm in post-Soviet borderlands that we turn to the posting in July 2021 on the Kremlin's website of what it claimed was Putin's 5,000-word article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." Insisting that the starting part of Russian-Ukrainian interstate relations must be "that Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole," it explores the supposed origins of these people and how a combination of nineteenth-century nationalism, misconceived Soviet Union policies, and the nefarious meddling of the West came to separate them over time.

The essay's denial of any authentic tradition of Ukrainian nationhood has been roundly rebutted by historians such as Saunders (2022). Nonetheless it is a useful source for understanding the grievances that Moscow holds – grievances that are substantially political geographical in nature. Although Russia's gripes about NATO expansion are context-specific, the others are well-rehearsed failings of the nation-state system. In the remainder of this article I will unpack these. I recognise that analysing the putative writings and speeches of authoritarian heads of state requires care. They are political interventions usually produced iteratively by advisors and speech-writers, and may be designed to conceal as well as reveal, to obfuscate as well as clarify. However, because they are intentional, public presentations, as March (2003, p. 307) argues they are useful windows into "state rhetoric and ideology," and as I show, the concerns raised in Putin's essay have been widely discussed by other sources (Russian and non-Russian alike).

The essay lists grievances pertinent to political geography including the memorialisation of the Soviet past, managing ethnic diversity and inclusion in the nation-state, boundaries and territories, and the geopolitics of EU and NATO expansion. These correspond to the local, regional, national, and international scales. Focussing on these four scales in turn, and using examples from other contexts to show how they can successfully be addressed, I will identify and evaluate the stated grievances and consider ways in which these they may be addressed in future negotiations.

2.1. Local scale: memory and placemaking

Putin's essay refers to "Ukrainian neo-Nazis," and Russian government propaganda has repeatedly made outlandish claims that because Ukraine is allegedly over-run by Nazis a goal of the 2022 invasion was the "de-Nazification" of the republic. Although these statements are fantasies, they point to the issue of *localised* contests over memory and place-making that are common across post-Soviet (and other) space.

The presence of extreme right-wing groups on the 2013-14 Euromaidan protests and post-Maidan politics in Ukraine has been widely recognised by scholars (Ryabchuk, 2014). However Russian propaganda has exaggerated the significance of such fringe groups way beyond their actual political influence or social importance (Snyder, 2018, pp.149-154). Apart from propaganda purposes, how can we understand Putin's apparent obsession with 'Nazism'? Consider this passage from his essay:

I think it is also natural that the representatives of Ukraine over and over again vote against the UN General Assembly resolution condemning the glorification of Nazism. Marches and torchlit processions in honor of remaining war criminals from the SS units take place under the protection of the official authorities. [World War II-era Ukrainian nationalists like Stepan] Bandera, who collaborated with the Nazis, are ranked as national heroes. Everything is being done to erase from the memory of young generations the names of genuine patriots and victors, who have always been the pride of Ukraine (Putin, 2021).

References to "memory" and specific events such as "marches" are significant here, both for understanding the issue and thinking through how it might be addressed in a peace settlement. They relate to events taking places in specific, local places.

Ishchenko's 2011 article helps us understand the politics of memory in Ukraine. President Yushchenko's politics of memory, he argues, glorified the anti-Soviet struggle of Ukrainian nationalists during and after World War II, especially the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Portraying the Ukrainian nation as an object of Soviet (*i.e.* Russian) genocide "went hand-in-hand with either denial or justification of Ukrainian nationalists' collaboration with Nazis in the beginning of WWII, their participation in the Holocaust, and the ethnic cleansing of up to 60,000 Poles in Volhynia in 1943" (Ishchenko, 2011, p. 369). President Yushchenko awarded "Hero of Ukraine" titles to WWII nationalist leaders like Bandera, and in 2007-9 initiated a wave of attacks on Soviet-era monuments, which often saw nationalists vandalizing Lenin statues, and sometimes daubing pro-Nazi and antisemitic symbols on them (Ishchenko, 2011, pp.381-382). Our understanding of this is augmented by Rozenas and Vlasenko's more recent work. The 2013 Euromaidan protests "unleashed a mass wave of demolitions" of monuments of Soviet figures, known locally as *Leninopad* ("Lenin's Fall") which led to "a swift transformation of Ukraine's public space" (Rozenas & Vlasenko, 2022, p.1261). In their stead, many monuments were erected to the UPA (Kappeler, 2014, p.114). In these protests, in which the Lenin statue in central Kyiv was toppled in December 2013, xenophobic and anti-semitic poems were recited from the stage, and slogans including "Ukraine above all" (echoing the Nazi slogan of "Deutschland über alles") and "Glory to the nation – death to its enemies" were circulated (Ryabchuk, 2014, p.7). Pro-separatist organizations reacted against this by deploying Soviet symbols in their public relations campaigns, further politicising the removal or maintenance of these statues.

Unsurprisingly, it was not simply Russia and Russian minorities who objected to this politics of memory. In 2020 Israel and Poland issued a rare joint rebuke of Ukraine for allowing nationalist events honouring Third Reich collaborators like

Bandera whose forces killed thousands of Jews and Poles. “Celebrating these individuals is an insult” which caused them “great concern and sorrow,” the ambassadors of the two countries wrote in a co-signed letter (Liphshiz, 2020). This reprises previous disputes between Poland and Ukraine over Ukraine’s alleged attempts to prevent or remove the memorialisation of WWII Polish victims of Ukrainian violence (Kuzio, 1997, pp.42-43). Institutions like The European Parliament and the Wiesenthal Centre complained to Ukraine about the revisionism, which mirrors moves in other East European states to rehabilitate right-wing interwar nationalist movements in the same way (Harris, 2020).

The question of how the Soviet and Nazi-era past is commemorated and memorialised is by no means unique to Ukraine – it is an issue that many East European states have faced, and found ways to address, since 1991 (Esbenshade, 1995). Importantly, these are processes which must be implemented locally and take place locally. Fumagalli and Rymarenko, in their research on how Crimea’s elites turned against Kiyv and sought Russian annexation, draw attention to anger at a 2007 government decree that all regional authorities, including the Crimean government and Sevastopol city council, should organize public events in commemoration of the 65th anniversary of the foundation of the UPA (Fumagalli & Rymarenko, 2022, p.13). Geographers have long recognised that creating ‘deathscapes’ (places in which the dead are remembered) is a process of infusing meaning into places (Kong, 1999). Places like the sites of monuments, the town halls from which banners are draped, and the streets through which parades march, are “sites of contest that are constantly being produced and reproduced” (Lynn & Fryer, 1998, p.570). A peace settlement that proscribes how Ukraine celebrates and teaches its history is both unreasonable and unenforceable. Instead, granting local communities the autonomy to make their own decisions about commemoration might help defuse the tensions of centrally-imposed government policies or Russian-backed alternatives about how Nazi or Soviet-era figures ought to be remembered. Beyond that, as Courtheyn argues in his research on the commemoration of violence in Colombia, such memorialisation is not bound to be a reactive political act anchored in the past, but can also be forward-looking and part of building peace (Courtheyn, 2016).

2.2. Regional scale: ethnic inclusion and diversity

The second striking theme of Putin’s essay, from a political geographical perspective, is the complaint that Russian speaking or identifying minorities (especially in Ukraine’s eastern regions) have seen their linguistic and cultural rights discriminated against by exclusionary Ukrainian central state policies. Putin described as an attack on the Russian language the legislative agenda of the post-2014 Ukrainian authorities who “first tried to repeal the law on state language policy,” then enacted laws on purifying the power structures, and also “the law on education that virtually cut the Russian language out of the educational process.” Further, Putin claims, a May 2021 bill on “indigenous peoples” meant that “only those who constitute an ethnic minority and do not have their own state entity outside Ukraine are recognized as indigenous.” All of this, he concluded, is problematic in a place “that is very complex in terms of its territorial, national and linguistic composition.” Putin sees the cumulative purpose of these laws being, “a forced change of identity” and “forced assimilation, the formation of an ethnically pure Ukrainian state” which means that

“the Russian people in all may decrease by hundreds of thousands or even millions” (Putin, 2021).

The question here is that of how to maintain diversity and inclusion in multi-ethnic border regions of the nation state. This challenge is endemic to the nation state system, which seeks to impose neat political boundaries on places whose complex ethnic geographies belie such simple division.³ Using the University of Maryland’s *Minorities at Risk* dataset, Horowitz and Redd “count 41 cases where a politically significant minority group has both regionally concentrated settlement and a neighbouring state politically dominated by ethnic kin. Out of these 41 cases, 20 have seen major armed conflict” (Horowitz & Redd, 2018, p.70). These situations are particularly likely to be dangerous, they find, when former empires break up into nation-states.

This aptly describes the issue of Russian-identifying minorities in Ukraine’s eastern region. Terms must be handled carefully. The definition of who counts as a ‘Russian’ in Ukraine is complex. It cannot simply be read from language, as bilingualism is high (Kuzio, 1997, 109). Conducting opinion surveys in the Donbas region, Sasse and Lackner found that feeling ‘Ukrainian’ included both mono- and bi-lingual citizens (Sasse & Lackner, 2018, p.153). Recent and ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine has increased identification with Ukraine amongst Russian-speakers. Nonetheless Harris argues that although there is no causal link between ethnicity and nationalism in the conflict, it does play a role and so should be explored (Harris, 2020, p.611). According to Ukraine’s 2001 national census, numbering 8,334,100 Russians constituted the largest of the republic’s more than 100 registered ethnic minority groups. They made up 17.3% of the overall population, but constituted significant shares of the population in the Donetsk (38.2%), Luhansk (39%), Kharkiv (25.6%), and Zaporizhia (24.7%) regions (Solonenko, 2017, p. 4). These figures do not automatically correlate to political choices – for example in the 1991 referendum on Ukrainian sovereignty, these regions voted heavily in favour of independence (Kuzio, 1997, p.49). However, over time in a context of what Harris (2020, p.597) calls “the ethnicization” of post-Soviet politics in Ukraine and Russia, these identities came to map onto support for pro-Russian political parties (Clem & Craumer, 2008) and geopolitical visions. Polling in 2017 showed “that support for the EU in western Ukraine was 83% and only 27% in eastern Ukraine, while support for NATO membership in eastern Ukraine was 21% and 71% in western Ukraine” (Harris, 2020, p.605).

As Horowitz and Redd argue, in such nation-state building processes conflict over territory and identity is common – particularly in border areas. The issues are particularly acute in many former Soviet borderlands where the 1991 USSR collapse suddenly created numerous, regionally-concentrated ‘stranded’ minorities. They found themselves increasingly severed from previous economic, educational, cultural and kinship networks, but also more marginalised in non-inclusive state-building processes under what Brubaker calls ‘nationalising regimes’ (Brubaker, 1996). In some cases, ‘kin states’ have taken particular interests in the welfare and rights of their co-ethnic people: Germany, South Korea, and Israel, for example, have offered different types of support for ‘their’ kin minorities in post-Soviet space, and

³ A point made by Agnew (2024) in the context of the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, this issue.

Kazakhstan has expediated the ‘return’ of ethnic Kazakhs who are citizens of nearby states (Diener, 2009).

In the same way, Russia has seen itself as a protector of the Russian minorities which were suddenly created by the collapse of the USSR. According to Mankoff, Moscow’s support was initially low-level and cultural, but this changed after 2008 when the NATO Bucharest summit declared support for future Ukrainian and Georgian membership. Russia then launched a new Foreign Policy Concept that included protection of the “legitimate rights and interests of Russian citizens and compatriots residing abroad” (Mankoff, 2022, p.40).

2.2.1. Russian Minority rights in Ukraine

To claim, however, that Russian ‘compatriots’ residing in Ukraine need the sort of “protection” that has been marked by armed support of separatists and invasion is to claim that their civil, linguistic, and cultural rights have been gravely abused. Given the complicated relationship between language and ethnicity in Ukraine – demonstrated by a Russian-speaking President leading many Russian-speaking soldiers against a Russian Federation invasion – can this be the case? For a more objective assessment than that which can be offered by either Russia or Ukraine, we can turn to the work of international organisations (IOs) who report from the ground. IOs have repeatedly raised criticisms about Ukraine’s treatment of minorities in the context of growing nationalism. The European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) warned that “‘Ukrainisation’ is spreading insecurity among minority groups and endangers possibilities to establish a cohesive Ukrainian society with a shared sense of belonging” (Henke, 2020, p.3). In 2018 the UN called on Ukraine to take immediate action to stop what amounted to a “systematic persecution” of the country’s Roma minority who had become the target of a wave of violent attacks by extreme right-wing groups (United Nations, 2018). In 2016 the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)’s High Commissioner on National Minorities described how the Ukrainian government was rolling back protection of minorities and expressed particular concern about the implementation of new language laws, aimed at widening the use of Ukrainian at the expense of minority languages, including Russian (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2016). These concerns were echoed by various UN branches (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019, p.24) (United Nations, 2019), which repeatedly noted abuses of minorities and recommended “the swift adoption of a law on the protection of national minorities that will specifically protect their language rights” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021, p.2).

The plight of Ukrainians who speak or identify as Russian became increasingly prominent in these reports. However, it is important to note that according to these reports the mistreatment of Russian/Russian-speaking minorities by the Ukrainian government was consistently far less bad than the actions of the Russian-backed authorities in separatist-controlled areas. For example, the 2021 OHCHR report cited above also reported “widespread credible allegations of torture and ill-treatment,” “flaws in the administration of justice,” “limitations on the enjoyment of their freedom of religion or belief,” and numerous attacks on journalists, human rights defenders, political and gender-based activists, and “members of national minorities” under the separatist administrations (ONCHR, 2021, pp.1-2). Nonetheless Russian

abuses do not excuse Ukrainian ones, and although Putin has greatly distorted the true picture on the ground by unreasonable invocations of Nazi-style genocides, as these IO reports indicate there is some basis to claims that Russian-speakers have suffered discrimination.

2.2.2. *Resolving the regional issue?*

So, whilst hyperbolic Russian Federation claims about the severity of the mistreatment of Russians by Ukraine are grossly inflated, there are genuine issues that will need addressing in peace negotiations. How can this be done? Extreme measures of population exchange (the ‘peace’ principle behind the 1923 Lausanne Treaty) or territorial annexation (the results of sham plebiscites in September 2022 notwithstanding) are unacceptable, nor is it reasonable for Russia to demand the federal restructuring of the Ukrainian state (Dnistrianskyi, Kopachinska, & Dnistrianska, 2022, p.119). Instead, a long-term solution is required that both removes Russian forces from the Donbas but which also obviates the perceived Russian need for their presence by guaranteeing and protecting the civil, linguistic and cultural rights of the region’s Russian-identifying, Russian-speaking and other minorities. The Minsk Agreements of 2014 and 2015 sought to do this, but failed for various reasons (Åtland, 2020).

A promising alternative way forwards is the model of Non-Territorial Autonomy (NTA) devised in the Danish-German borderlands. A bitter ethno-territorial dispute emerged in the nineteenth century as the imposition of nation-states highlighted the mismatch between state boundaries and ethnic affiliation, leading to two major wars, occupation and oppression, boundary changes, and generations of bitterness. However, in one of the most remarkable cases of peacemaking in post-1945 Europe, the issue was largely resolved by a process beginning with the 1955 Bonn-Copenhagen declarations guaranteeing the cultural, linguistic, educational and spiritual rights of minorities (Megoran, 2011).

What emerged from this experience is perhaps the quintessential example of NTA, described by Malloy (2017, p.183) as “a policy for accommodating diversity in multicultural societies through delegating powers to distinctly defined and legally embedded institutions of a political, cultural, social, and occasionally economic nature run by minority organizations.” It includes arrangements whereby those who self-identify as belonging to ethno-cultural-linguistic minorities have been granted some form of cultural autonomy – for example, in organising educational systems, places of worship, and cultural/associational life – with minority institutions existing alongside state ones (Klatt, 2022, p.908). NTA offers political participation of national minorities and is thus a tool to manage diversity without challenging territorial integrity – something that Ukraine has failed to achieve so far. Could NTA offer anything here?

Klatt and Malloy are both scholars associated with the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI), a policy think-tank based in the Danish-German borderlands which explores the potential for NTA to help address ethno-territorial disputes in east Europe. In 2017 the ECMI issued a comprehensive report on minority protection and diversity issues in Ukraine. In recognition of the multiplicity of ethnic groups, in the 1990s Ukraine signed bilateral agreements with neighbouring kin-states of its largest minorities including Hungary, Poland, Moldova, Romania, Belarus, and

Russia, which regulated provision of the rights to national minorities. For example, the 1997 ‘Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and Russian Federation’ contains an article devoted to national minorities. In reality, the ECMI found that although Ukrainian legislation prohibits discrimination and promotes equal rights, it is weak on implementation and contained almost no positive measures for the protection of national minorities such as preserving the language, culture and identity of particular groups, governmental social guarantees, or special conditions for exercising certain rights. The ECMI reported that controversial laws such as the 2017 Education Law (singled out by Putin in his essay) which forced minorities to spend more time studying Ukrainian elicited official protests not just from Russia but from other kin-states of minorities like Romania and Hungary (Solonenko, 2017, p.41).

The report contained many recommendations. These were both negative, such as amending the language and education laws that Putin critiqued, and positive including adopting a comprehensive law on national minorities that defines responsibilities and competencies. It also recommended institutional changes to help implementation, such as establishing sufficiently resourced and capable independent institutions to act as guarantors, and setting up effective consultative mechanisms with national minority representatives to discuss and address their legitimate concerns. Furthermore, ethnographic research in the Ukrainian-Russian borderlands around Kharkiv before the present conflict found that the emergence of border controls was a concern for many residents who identified with Russia (Zhurzhenko, 2013), and so facilitating trans-border movement for trade, study and family reasons would also be important.

Such proposals, which could be developed with bodies like the ECMI, could offer a way forward in the regional dispute about Donbas that protects both the territorial integrity of Ukraine and also the rights of national minorities who feel beleaguered by the nationalising regimes that have dominated Kyiv since 2014. It is a way to manage the peculiar problems of diversity that are inherent to the nation-state system and which have taken particular forms in the former Soviet Union.

2.3. National scale: Sovereign borders of Ukraine⁴

The third scale in which the Ukraine war can be understood from Putin’s text as a political geographical issue is the national scale and in particular the question of sovereign boundaries. A recurring theme in Putin’s essay is that the imposition of the modern nation-state model on Eastern Europe is artificial and has had significant negative consequences. Putin majors on the Soviet experiment of creating a federation of national-based union republics. The Bolsheviks, he argues, “embarked on reshaping boundaries... manipulating with [sic] territories to their liking, in disregard of people’s views” (Putin, 2021). The internal USSR “borders between republics were never seen as state borders” but became so unexpectedly in 1991. Because Ukraine and Russia had “developed as a single economic system over decades,” independence led to significant economic rupture and the decline of many industries.

⁴ Some material in this part of the essay is translated and developed from that previously published in Spanish and used with permission (Megoran, 2022).

Post-Soviet Ukrainian elites emphasised the difference of their people, and “began to mythologize and rewrite history,” editing out common Russia-Ukraine histories.

There is little in this that mainstream scholarship of the political geography of the Soviet Union would disagree with. Nationalism – the ideology that the world should be divided up into territorially-bordered states each representing and advancing the interests of their nation – is widely recognised as a modern phenomenon that creates nations where they did not exist before (Gellner, 1983), even if it be conceded (with Anthony Smith) that many modern nations had their roots in “fairly cohesive and self-consciously distinctive *ethnies*,” which later became the “ethnic cores” of subsequent nations (A. Smith, 1991, pp.37-38). Graham Smith (1996) showed how the Soviet Union devised a unique and paradoxical system of a supposedly non-national federation (the USSR) based on nationally-constituted union republics (the individual Soviet Socialist Republics, SSRs). This involved drawing brand new boundaries for the SSRs and imbuing them with constructed national historiographies, a process which Allworth (1990) sees as creating nations “where none existed before.”

Putin cites no references in his essay, but had he wanted to could have drawn on a wealth of Western scholarship to bolster his critique of the artificiality of Soviet borders and nations. For example, Hirsch (2005) and Kassembekova (2011) have shown how making internal SSR borders spatialized these national identities in the early Soviet period. Mankoff, in a searching critique of the conditions of post-Soviet Russian nationalism, nonetheless concedes that “the USSR’s model of ethno-territorial federalism aided the consolidation of Belarusian and Ukrainian national identities” within the new Belarusian and Ukrainian SSRs, “whose borders reflected political expediency more than ethnographic or historic consideration” (Mankoff, 2022, p.34). But where this scholarship would break company with Putin is his proposed remedy: the erasure of these boundaries and the crushing of these new nations by force. There are two legal reasons for this.

The first is the prohibition of seizing territory by military conquest. This is contrary to Article 2.4 of the United Nation’s founding charter, which states that “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.” Atzili (2007, p.142) reckons that this UN principle of ‘fixed borders’, or the invalidity of taking territory and changing borders by force, has only been breached 10 times since 1950, and none of these seizures have been widely recognised internationally. This principle has become a cornerstone of international law and there can be no way in which peace negotiations could compromise on it.

The second reason is because of the legal requirement of states to recognise international boundaries once formally agreed. It has become the assumption in international law of *uti possidetis* – that the colonial line becomes an international boundary unless otherwise established (Marston, 1994, p.149). Marston (1994, p.146) contends that “Once a boundary line has been established, whether or not it has been demarcated, its existence as a legal construction binding on the parties is no longer dependent on the continued existence of the treaty or treaty provision which established it.” International boundaries cannot be repudiated in a bilateral act. Because the Russian Federation as the principal successor state to the USSR (Crawford, 2006, pp.676-678) recognised the independence of Ukraine in 1991 it is legally obliged to accept the existence of Ukraine as a state with an international boundary. On various occasions, in treaties registered with the United Nations, the Russian Federation

formally recognised Ukraine. These include the 1994 Budapest Memorandum⁵ and the 1997 “Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership” in which Moscow recognised its obligation under various international charters to respect Ukraine’s “territorial integrity and confirm the inviolability of their common borders.”⁶ These borders were agreed in a Putin-era (2003) boundary delimitation treaty with Ukraine, which likewise was registered with the United Nations.⁷ Further, Kuzio reports that some Ukrainian authors have argued that if Russia seeks to annex Crimea’s 25,000 km² territory, then “perhaps Ukraine should demand the return of the 325,000 square kilometres of Ukrainian territory” transferred to Russia in 1924 (Kuzio, 1997, p.24). Upon independence in 1991 Estonia and Latvia claimed inter-war period boundaries, but later agreed to give these up for the more modest Soviet-era ones, which benefitted Russia (Levinsson, 2006, p.98). Russia maintains territory previously annexed from Finland. Not respecting *uti possidetis* could cut both ways for Russia.

2.3.1. *The Crimean Conundrum*

Russian aggression, therefore, must not be rewarded by legal recognition of sovereignty over territories seized by force. At the same time, however, creative solutions to particularly thorny issues can be devised, and these should be considered in relation to Crimea. In his essay, Putin claimed that “The people of Crimea and residents of Sevastopol made their historic choice,” to be part of Russia. Crimea was annexed by Russia from the Ottomans in 1783. Even Ukrainian nationalists in 1917 did not claim Crimea (Hunczak & Heide, 1977), with Lenin instead establishing it as the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) in the Russian Federation. This entity was dissolved in 1945, and in 1954 Crimea was transferred to Ukraine on the 300th anniversary of a treaty between Russia and Ukraine. There were good geographical reasons for this – being better connected to Ukraine than Russia, the transfer enabled the development of Crimea through the construction of the North Crimean Canal (Finnin, 2023). This transfer was widely seen in Russia as an illegitimate move and in a 1991 referendum 93% of Crimean voters opted to restore the ASSR, which some argued necessarily annulled the 1954 transfer (David & Duke, 1995). Subsequent research showed a growing disenchantment amongst Crimeans with Ukrainian sovereignty (Simonsen, 2000). According to the 2001 census, 58.3% of Crimea’s population identified as Russian and the early 1990s saw the growth of a Russian nationalist and separatist movement which was in part mollified by the granting of special status to the Russian and Crimean Tatar languages (Harris, 2020, p. 601). Recent field research in Crimea found that whilst elite bargains between Kyiv and Simferopol (Crimea’s capital) kept the 1990s pro-Russian irredentist movement in check, this settlement was put under tension by President Yushchenko’s Ukrainianization of language and his valorization of World War 2-era Ukrainian ultranationalists (as we saw above). This bargain eventually broke down over the 2013-14 Euromaidan protests and subsequent power vacuum, when local

⁵ UN Treaty 52241. “Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” (1994, p.169).

⁶ Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. (Kiev, 31st May, 1997). UN treaty registration number: 52240.

⁷ Treaty between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the Ukrainian-Russian State border (with annex and maps). (Kiev, 28 January 2003). UN treaty registration number: 54132.

elites lobbied for annexation by Russia (Fumagalli & Rymarenko, 2022). Although some scholars dismiss the annexation as “undisguised aggression” (Dnistrianskyi et al., 2022, p. 119), other research subsequent to the 2014 annexation agrees with Fumagalli and Rymarenko in finding significant support in Crimea for Russian annexation (O’Loughlin & Toal, 2019), especially after the Euromaidan protests and the overthrow of the pro-Russian government (Katchanovski, 2015, p. 86). The replacement more-nationalistic president Petro Poroshenko downgraded the status of the Russian language in Crimea, provoking pro-Russian demonstrations in the peninsula and calls for Russian intervention (Harris, 2020, p.601). When this intervention came it was, claims Mankoff (2022, p.37) “aided by the defection of members of the Ukrainian military.”

Given this history and substantial apparent local support for annexation, Russia would be unwilling to renounce its claims over Crimea. Further, Ukraine would also be unwilling to cede it under threat. This ‘Crimea conundrum’ (O’Loughlin & Toal, 2019) seems to be an impasse. However, that is only the case if sovereignty is seen to be a zero-sum game and in reality there are a number of ways in which a compromise could be reached that recognises *de facto* Russian rule and *de jure* Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea. These options include de-facto acceptance of the status quo which enables a certain degree of cooperation whilst formally holding back recognition (the FRG approached the GDR in this way during the Cold War), a condominium, or autonomy within Ukraine under international observation (Henrikson, 2022, p.30) and with Russia formally recognised as a partner. Perhaps more realistic is territorial leasing, defined by Okunev as “a sovereign territory temporarily transferred to another state for possession or use” (Okunev, 2019, p.220). In recent times Russia has made a number of territorial leases. A Soviet-era deal to lease part of the Saimaa Canal to Finland was extended in the post-Soviet period to 2063, bringing the canal under Finnish jurisdiction but allowing passage to Russian vessels. Of more direct relevance is the case of the Kazakhstani city of Baikonur, which “is the largest leased territory in the world and has a unique political and legal status” (Okunev, 2019, p.222). Because of its importance to the Russian space programme, in 1992 Russia secured a lease on the territory until 2050. Kazakhstan exercises sovereignty over the city, but it is subject to Russian jurisdiction and Russian courts, schools, and hospitals function on its territory. However, although formally a Russian city its legislative and executive authorities are not represented in Russia’s Federation Council, and the head of the city administration is appointed by the presidents of the two countries. Such a model might lend itself to help resolving this aspect of the current conflict. Ukraine could lease Crimea to Russia for a given period, with provision made for shared governance and consultation on relevant issues such as the protection of the civil, cultural and linguistic rights of non-Russian national groups in the peninsular (including Ukrainians and Tatars, given that research indicates that the indigenous Tatar population largely opposed the Russian annexation (O’Loughlin & Toal, 2019). This would allow Ukraine to avoid the humiliation of formally ceding formal sovereignty, Russia to avoid the humiliation of evacuating control of the peninsular, and the local population to remain under Russian jurisdiction but with safeguards for pro-Kyiv populations. Such arrangements could include elements of shared sovereignty to deal with day-to-day geographical and intercommunal issues arising in Crimea.

There is precedent for such an arrangement here. For example, in 2003 Russia and Ukraine signed an agreement on terms of use of Kerch Strait at the mouth of the Sea of Azov. Problems arose when Russian authorities started to build a causeway from their shore to the island of Tuzla. This was controlled by Ukraine, but had been attached to the Russian coast until 1925 when a storm removed sediment forming the connecting spit. Ukrainians protested and began reinforcing the population on the small island. The agreement formed meant both countries regarded the Sea of Azov and Kerch Strait as internal waters of the two countries and make joint decisions on their use – leading to shared control of a canal through the Kerch strait (Prescott & Triggs, 2008, p.5). This example shows that, in problems arising in the future due to the geography of Ukraine and Russia, there are precedents for creative solutions sharing sovereignty when we move beyond seeing sovereignty as a zero-sum affair.

2.4. International: European security and geopolitics

Fourthly and finally, at the international scale geopolitics features as a significant element of Putin’s essay. This is not, however, the determinism of writers like Marshall who are obsessed with plains, mountains and rivers: unlike them Putin makes no reference to topography. Rather, it is with the cartographic imaginations of Europe as protected or threatened by military and political blocs with which Putin is concerned. He views Ukraine as a pawn in the geopolitical designs of the west. “Step by step, Ukraine was dragged into a dangerous geopolitical game aimed at turning Ukraine into a barrier between Europe and Russia, a springboard against Russia,” he writes. In particular, he signals the EU and especially NATO as the chief culprits:

We are witnessing not just complete dependence but direct external control, including the supervision of the Ukrainian authorities, security services and armed forces by foreign advisers, military “development” of the territory of Ukraine and deployment of NATO infrastructure. It is no coincidence that the aforementioned flagrant law on “indigenous peoples” was adopted under the cover of large-scale NATO exercises in Ukraine (Putin, 2021).

Putin is particularly concerned about NATO expansion. But, he complains, “every time we were told that Russia had nothing to do with it and that the issue concerned only the EU and Ukraine. De facto Western countries rejected Russia's repeated calls for dialogue.” Putin’s slippage between NATO, the EU, and ‘Western countries’ is illuminating of the fourth political geographical scale at which this conflict – and thus by extension, achieving a negotiated peace – takes place. Given Putin’s apparent preoccupation with NATO, the story of its expansion is worth exploring in more detail.

Headquartered in Brussels, NATO was formed in 1949 primarily to counter the Soviet Union (Park, 1986). With the end of the Cold War its formal *raison d’être* evaporated and there appeared to be reasonable grounds to retire NATO and devise a fresh European security architecture for a new age. There were new ideas aplenty. For example, in his 1991 Association of American Geographers’ presidential address about how to build a peaceful world order in the aftermath of the Cold War, Saul Cohen urged the USA to “strengthen global interdependence through partnerships of

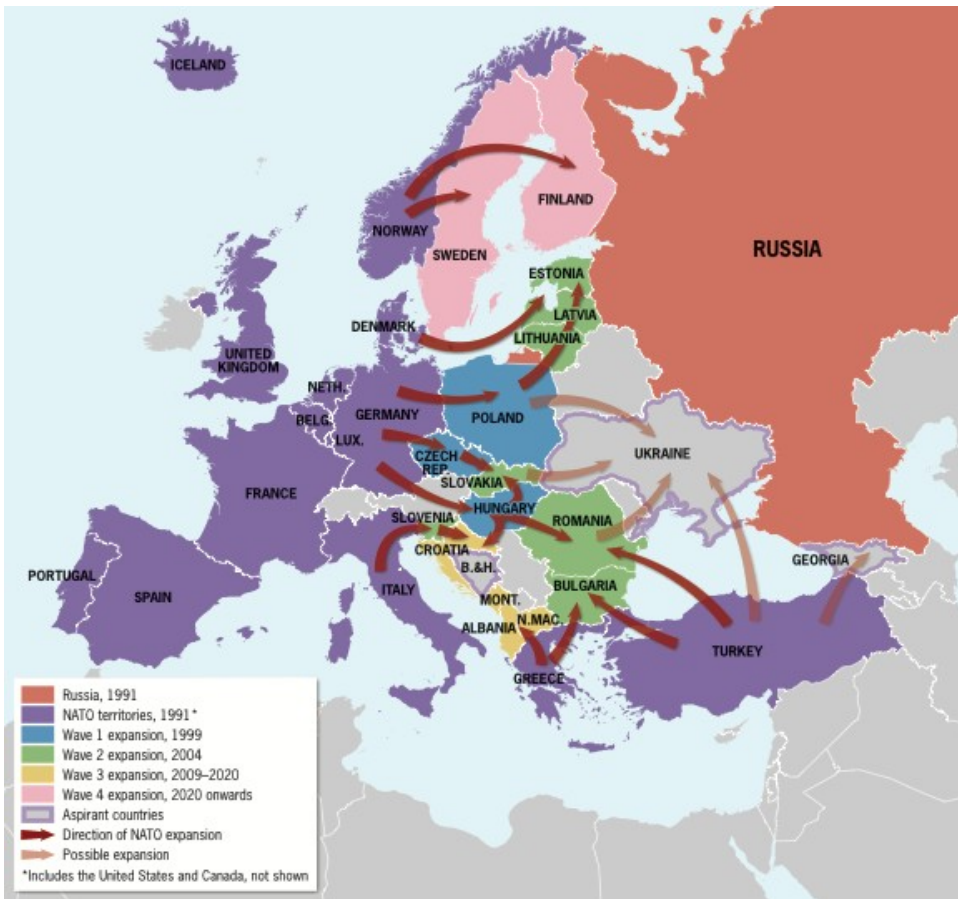
interest” by fostering former Socialist East Europe as a ‘Gateway region’ that would mediate relations between Russia and NATO (Cohen, 1991, pp.551, 571-552). But, as Robert Hunter (former US ambassador to NATO) writes, “At no point, however, did the United States and other NATO allies take seriously the declared Russian preference that NATO itself be dissolved as the Warsaw Pact had been, and that Russia would play an equal part in creating a new institution to provide for security across the continent” (Hunter, 2022, p.9). Instead, the US pushed for NATO’s expansion. Why?

Dogan (2022, chapter 5) argues that the administration of George Bush Snr refused to pursue NATO expansion because it had promised Mikhail Gorbachev not to expand the alliance “one inch East” if Russia allowed a united Germany to be part of the alliance. This is a contested claim with no documentary evidence, but Russian elites seem to think they were promised this. However, Dogan continues, pressure for NATO enlargement grew from a number of sources with the Democratic capture of the White House by Bill Clinton in 1994. These included hawks in the Republican Party, leaders of post-Socialist Central European states and their diaspora lobbies in the USA, and US military contractors who formed the ‘Committee to Expand NATO.’ This pressure culminated in the 1996 passing of the NATO Enlargement Facilitation Act.

There was far from universal support in the West, however, as represented by a striking intervention from retired US diplomat and historian, George Kennan, whose 1947 *Foreign Affairs* article on ‘The sources of Soviet conduct’ was influential in formulating US Cold War policy of ‘containing’ Russia (Kennan, 1947). In 1997 the 92-year-old Kennan wrote in the *New York Times* his opinion that “expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era” (Kennan, 1997). He regarded this move as both unnecessary (in that Russia posed no apparent threat to the USA), and unfortunate in that it would squander the “hopeful possibilities engendered by the end of the cold war.” He suggested that it might have a number of negative consequences: inflaming “nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies” in Russia; hampering “the development of Russian democracy”; restoring the “atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations”; hindering nuclear weaponry reduction negotiations; and impelling “Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”

Kennan’s warnings went unheeded, with NATO expanding eastwards in 1999 and again in a second wave of 2004 (see figure 1). A turning point was the alliance’s 2008 Bucharest Summit, which declared that “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO” and “agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO” (The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 2008). Following this a third wave of expansion brought other post-socialist states into membership (Finland and Sweden subsequently joined in fourth wave in response to Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine). Kennan’s argument was restated by realist thinker John Mearsheimer, who argued in 2014 that “the Ukraine crisis is the West’s fault.” He claimed that western belief in the inevitable triumph of liberal democracy blinded them to the extent to which NATO and EU expansion were seen as a geopolitical threat by Putin, and eventually the 2103 overthrow of elected Ukrainian President Yanukovych by pro-western elements triggered Russian annexation of Crimea. NATO’s subsequent response of promising increased military aid “will only make a bad situation worse”, he predicted (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.87).

Map 1. Expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe



Source: Author.

Robert Hunter, US Ambassador to NATO between 1993 and 1998 when expansion was top of his in-tray, presents a more nuanced version of this argument. He contends that both the Bush Sr and Clinton administrations handled Russia with tact and respect, but that relations deteriorated under the George Bush Jr administration: “the prevailing view in the George W. Bush administration was that, since the Soviet Union had lost the Cold War, the US and NATO could do as they pleased,” he argues (Hunter, 2022, p.13). This attitude led Bush not only to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and deploy previously banned weaponry to East Europe, but in a second wave of NATO expansion (see figure 1) to accept some of Russia’s immediate or closer neighbours to join. Russia, claims Hunter, was “insulted at being strategically dismissed and threatened to deploy new offensive weapons,” and so suspended its observance of the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, citing NATO’s expansion and its plan for missile defences in Central Europe (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.14).

An argument can thus be made from sources across the western political spectrum that NATO expansion has not only made the continent less safe but has contributed

to the outbreak of its most destructive war since 1945. Almost everything Kennan warned of in 1997 has come to pass. That what he and others set out anticipates Kremlin propaganda cannot be a criticism of their writing: the act of seeking to critically understand and explain dangerous geopolitical reasoning should in no way be confused with its justification.

2.4.1. Geopolitics and peace in Europe

If NATO expansion has been a factor in the Ukraine-Russian war, what can be done about it to bring about peace?

The hard-line response is that NATO is a voluntary membership organisation and any state which fulfils membership criteria should be free to join. Many Eastern European political elites (with widespread popular support) actively sought membership of NATO and the EU. They hoped that this would provide prosperity and, as Smoleński and Dutkiewicz (2022) remind us, protection from the power which had proved their main existential threat in modern times – Russia. This is eminently rational: 2022 showed that NATO did not invade Eastwards but rather Russia invaded Ukraine, and in response other states like Finland and Sweden sought membership for their future protection.

However, the recognition that NATO did not ‘invade’ Eastern Europe and that there was a desire amongst many elements of Ukrainian society to align with NATO and the West does not negate the fact Moscow sees expansion as a threat and that it is thus an element in the conflict. How Russia perceives threat and how political actors in Brussels, Kyiv and Washington understand and respond to this does matter. In 2014 Russia’s Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, explained his country’s logic in Ukraine. Like Kennan, he lamented that, “the chance to overcome the dark legacy of the previous era, and decisively erase the dividing lines was missed” (Lavrov, 2015, pp.12-13). He blamed Western expansionism, including the EU but particularly NATO, for this. “Assurances that the North Atlantic Alliance would not expand eastward—which had been given to the leadership of the Soviet Union,” Lavrov claimed, “turned out to be empty words, for NATO’s infrastructure has continuously drawn closer to Russian borders” (2015, p.13). He said that despite repeated Russian warnings that Kiev must not be forced to “choose one vector of its foreign policy...” (*i.e.* make a clear alignment with either Russian or Western geopolitical structures), “... We were not heard.”

This points to the alternative option: of creating a better security environment in Europe, one which hears the concerns of both Russia and the East European states that feel threatened by it, and builds a framework for the development of long-term, mutually-beneficial, and stable relations. Two versions of this could be envisaged, a reforming and a radical one. The more modest reforming possibility would be to broadly accept the existing military, political and economic architectures of the continent, including the EU and NATO, but reworking them in a way that does a better job of creating security for all. For practical purposes this could mean maintaining NATO as it currently stands but providing guarantees about both NATO and Russian military deployments. In December 2021 Russia floated two draft treaties on Russian-Western relations along these lines. Recognising the need for collective security in Europe, they stated that “an effective response to contemporary challenges and threats to security in our interdependent world requires joint efforts” of both Russia

and NATO (Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, 2022a). The proposals included confidence building and transparency measures, establishing direct emergency hotlines, pulling back missile and troop deployments, and a freeze on further NATO expansion (Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, 2022b). This might approximate Russia accepting waves two and three of NATO expansion as realities on the ground, but returning US, British and other forces back to the borders of wave one NATO expansion and envisioning no subsequent waves. This essentially envisions a reset of relations and troop deployments to the Clinton-era, perhaps validating Robert Hunter's analysis of the significance of George W. Bush's policy change. Because they were dismissed out of hand by NATO powers, however, we shall never know whether these proposals were smokescreens to justify aggression or were genuine attempts to avoid the full-scale war of 2022.

The more radical version would be the abolition of NATO and the creation of a brand-new security structure for Europe. This could be state-led: Emmanuel Macron's recently-convened European Political Community had its origins in a proposal by late French president Francois Mitterrand to form a post-Cold War forum encompassing the EEC, Russia, and central and eastern European countries (Martinez, 2022). But the creation of a new security arrangement could also be driven by the active citizenry of Europe. A precedent exists for this in 1980s activism across the continent by groups such as European Nuclear Disarmament (END). Recognising that realist geopolitics and war fever on both sides of the 'iron curtain' was an existential threat to Europe, this group of activists sought to work for a demilitarised continent free of both Soviet and US weapons of mass destruction. It involved networks of peace activists, academics, and Christian pastors that eschewed the East-West divide and, as Dalby has suggested, had a significant role in rethinking European security by influencing policymakers and ensuring that the Cold War ended without the violent conflagration that so many had feared (Dalby, 1993). E.P. Thompson (a founder of END) wrote that "Against a strategy which envisages Europe as a 'theatre' of limited nuclear warfare, we propose to make in Europe a theatre of peace" (Thompson & Smith, 1980, p.59) not waiting for state leaders to change things but ordinary citizens acting "as if a united, neutral and pacific Europe already exists" (Thompson & Smith, 1980, p.225). As Europe again faces the spectre of nuclear war, such a "pacific geopolitical" (Megoran, 2010) reimagining of Europe could help lay the foundation of long-term peace on the continent.

Conclusion

A century ago, British foreign secretary Lord Curzon chaired the 1923 Conference of Lausanne to end the Greco-Turkish war in the last of the post-WWI peace treaties. As well as territorial adjustments, Curzon proposed mass forced population transfer in order to "unmix the population" (Ther, 2014, p.77). Hailed at the time as a triumph of peacemaking (Conlin & Ozavci, 2023), we now name it 'ethnic cleansing.'

A generation later, after the Second World war, Denmark rejected the opportunity to resolve the long-running Schleswig-Holstein borderland dispute with Germany by this same mix of territorial adjustment or population exchanges. Instead, it worked with the Federal Republic of Germany to issue the 1955 Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations. These accepted the territorial status quo, but built in extensive mechanisms

to protect the linguistic, cultural, and civic rights of borderlanders who identified as Danish in Germany and German in Denmark. This helped defuse tensions and create a remarkable story of coexistence in a region that was once the byword for the age of nationalism's intractable ethno-territorial disputes.

Both of these settlements applied geographical solutions to the problem of what happens when you try to create territorial nation states in borderlands where ethnic geographies do not match new political geographies. This problem almost inevitably arises under nationalism, the modern European idea that the earth should be divided up into discrete territorial units each congruent with an ethnically-defined nation. Virtually all the wars in Europe since 1991 have been about grappling with this question in the wake of the break-up of a multi-ethnic socialist federation, from those in the former Soviet Union including Transdnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgia, and Chechnya, to those in the former Yugoslavia. The Russo-Ukraine war is not exceptional in this regard: this article has suggested that precisely this question is central to the conflict, and that Putin's litany of grievances can be read in part as listing a series of disputes at intersecting scales of local, regional, national and international political geographies. These disputes are in themselves similar to numerous other ones, and creative geographical solutions can be found to all of them. Addressing them will be crucial to success of negotiations that will be inevitable if a lasting peace is to be concluded to end this war.

It is important to state some caveats. First, geography alone does not explain the origins of this conflict. Wars are always multi-causal and here I offer only a lens on an aspect of the conflict that has been poorly appreciated. Second, I am not pretending to offer a blueprint for ending the war, which is a diplomatic question. Third, this does not claim to be comprehensive catalogue of issues to be addressed in a resolution. Beyond a mere ceasefire, it will be necessary to find a way to move from what Rev. Martin Luther King called a degraded concept of peace as the "absence of some negative force" like war, to "peace as the presence of positive good," marked by "justice, goodwill, brotherhood, love" (King, 1956). Justice for the victims of the numerous war crimes committed will require identifying and holding to account those responsible, agreeing reparations, returning abductees, restoring stolen property, and creating the framework for reconciliation that will prevent such a war in the future.

Even with these caveats, I recognise that some will balk at the attempt to understand this war through political geographical analysis. They prefer to view Russia as what Mankoff (2022, p.269) calls an "ideological grievance state," trapped by a warped vision of history. The irony of this reading is that although it offers a historical interpretation of Russian politics, it actually de-historicises and de-politicises the war by placing its comprehension outside the realms of both, to be resolved only by missile, gun, and bayonet. Rather, I suggest that by seeing geography as a crucial constitutive element of the war, we can not only understand it more clearly in a broader stream of nationalist European history but also mine extensive resources and experiences to help resolve the conflict and move towards the lasting peace that that has so far eluded post-cold Europe.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank John Agnew, Alan Henriksen, Fiona McConell, Davd Saunders, and Gerard Toal for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay. I know that they would not all agree with everything I have written here, and all opinions expressed are obviously my own. I am particularly grateful to Heriberto Cairo Carou for his encouragement to me to write for *Geopolítica(s)*, which has emerged as an exciting forum to discuss dissenting and radical ideas.

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