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Seven hundred thirty days

Could the war in Ukraine have been avoided?

There are certain wars in history that continue to intrigue researchers with two specific questions: why did they happen, and could they have been avoided? It is quite conceivable that, at least in the European context, the Russia-Ukraine war will be listed along with the classic examples of such conflicts, such as the Peloponnesian and the First World War.

Much like many of the other wars waged in the past, this too was the result of a combination of circumstances and causes on different levels: from the crisis of the entire international order to the peculiarities of the Russian leadership's perception of the world. Some of these circumstances might have been different, but the mix of trends could not have been changed. Coincidences, patterns, strategic pitfalls and self-fulfilling prophecies — all of this came together and blew up in an international security crisis for the world and a war of survival for Ukraine.

Is war futile?

Hugo Grotius, one of the founding fathers of contemporary international law, considered wars pointless and devoid of sense. Recognising that they were a consequence of incompatibilities in national interests and therefore a natural occurrence, Grotius primarily saw them as an erroneous and ineffective instrument of state policy. In his view, it was always better to resolve disagreements and conflicts in some other way than through wars: with the help of arbitration, mediation, sortition or even symbolic duel. The result will be the same, but the price paid will be incomparably lower.

There have been many people, less well-known than Hugo Grotius, with similar views on war. On the eve of almost every major war, there have been philosophers making a convincing case for its futility. Over history, the price of war increased, and the invention of nuclear weapons saw it skyrocket. The world is more integrated and interdependent than ever — so why would there be war?

Within the realist view, war serves as an instrument, the use of which is a question of balancing risks and opportunities.

Yet, despite the irrational nature and sometimes quite obvious futility, wars still happen. And there are, of course, other views than those of Grotius. Realists, for instance, advise states to focus on the balance of power and assess the realities of international security, and not to be guided solely by their own desires and idealistic notions. States can only do what the existing balance of power allows; and miscalculations can be extremely costly for those who take the principle of equality of states too seriously.

It is no coincidence that supporters of precisely this perspective have been paying so much attention to the West's erroneous approach to what was initially referred to as the 'Ukraine crisis'. In their view, the West's promises of an open door to NATO gave Ukraine too much false hope, which divorced its foreign policy from bleaker realities and, ultimately, created too many risks for Kyiv. Moreover, ignoring Russia's interests upset the balance of power and left Ukraine face-to-face with a direct challenge to its very existence.

For realists, the state's priority should be to look after its own security and, among other things, avoid war, especially the type of war where the prospects of victory are poor, even if this means making concessions. Within this world view, war serves as an instrument, the use of which is a question of balancing risks and opportunities. It is the correct management of these very risks that forms the basis for international security and can reduce the number of wars by imposing too high a price on states — especially the big ones because they are the more aggressive.

Lessons learned by Russia

It is likely that, for Putin, the price of invading Ukraine did not seem too high — and this is the first lesson of the past two years. Moscow drew conclusions from the events of the summer of 2014, when, under pressure of the threat of sanctions, it was forced to cut its losses and retreat. In the eight years since then, Russia has continued to strengthen its resilience to economic sanctions imposed by the West and the success of these efforts has significantly increased the Kremlin's willingness to take risks.

The second lesson that Russia learnt is that the West is not willing to pay too high a price for Ukrainian security. The eight years between 2014 and 2022 have brought Ukraine no closer to a true alliance with the West. NATO membership was just a topic for electoral slogans and

diplomatic rhetoric, not a real prospect.

The nature of relations between Russian and Ukraine, Kyiv's lack of allies, as well as the West's inability to impose a high price on Russia for the war created the conditions under which the Kremlin made the decision to invade Ukraine.

Arms shipments initiated by US President Donald Trump were more of a symbolic move than anything else, intended as a substitute for real security guarantees. The US resolved 'the patron's dilemma' in favour of simpler financial support instead of seriously considering the option of providing Ukraine with security guarantees. Ukraine thus continued to be in the 'grey zone' of security, making it a convenient and weak rival for Russia.

The third lesson for the Russians might be that their main strategy of weakening Ukraine seemed broadly correct. This strategy was formulated as soon as the realists in the Kremlin realised that there would be no return to a pro-Russian Ukraine in the foreseeable future. This meant Ukraine had to be perceived as a threat, and Russia had to undermine its defence, economic and social potential as much as possible. The culmination of these attempts was the invasion.

Many historical parallels can be drawn here, from Sparta and Athens to the Second Republic and France; but once this type of relationship arises, the logic of the security dilemma greatly increases the likelihood of war. The nature of relations between Russia and Ukraine, Kyiv's lack of allies, as well as the West's inability to impose a high price on Russia for the war created the conditions under which the Kremlin made the decision to invade Ukraine.

An unavoidable war?

Supporters of Grotius' views would probably point to the fact that even under conditions like these, war could still have been avoided by resorting to negotiations. Obviously, the basis for these talks should be the Minsk agreements, in one interpretation or another. The optimal interpretation of these agreements for Ukraine would have resulted in reestablishing formal control over the occupied territories in the east of the country, with the conditionality of *de facto* control, maintaining Russia's levers of intervention in Ukrainian political processes and removing the Crimea question from the equation with all the advantages this would bring for Russia.

In theory, the negotiations could be an alternative to war; but in practice,

there were serious obstacles. In almost eight years of various rounds of negotiations, the parties have not even been able to achieve a level of trust that would have made it possible to establish a ceasefire. Strategically, neither side could regard the Minsk compromise as final. Russia's annexation of Crimea had long-term destructive consequences, not only for bilateral relations but also for the security and political environment of the two countries. Since 2014, there have been no real opportunities for agreements between the parties on any of the platforms or tracks.

The war could only have been avoided either by means of quickly and reliably providing Ukraine with genuine security guarantees, or at the price of such large-scale concessions to Russia on Ukraine's part that its statehood would have been threatened.

International partners have also failed to play an effective role. Germany's and France's mediation efforts in the Normandy format did not prove to be useful for various reasons. Their efforts lacked credibility; and it was weak mediation in the sense that there were no power resources or leverage underpinning it. Overall, the EU failed the test of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and, as a result, faces much more serious security challenges. Meaningful negotiations, which could be an alternative to the war in this situation, required a combination of numerous factors, each of which was rather unlikely.

This war is a risky lottery for everyone involved. Putin took a risk by increasing the stakes and, above all, by deciding to invade in the first place. Zelenskyy took risks too, dismissing the pressure, threats and demands from the Kremlin — whether this was because he underestimated Russia's readiness to go to war, overestimated the willingness of Ukraine's partners to help the country indefinitely, or whether he was convinced that concessions were a recipe for failure, and the chances of winning a war were high enough. Only time will tell who lost that lottery.

This war was ultimately caused by a combination of three key factors: Russia's strategic impasse following the annexation of Crimea in 2014; Putin's uncertainty about whose side time was on; and Ukraine finding itself in a 'grey zone' without allies or security guarantees. This could only have been avoided either by means of quickly and reliably providing Ukraine with genuine security guarantees, which could only be done by the US; or at the price of such large-scale concessions to Russia on Ukraine's part that its statehood would have been threatened. This price was infinitely high for Kyiv. Moreover, Moscow was probably only prepared to accept it up to a certain point in time. By mid-2021, it was already too late.



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