

Quo vadis, Ukraine?

Is Ukraine once again becoming a contested borderland in Europe?

Ukraine translates as "borderland". For centuries, it has repeatedly been the land on which European powers have drawn their borders! War has been raging in eastern Ukraine since March 2014.

The daily report of the "OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM)" of 24 January 2022 reported:

- In Donetsk region, between 21.01. and 23.01.22, there were 132 border violations and 19 explosions ...
- In Lugansk region, between 21.01. and 23.01.22, there were 191 border violations and 34 explosions ...",

Death toll since March 2014: 14,000 dead.
This is daily routine.

Back story

After Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign the Association Agreement with the EU in November 2013, under pressure from Putin, hundreds of thousands demonstrated in Ukraine for a pro-European course for the country. The protests on Kiev's Independence Square (Maidan) continued for months, leading to the ouster of Yanukovich and new elections for president (15.05.2014) and parliament (27.10.2014).

On 26 February 2014, Putin alerted large units of the Russian armed forces "to check their combat readiness". On 27.02.14, armed special forces without rank or nationality insignia occupied strategically important points on the Crimean peninsula as well as the parliament there. On 1 March 2014, Putin asked the Russian Federation Council for permission to deploy Russian forces in Ukraine, which was granted that same day.

On 18 March 2014, Vladimir Putin signed a treaty on the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation. The annexation of the peninsula had been preceded by an internationally controversial referendum. Neither the referendum nor the annexation of Crimea are recognised internationally to this day.

After the annexation of Crimea, which was contrary to international law, riots with Russian special forces were unleashed in the cities of Kharkiv, Odessa, Mariupol, Luhansk and Donetsk, including their surroundings, in order to destabilise the entire south and east of Ukraine. While the situation calmed down in Odessa, Kharkiv and Mariupol due to the lack of support from the population, armed so-called people's militias became active in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. In an interview, the Russian intelligence officer Igor Girkin stated in the SZ of 22 November 14: *"I pulled the trigger for the war. If our unit had not come across the border, everything would have turned out the way it did in Kharkiv and Odessa"*.

The MINSK I and MINSK II agreements (negotiations in the so-called Normandy format: Ukraine, Russia, France, Germany) attempted to pacify the situation in eastern Ukraine.

However, the agreements were never realised and failed already because of the basic demand for a stable ceasefire. The OSCE observer force, which has been deployed since 2014, reports almost daily violations of the ceasefire, shootings, injuries and deaths.

Current situation

In spring 2021, strong Russian combat troops (48,000), Russian support troops (37,000) began deploying along the border with Ukraine as part of a Russian manoeuvre. Approximately 15,000 so-called separatists led by Russian command personnel and foreign mercenaries are available for the fighting in the Donbass.

In addition, large Russian units have been deployed to Belarus since mid-December for a large-scale manoeuvre along the border with Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania. The total numbers vary, depending on the source. What is undisputed is that at least 100,000 Russian soldiers have now been deployed near the border with Ukraine. Along the Ukrainian border and in the Donbas region, the tense situation between Russia and Ukraine has further intensified.

Current political reactions

Putin has reinforced his rejection of an independent Ukraine in an essay published in July 2021, claiming that Ukrainians and Russians are "one people" and that "true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia."

In December 2021, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy accuses Russia of planning a coup in his country. In another context, he expresses his desire to receive concrete dates for Ukraine's accession to NATO.

A video phone call between US President Biden and Kremlin leader Putin does not lead to a breakthrough.

The NATO-Russia Council meets in Brussels on 12 January 2022 and confirms a risk of escalation. NATO warns Russia against attack.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov rejected "anti-Russia hysteria" during talks on 21 January 2022 with US Secretary of State Blinken. Russia is not threatening anyone and is not invading any country," he said in reference to the West's fears that "an invasion of Ukraine may be imminent. Blinken replied, "You look at what is visible to all."

Russia's concrete demands known so far

Lavrov demanded on 21 January 2022: "... *Russia demands, among other things, that the US, like NATO, guarantee not to admit any more former Soviet republics into the alliance. Also, NATO would have to withdraw all troops from Eastern Europe and the US would have to transfer nuclear weapons stationed in Europe to its own territory.*"

Lavrov bases his demands on the regulations of the European Peace Order, which was drawn up and signed by 57 states (including Russia) after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s.

The European Peace Order - a Europe of value-oriented politics

In the commemorative declaration of ASTANA (Summit 2010), paragraph 3 emphasises:

The security of each participating State is inextricably linked to the security of all others. Each participating State has an equal right to security. We reaffirm the inherent right of each participating State to choose freely its security arrangements, including alliances, or to modify them as they evolve...".

The signatory states committed themselves to political action (domestic and foreign) that is in accordance with

- the Charter of the UN,
- human rights,
- the principles of democracy and the rule of law,
- the right of self-determination of all peoples,
- the preservation of territorial integrity,
- peaceful conflict resolution and
- the free choice of alliances.
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Milestones in the development of an "independent Ukraine

1. In a referendum on 1 December 1991, the Ukrainian people voted overwhelmingly for independence within the existing borders, a parliamentary democracy based on the rule of law and a free market economy.

With independence, the treaty with the Soviet Union (SU) was terminated, leading to the dissolution of the SU. In the 1997 Basic Treaty, Russia recognised the borders with Ukraine. (Russia was granted rights of use for the port of Sevastopol in Crimea via special agreements).

2. (Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan came into national possession of nuclear weapons with the dissolution of the SU. With 1 800 nuclear warheads, Ukraine became the third most powerful nuclear power in the world.

With the Budapest Agreement of 1994, Ukraine undertook to hand over all nuclear weapons to Russia or to destroy them. In return for renouncing nuclear weapons, the signatory states Russia, the USA, Great Britain and China undertook to guarantee Ukraine's sovereignty within its existing borders.

Russia has broken the agreement, the other signatory states have not brought in their guarantee of sovereignty.

3. All Ukrainian presidents since 1991 have had the goal of becoming a member of the EU.

Under President Yushchenko, the Action Plan for the preparation of the EU Association Agreement was adopted in December 2004 and slowly implemented over hurdle-laden years.

Putin declared Ukraine's signing of the Association Agreement a "geopolitical danger". It would contradict the strategic goals of the Eurasian Union (Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus, with Moscow as the centre), could become a precedent for the post-Soviet space, would drastically reduce the attractiveness of the Eurasian development model, would bring economic disadvantages and new borders between East and West.

The EU in turn demanded a clear choice from Ukraine: either EU Association Agreement or membership in the Eurasian Union.

In August 2013, Russia imposed trade sanctions against Ukraine with a short-term halt of all imports to force Ukraine's membership in the Eurasian Union.

Nevertheless, in October 2013, the Ukrainian parliament passed the so-called "European laws (electoral law, judicial system, anti-corruption laws ...).

On 22 November 2013, under Russian pressure, Yanukovich refused to sign the Association Agreement.

This triggered demonstrations on the Maidan (see above back story), which ultimately led to the flight of Yanukovich in February 2014 and the re-election of the president (25.05.14) and the parliament (27.10.14). With an open letter, the writer Yuri Andrukhovich described the goal of the Maidan as "... The Ukrainian people are fighting for the values of a free and just society ..." Not membership in the EU was the goal for the Ukrainian people, but "... living European values"! Thus, the new elections resulted in pro-Western and pro-European parties gaining a clear majority in parliament. In free self-determination, the people voted in favour of Western orientation, although as recently as 2012 polls showed only about 40 % in favour of EU membership.

Putin has thus not achieved his goal of "integrating Ukraine into the Eurasian Union determined by Moscow". The economic pressure in 2013 with the import ban on Ukrainian goods had a rather counterproductive effect. European values" were more important to the Ukrainian people.

4. **The annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014, which was against international law, and the still ongoing war in eastern Ukraine did not further divide Ukrainians as Putin wanted, but they showed solidarity as Ukrainians. Solidarised into a "We don't want a new tsar, we don't want Stalin, we don't want Putin. We want to live free and independent, as a good neighbour to Russia." But also solidarised in a new need for security:**

In an opinion poll on "how respondents would vote to join NATO in a referendum".

=> 2009 21 % for NATO, 60 % against, 19 % undecided

=> 2020 65% for NATO, 28% against, 7% undecided

Summary

1. Russia, as a signatory state of the European peace order, has denounced the values of this peace order with breaches of treaties and aggressive foreign policy.

Domestically, writes Boris Reitschuster in "Putin's Democracy", a "controlled democracy has developed into Putinism with: Gleichschaltung of parliament, judiciary and media; anti-Western sentiment, warmongering and hurrah patriotism, loss of the rule of law, subversion of the separation of powers ..."

Russia as a whole practices "power-based politics" according to the Leninian principle "law is what is useful to power".

2. Ukraine became vulnerable due to the renunciation of nuclear weapons and the non-compliance with the Budapest Agreement by the signatory states. It was massively damaged by military force in 2014 (14,000 deaths and territorial losses) and is effectively in a state of war in eastern Ukraine.

Economically, Ukraine has experienced an upswing despite the war, which has already been described elsewhere.

The democratisation process is so advanced that tolerating a totalitarian system has become unthinkable.

The Ukrainian people have decided in favour of the Western orientation and the value-oriented policy of the European peace order. It wants to be embedded in a reliable alliance system because of the experienced Russian power politics.

3. The deployment of troops and the Russian threats are directed against Ukraine and against the European peace order. Consequently, ways must be found to exclude hostilities, to protect Ukraine and to guarantee the preservation of the European peace order. The preservation of the European peace order is imperative, said the new Foreign Minister, Ms Andrea Baerbock, on several occasions.

But successful deterrence requires more than lip service!

4. For a successful policy of détente, it must be clarified what Russia actually wants: to be a member and partner in the European peace order or to pursue a power policy in hard-lined spheres of influence as in the days of the Cold War?

The Ukrainian people have decided in favour of the European order of values with all the claims that arise from it. **Europe must recognise this and safeguard it in its alliance policy.**

5. In further steps, a peaceful coexistence with a peaceful Russia must become possible. Here, a rethinking of the "either-or rule (either EU member or member of the Eurasian Union)" rigidly applied by the EU in 2013 on the basis of Putin's desired common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok could possibly open the door to a reduction of the conflict.

Thus, Ukraine, freed from the role of border country, protected by NATO, could become a bridge!