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Eastern Europe in 2022: The main hotbed of the future world war?

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Summary

The reluctance of global actors to accommodate each other's interests, alongside attempts to revise the rules of the game and create a new normal in international relations that would benefit them, led the world to the Russia–Ukraine war. It rendered irrevocable the transformation of the European security landscape that started a while ago and gave rise to a framework where international norms and realities can be adjusted forcefully.

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These developments did not come as a surprise in 2022, but followed the trends previously outlined in numerous Minsk Dialogue publications: regional militarization, disruption of military transparency measures, hostile rhetoric, and politico-military confrontation. For example, in last year's annual policy paper "Security in Eastern Europe in 2021: Balkanization of the region" we noted, based on the change in the Minsk Barometer monitoring indicators, that "the pace of military preparations in the region is increasing and is close to dangerous levels." We distinctly emphasized that "the all-round pressure, which caused Belarus to abandon its neutrality, contributed to the fusion and mutual reinforcement of the centres of regional tension, as the Donbass,

Crimea, and Belarus crises started to merge." Against that backdrop, the specific place and onset of war were only a matter of time, as all the prerequisites for an armed conflict had been in place.

War as an end and war as a beginning

The region had been sliding toward war for years, changing the logistics, communications, and political economy of international relations in Eastern Europe. The conceptual foundation for these processes was laid by the mega-ideologies of Euro-Atlanticism (incorporating references to the set of liberal values) and Russian imperial restoration (which builds on the premise of traditional values). However, the ideological platforms only enhanced the processes, which were mostly driven by the conflict of interests.

> Moscow failed to achieve quick wins during its military campaign in Ukraine. It underestimated Ukraine's subjectivity and viability as a state, which constituted the fundamental problem.

Many in Russia had expected that the bulk of Ukrainian officials and the military would abandon their subordination to Kyiv soon after hostilities started and deflect to the Russian side. This probably accounts for the tactics that Moscow had chosen: until the autumn, Russia had been fighting with its peacetime army and refrained from mobilization. Moscow had also anticipated that rapid military successes would stop Western countries from actively intervening in the situation (which corresponded to estimates in some Western capitals).

However, those plans never materialized, especially in the north of Ukraine, which the Russian army had left by mid-spring. In the south, Moscow proved more successful: by the summer, Russian troops had cleared and broadened the land corridor to Crimea. That corridor was obviously one of the Kremlin's primary objectives in the war. Nevertheless, further offensive stalled at the approaches to Mykolaiv, and Russia failed to achieve its second strategic objective of denying Ukraine access to the sea and joining with Russian and pro-Russian forces in Moldovan Transnistria. In the third direction, the east of Ukraine, i.e., the Donbass, Moscow managed to take control of new territories, but was soon stuck in sluggish fighting. No wonder, given Ukraine's years long preparation for Russia's actions in that region.

Russia gradually changed to the tactic of "grinding down" the Ukrainian Armed Forces (AFU) while keeping as many of its personnel intact as possible. However, eventually, in the autumn, Moscow was forced to announce partial mobilization, amid stagnation on

the frontlines and the rapid removal of restrictions on Western arms deliveries to Kyiv.

In September, Ukraine carried out a successful counteroffensive in the Kharkiv direction, liberating about 3,000 square kilometres of its territory, whereas in late September, it also managed to recapture the town of Liman. In November, Russian troops left the city of Kherson and the surrounding area and retreated in an orderly manner, retaining a land corridor to Crimea and a combat-ready contingent. Starting in the summer, Russian forces continued to advance slowly in relatively small numbers in the vicinity of Bakhmut. The district turned into a sort of notorious "Verdun Meat Grinder" of World War I.

In the autumn, drastic changes were observed, as the "war of the cities" commenced. Moscow started to destroy Ukraine's critical civilian infrastructure, while Kyiv, on an incomparably smaller scale, began delivering strikes on neighbouring Russian regions. Previously, Ukraine had already tested more asymmetric forms of warfare, which involved attacks and sabotage behind enemy lines. It contrived to conduct a number of high-profile operations deep inside the Russian territory, including against critical military facilities. For example, on 5 and 26 December, the Ukrainian military carried out drone strikes against airfields in Russia's Saratov and Ryazan regions, where strategic bombers are based.

By the end of the year, the war had become stagnant on all fronts, and the front line was frozen. In December, the Russian army captured the village of Pavlovka, which became its biggest success since the summer. On 22 December, Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov stated that the army's main priority was the Donbass.

On 10 November, General Mark Milley, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, estimated Russian and Ukrainian losses in the war at "well over" 100,000 troops on each side. Similar estimates were voiced by European politicians. Speaking on 30 November, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen said: "over 20,000 civilians and 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed in Ukraine." The European Commission later corrected this statement, adding that it referred to the total number of killed and wounded.

Risks of more active involvement of third countries in the war, expansion of hostilities over new countries, as well as a particularly hazardous merger of the war in Ukraine with hotbeds of tension and wars in other parts of the world were growing.

> The latter, in the worst-case scenario, could evolve into a mechanism for escalating the local war into a network of interconnected conflicts, which could potentially merge into a world war.

The already meagre peacemaking attempts hold even less promise. This situation will persist until either escalation comes close to a nuclear conflict, or mutual exhaustion affects those on the battlefield, or the sheer magnitude of the economic crisis generates overriding public demand for the war to end.

Fragmentation of the region

> The Russia–Ukraine war has become a convenient explanation to account for everything that is happening in the region, but this reasoning is often fictitious when it comes to phenomena and processes that have other origins and motivations.

One example is the deepening of borderlines and militarization in the region that is already torn between the military blocs. The decline of international communication during the two-year pandemic contributed generously to this, and the transit flows and connectivity of the region started to break down much earlier and through deliberate actions of many parties.

In 2022, Lithuania successfully restricted Russian transit to the Kaliningrad region, leaving only rail transport by August, and then continued attempts to halt it as well, citing problems with the acceptance of transit fees. At the same time, an idea to blockade Russian boat traffic in the Baltic Sea was voiced.

Initiatives undertaken by the EU–NATO countries and Ukraine with respect to communication with Belarus drew a lot less attention. Amid phasedown of railway communication, Belarusian and Russian carriers were banned from the EU in spring and a reciprocal symmetric move was made against carriers from the EU countries in Belarus and Russia (although Minsk unilaterally lifted its ban at the end of the year). The bordering countries (especially Lithuania and Poland) continued to raise the degree of uncertainty in terms of any movement of people and vehicles across the border with Belarus by significantly reducing — without any public declaration — the number of individuals and vehicles allowed to cross the border. This not only resulted in long lines, but also de facto reinforced the semi-blockade of Belarus. In parallel, Lithuania and Poland erected an initial wall on the border with Belarus with the intention to further reinforce it, while Latvia began the construction of such a wall. Ukraine mined the

border with Belarus. Operations of the media and NGOs are restricted in the Polish areas bordering Belarus, and asylum seekers crossing this border find themselves in a vague legal situation, where their compliance with the EU's legal standards and international conventions is open to question.

In early November, Poland started laying a fence on the Poland–Russia border with the Kaliningrad region. This step put an end to the remnants of the system of local border traffic between Russia and Poland, which Warsaw began to dismantle in 2016. The formal reason for the construction of the fence was the hypothetical danger of inflows of illegal migrants. Estonia is building a similar fence on its border with Russia, and Finland plans to follow suit.

More people with guns

Not only were there more and more insurmountable borders in the region, but the number of soldiers ready to use military force along those borders was growing as well. The NATO summit in Madrid adopted a new Strategic Concept for the alliance that called Russia "the most significant and direct threat." "Military integration with Belarus" was mentioned among the direct threats associated with Russia. NATO countries agreed to provide "long-term support" for Ukraine and further increase their military expenditures, and invited Sweden and Finland to join the alliance.

At the same Madrid summit the Baltic countries demanded that foreign military contingents of 50,000 soldiers be permanently deployed on their territory to defend the Suwałki Gap (at the time of the summit, their number totalled about 4,000 personnel). Specific decisions to strengthen NATO's eastern flank were not published, but it was announced that the size of the rapid reaction forces would increase from 40,000 to 300,000 soldiers. President Biden said that the U.S. would increase the number of its soldiers and equipment in Europe, including the deployment of the permanent HQ for U.S. Army's V Corps (it would be the first American unit permanently stationed on NATO's eastern flank), build-up of forces in the Baltic States, Germany, and other regions.

On 25 August, President Putin signed a decree to recruit 137,000 more staff into the country's armed forces starting 1 January 2023. The total strength of the Russian army will be 2.4 million, of which 1.151 million servicemen. On 21 December, the extended board session of the Defence Ministry announced that two new military districts — the Moscow and Leningrad districts — were formed from the Western Military District, along with three motorized rifle divisions and an army corps, two airborne assault divisions, five artillery brigades, and five divisions of marines. These new formations

will likely be deployed in the west, though a large portion of them will be moved to the northwest of Russia (which has been largely demilitarized in the past few decades) due to NATO's planned inclusion of Finland and Sweden. The number of contract soldiers in the Russian Armed Forces is expected to have reached 521,000 by the end of the year (in 2020, their number doubled from 2010 to 405,100).

Poland's desire for dominance in the region and continental Europe

The war in Ukraine served as a catalyst for a reshuffle of power within the EU–NATO. Poland focused on military build-up to fundamentally change the military balance in the region and within NATO. This is happening on two fronts: build-up of its own military capabilities and attempts to become the de facto main ally of the U.S. in continental Europe (in some ways an equivalent of the UK, another ally of the U.S.). Below are a few of the most indicative facts.

Poland signed a contract with the United States to purchase Abrams tanks and announced its plans to buy 27 divisions of M142 HIMARS multiple rocket artillery systems, which constitutes about 500 launchers. Notably, since early 1996, a total of 540 launchers of the system, originally designed as an offensive weapon for marines, have been manufactured. Warsaw later submitted a request for the purchase of 96 American AH-64 Apache helicopters. In July, a framework agreement was signed for the acquisition of South Korean weapons worth, according to various estimates, from USD 15 billion to USD 20 billion. The list includes 980 K2 tanks, 648 K9 Thunder self-propelled armoured howitzers and 48 FA-50 light combat aircraft.

Deliveries of South Korean weapons started at the end of 2022 and will have been completed for the most part by the end of 2025, after which Poland will commence production of these weapons using its own arms industry. The Polish government has also signed a contract with a South Korean manufacturer for 288 K239 Chunmoo multiple-rocket launchers and intends to acquire "a very large number of missiles, both precision strike missiles for a distance of up to 70 km, and tactical missiles with a range of about 300 km." In addition to this, Warsaw is preparing to buy American MQ9B Reaper attack drones and will rent such UAVs from the manufacturer before the purchase, notwithstanding that at the end of October, Poland began receiving Turkish Bayraktar strike drones.

> All of this points to Warsaw's plans to arm itself as quickly as possible.

On 30 August, Polish premier Mateusz Morawiecki announced that in 2023, the country's already substantial military spending would more than double to USD 29 billion. The increase is anticipated due to the purchase of weapons and the planned growth of the army (two new divisions will be formed). Furthermore, a bill has been prepared to ensure that troop numbers would more than double from 110,000 currently to 250,000, along with 50,000 reserve troops (without the introduction of compulsory service). At the same time, Warsaw keeps building the infrastructure for the deployment of the U.S. forces, primarily the U.S. Army's V Corps. In November, the Polish defence minister announced plans to expand the U.S. Army Base Powidz, where Apache attack helicopters are stationed.

Germany is back?

Although many of its NATO allies criticized Berlin's lack of action in the politico-military confrontation with Moscow, Germany's role in Eastern Europe was steadily growing more significant. In June, it was reported that the German government resolved to increase its military presence (more than 1,000 soldiers) in Lithuania by 500 personnel and deploy an additional brigade (3,500 soldiers) in Germany itself in order to reinforce NATO in Lithuania. In July, Lithuanian officials announced that the infrastructure to host the brigade in Lithuania should be ready by mid-2025 (rather than by 2027, as previously planned). Its units will be located in Panevėžys, Klaipėda, Suvalkija, and Rūdninkai. The entire infrastructure that is currently under construction will accommodate an additional 15,000 soldiers.

Can one go against the stream long enough?

A natural consequence of the sanctions imposed against Belarus in the period from late 2020 to early 2022 by Western countries and Ukraine was the unprecedented narrowing of the room for Minsk's foreign policy manoeuvre. This ruled out Belarus's previous policy of situational neutrality and predestined its role in the Russia–Ukraine war. The sanctions faced after the onset of the war resulted in a de facto semi-blockade of Belarus: possibilities for the movement of people and goods across all borders, except for that with Russia, have been either completely blocked or significantly limited.

> This state of things, along with the fact that the EU–NATO disregarded Minsk's proposals to intensify military transparency toolkit in the context of growing regional militarization, encourage further approximation between Belarus and Russia in all sectors, including military.

At the same time, Belarus obviously seeks to avoid direct involvement in hostilities, including through actions that are often unnoticed or ignored by the media and diplomats. For example, Minsk demonstratively moved special operations units to the border with Ukraine, while full-fledged military units (in particular, motorized rifle units) were positioned at the borders with Poland and Lithuania. The southern regions of the country remained largely demilitarized, and border development had just started there. Incidentally, the unpreparedness of the military infrastructure in the southern regions of Belarus (as a consequence of the past situational neutrality policy) appears to have significantly narrowed Moscow's ability to sustain its operation in the Kyiv direction. The creation of the Southern Operational Command remained only a plan throughout 2022. Admittedly, the lack of additional troops and necessary funding was an apparent reason.

Also indicative were the markedly discreet reaction of official Minsk to the 29 December missile incident and Belarus's initiatives aiming to bolster military transparency and confidence-building measures, which remain relevant. However, in the context of growing regional tensions, these initiatives, if left unanswered, cannot be displayed indefinitely, as Minsk is forced to enhance its own defence capabilities by available means, which in the current circumstances boils down to deepening military cooperation with Russia.

Increase in Russia's military presence on the "Belarusian balcony"

Now that Minsk is neither willing nor able to be directly engaged in the Russian campaign in Ukraine, Moscow has opted for increasing its own military presence in Belarus. It is probably in this context that we should perceive Belarus's attempts to get involved in strategic planning, including access to nuclear weapons. Minsk tried to ensure not only new supplies of expensive weapons, but also an increase of its own status in the region in general and specifically in relations with the Russian Federation. In late June, the leaders of the two countries agreed to "mirror" the model of access to nuclear weapons ("nuclear sharing") that applies to the European allies of the United States. It was decided to refit Belarusian aircraft for the possible use of nuclear weapons and train flight crews. It was also announced that Belarus would receive Iskander-M missile systems suitable for launching missiles with nuclear warheads.

In early October, as tensions kept growing, it was decided to immediately deploy a regional grouping of troops (forces) of Belarus and Russia. According to official statements, the number of Russian servicemen in the joint grouping was projected at

less than 9,000. The Belarusian MoD emphasized that the military units would be stationed at four training grounds in eastern and central (not southern!) Belarus, whereas the core of the grouping was formed by the Belarusian “peacetime army”.

> The grouping also includes units and formations of the Russian Western Military District and the Baltic Fleet, which means its original orientation towards action primarily in the northern and western directions (the Baltic region), rather than the southern (Ukraine).

In late October, Aliaksandr Lukashenka approved a draft agreement with Russia on the establishment and operation of joint military and combat training centres, which can probably be viewed as prototypes of military bases. In early December, a protocol to amend the agreement between Belarus and Russia on joint provision of regional security in the military sphere of 19 December 1997 was signed. The amendments simplify the procedures for the grouping’s operation and possibilities of its operational application.

Instead of a forecast: onwards to a world war?

As we analyse the overall dynamic and focus of military activity in Eastern Europe, we discern some obvious trends whose driving force (or inertia) makes it possible to neither stop, nor reverse them.

There is every reason to expect that the Russia–Ukraine conflict will become a protracted war that will go on for years. The sides are virtually equal in terms of resources available for use in the war, and appear capable of maintaining the inflow of resources at this level for quite some time. Russia has enormous human and material resources, but for various reasons is not yet mobilizing them intensively. Ukraine, despite its objectively smaller capabilities, actively uses resources supplied by NATO and foreign volunteers. Yet, growing deliveries of Western weapons are unlikely to lead to a linear growth of Kyiv’s advantages on the battlefield. Numerous conflicts show that the media tend to overestimate the technological capabilities of Western weapons.

> Prolongation of the war increases the likelihood of its transition to a larger-scale format and geographic expansion, as there may be no other way out of the strategic stalemate.

As we have shown above, the countries of the region are preparing for such an expansion of the conflict.

The situational neutrality, which Belarus adhered to in past years and which had significant de-escalation potential for the entire region, turned out to be unclaimed by the parties to the conflict and key actors in Eastern Europe. This became clear back in 2020–2021 and was fully evident in 2022. The West and Ukraine not only accept the growth of Russia's influence in Belarus as something inevitable — in a sense, Belarus's transformation into an extension of Russia in military and strategic terms looks more reasonable to many of them than Minsk's striving for neutrality. Belarus's neutral status would probably constrict the parties: it would not allow Russia to use the Belarusian territory and airspace and would deprive Moscow's opponents of the chance to use Belarus as a platform for step-by-step escalation of the conflict with Russia. Further, from the perspective of the Kremlin's opponents, it would afford Russia a kind of "gateway to the world" in the form of a potentially neutral country next to Moscow, whereas in the current situation, Belarus becomes an additional burden for Moscow, which it needs to protect and support. These calculations may seem convincing in the short term; however, they may eventually turn out fatal for the Belarusian statehood and deprive the region of many opportunities to build the future security model.

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