



KAMPELMAN QUARTERLY

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A note from the editor

Our flagship fellowship program is named for longtime U.S. ambassador to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Max Kampelman. A first-generation American born in the Bronx, Kampelman died having served presidents of both parties at the highest levels and having dedicated his talents to issues ranging from negotiating nuclear agreements with the Soviet Union to advocating for labor rights. His leadership helped elevate a commitment to human rights as a defining element of American global leadership.

In Kampelman's memory, three times a year, we welcome new interns and fellows to our team, who are at the outset of their careers in public service and unfailingly bring with them their own passions and perspectives on the region. We encourage our fellows to explore the complex issues that drove them to apply to the program—and to pursue a career in U.S. foreign policy—deeply and critically. Their articles, found in this collection, do not represent the official positions of U.S. Helsinki Commission staff or members. They are, however, the efforts of our fellows and interns to engage with the challenges that animate their commitment to the moral dimension of our common defense—following the path of Max Kampelman and our commissioners.

We hope that their analysis and observations can provide readers with some of the energy, creativity, and fresh thinking that Kampelman fellows bring to our team each semester.

Investing in Ukraine's Defense: Why Europe is Adopting the Danish Model to Aid Ukraine

Connor Lewis, Kampelman Fellow, Summer 2025

More than three years after Russian tank columns began their approach to Kyiv, the war grinds on, with no obvious offramp on the horizon for either side. The conflict has, since 2023, been an attritional, near-stalemated affair, with the Russians slowly chipping away continual—though quite limited—territorial gains. Despite enormous advantages in manpower and resources, the invading force has been unable to effect any breakthrough or collapse in Ukrainian defensive lines.

Ukraine has been remarkably successful in mitigating Russia's battlefield advantages, not least because of the incredible determination, solidarity, and ingenuity of Ukrainians. Help from friends has also played a crucial role in Ukraine's survival. At various points, aid from Ukraine's partners has been decisive, from Czech artillery ammunition deliveries to the much-touted Patriot air defense batteries sent by the United States, Germany, and other European allies.

While this aid has been indispensable, it has not always been consistent. Delays for repairs and training, concerns about stockpiles and readiness, and in many cases, the domestic politics of donor countries have all contributed to significant gaps in support when Ukraine has needed it most. Ukrainians are well aware of this issue. Since the beginning of the war, they have developed domestic solutions for many of the battlefield challenges they face. Leveraging their Soviet inheritance of heavy industry and excellent human capital, as well as an innovative new decentralized approach to procurement, Ukraine has been able to field native capabilities far beyond what experts could have predicted in 2022. This is most evident in Ukraine's diverse array of drones, but extends to a wide range of other materiel, like domestically produced Neptune cruise missiles or Novator armored vehicles. Ukraine now makes over 40 percent of the weaponry its armed forces use every day.

In 2024, Ukraine's partners began to notice the viability of this resourceful approach. Denmark was the first to sign an agreement which would fund priority defense projects and companies within Ukraine, thereby building up its domestic defense industry. In what would come to be known as the "Danish Model," Europeans began spending their aid money (and in some cases, the accumulated interest from frozen Russian assets) in Ukraine, on Ukrainian Bohdana howitzers, long-range and sea drones, or anti-tank and anti-ship missiles. By opting for this framework, the Danes have leveraged their considerable national wealth to effectively support Ukraine, despite Denmark's own limited industrial capacity. Kyiv has lauded this approach, proposing it as a model for other partners to emulate.

It is easy to see why the Ukrainians are so quick to praise Denmark's initiative. First, the Danish Model sidesteps any concern about depleting stocks in partner countries. While many supporters of Ukraine have been exceptionally generous with military aid, some now express hesitancy in transferring certain systems, not wanting to hurt their own readiness. By investing in the expansion and improvement of production lines in Ukraine, the Danish Model avoids this problem entirely, while also building the Ukrainian—and the European—defense industrial base. This is prudent as a forward-looking project, preparing Ukraine and Europe to credibly deter future aggression and handle more of its own security.

But for Ukrainians, the urgency is much more immediate: new, better production lines in Ukraine mean essential weapons reaching the front line in greater numbers, more cheaply, and sooner than donations or sales from partners could ever hope to achieve. Ukraine simply cannot afford to wait.

Ukrainians also appreciate the freedom that comes with supplying their own weapons. A domestically produced Liutyi one-way-attack (OWA) drone or Neptune cruise missile will not be saddled with “red lines” restricting its target depth. With indigenous weapons like these, diplomatic capital need not be expended on convincing allies of the merits of using their weapons for deep strikes. After restrictions prevented Ukraine from using Western munitions to their fullest extent (most notably in 2024), Ukrainians are eager to reduce their exposure to such impediments to battlefield success.

Most importantly, the Danish Model is more efficient than other modes of support for Ukraine. From approval of funding to initial deliveries of weapons, military aid from Ukraine’s partners often takes months—and in some cases, years—to be put to use by the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU). Long approval procedures, refurbishment, and specialized training are just a few of the necessary, but agonizingly slow processes that extend wait times. For munitions like interceptor missiles for American Patriot, German Iris-T, or Franco-Italian SAMP/T air defense systems, dwindling stockpiles and long production lead times mean unavoidable limitations on deliveries, even when they have been promised and planned for. While the Western companies that produce these systems have been increasing production to the extent possible, they are not on a war footing like Ukrainian companies. These missile interceptors are one of the capabilities that Ukraine cannot easily replace on its own with or without investments from partners. To get such complex production lines up and running would need enormous investment in time and financing, undercutting another of the benefits of defense production in Ukraine—much lower costs than in the United States or Western Europe.

Though the Danish Model cannot directly supply such sophisticated weapons systems, it can mitigate the larger problems they aim to address. With interceptor missiles too expensive and few in number to waste on cheap Russian Geran and Gerbera OWA drones, Ukraine quickly began developing small, low-cost interceptor drones to help repel overwhelming nightly waves of Russian strike drones. Once the concept was proven to be effective, Ukrainian companies quickly struck partnerships with American and European firms to vastly scale up production of these interceptor drones in Ukraine. While Western air defense systems are (and will remain) critical for shooting down Russian ballistic and cruise missiles in particular, these Ukrainian interceptor drones can be used to address the ever-growing—and ever-deadlier—swarms of slower-flying Russian OWA drones.

If 2024 marked the successful launch of the Danish Model, 2025 has seen it garner wider adoption and increased funding. Norway, Canada, Sweden, and Iceland have all joined or promised large new investments under the Danish Model. In several cases, Denmark is actually serving as the executor of the investment on behalf of the donor country or, as was agreed earlier this year, on behalf of the EU, who delegated to the Danes the responsibility of spending European Peace Facility funds on Ukrainian defense production.

The relationships forged and the successes achieved through the Danish Model framework have also enabled another new linkage: Ukrainian defense companies beginning production in partner countries. Naturally, Denmark is a leader here too, having signed an agreement in June officially signing onto the “Build with Ukraine Initiative.” As with prior Danish Model programs, the funding for this arrangement will

be provided by Denmark, and much of the output will go towards supplying Ukraine's defense. And as with the Danish Model, this deepened cooperation with Ukraine's defense industrial sector will continue to be adopted by other Ramstein Group countries, as the UK demonstrated with its joint drone production agreement on June 23.

Irrespective of the Kremlin's preferences regarding Ukraine's westward orientation, the war has only served to deepen these ties, as exemplified by the Danish Model and its successor programs. With the consolidation and institutionalization of connections between the defense industries of Ukraine and its partners, Ukraine's central role in the future security architecture of Europe has become a foregone conclusion.

Normalizing Oppression: The Human Cost of Russia's Support of the Taliban

Tyler Jacobs, Intern, Summer 2025

On August 30th, 2021, the last C-17 departed from Hamid Karzai International Airport at approximately 3:29 p.m. The United States' longest war had come to an end. The Taliban had already swept across Afghanistan, capturing province after province and establishing a government based on their strict interpretation of sharia law. In this graveyard of empires, the United States lowered their flags, along with hopes for establishing democracy and stability. Yet the tricolored flag of Russia remained raised over their embassy. Russia saw the departure of the United States as an opportunity to step into the vacuum and gain influence. With various normalization efforts over the four years since the fall of Kabul, Russia has now become the first country to formally recognize the Taliban's government in Afghanistan, paving the way for stronger diplomatic relations.

Russia-Taliban Normalization

Russia has long considered Central Asia to be within its sphere of influence and has made various attempts to deepen political, economic, ideological, and military influence in the region. As a result, Russian leaders often see Afghanistan as merely a pawn in their broader aspirations for Central Asia. These efforts have historically been at odds with Western interests. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the British and Russian empires engaged in "The Great Game," a struggle over Afghanistan as a buffer state between the two empires. The British interpreted Russian expansionary efforts southward towards Afghanistan as a direct threat to the British empire in India and responded by launching the Anglo-Afghan wars. This series of conflicts concluded with British withdrawal from Afghanistan, a success for Russian aspirations. A century later, The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan with the hopes of supporting the communist-backed People's Democratic Party for control over Afghanistan. Fearful of Soviet expansion, the United States supported the Islamic mujahideen insurrectionists until the Soviets withdrew 10 years later.

Due to this history, Russia remains suspicious of Western involvement in Afghanistan and tends to respond aggressively to maintain its influence. When most Western embassies departed from Kabul during the U.S. withdrawal, the Kremlin saw an opportunity to cement its primacy in the country, keeping its embassy open and offering assurances to Taliban officials. President Putin went as far as to call the Taliban a "trusted ally" in combatting terrorism and establishing peace. Further normalization processes between the Kremlin and the Taliban began immediately, such as the Moscow Format Consultations in October 2021. In a [joint statement](#), senior officials from Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India, and the states of Central Asia said, "...further practical engagement with Afghanistan needed to take into account the new reality, that is the Taliban coming to power in the country, irrespective of the official recognition of the new Afghan government by the international community." The Kremlin recognized this reality and in April 2025, Russia's Supreme court removed the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations, leading to Russia's official recognition of The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (I.E.A.) in July 2025.

Taliban in Afghanistan

This normalization process quickly raised scrutiny due to concerns over the Taliban's implementation of their vision of sharia law in Afghanistan. In practice, these implementations of sharia law resulted in significant restrictions on women and children. Taliban edicts have denied over 2.5 million girls access to education above the sixth grade, barred women from employment in most sectors, restricted freedom of movement and excluded women from public and social settings, limited legal rights and protections, and more. Violators of these laws can be subjected to intense monitoring and interrogation, arrest, floggings and beatings, amputation, public execution, torture, or any other form of violent punishment as determined by Taliban authorities. This reality is leading to a large [mental health crisis](#) among Afghan women. Actions against women and girls have raised international calls for the Taliban to implement a more inclusive government. The International Criminal Court has even issued [arrest warrants](#) for top Taliban leaders for crimes of committing gender-based persecution. These concerns extend to other areas, such as recent [abuse of Afghan returnees](#), and government failures to manage food, water, and economic insecurity. The Taliban exercises complete and unlimited authority and has effectively abolished political and civil liberties for Afghan citizens. Many citizens of Afghanistan suffer with little hope for substantive change.

Russia's Sponsorship of The Taliban Regime

The danger of this new relationship between Russia and the Taliban is twofold. Russia's growth in Afghanistan isolates the country further from the West, while legitimizing and emboldening the Taliban.

Russia and the Taliban have engaged in provisional agreements across various sectors. This includes preliminary deals for the import of Russian energy, expansive infrastructure projects, developments in transportation, and more. Using these initiatives, Russia seeks to gain access to trade corridors through Central Asia and circumvent Western sanctions. But Russia is not the only country to strike deals with the Taliban. Countries such as China, Pakistan, Iran, and others in Central Asia have also made agreements to invest in Afghanistan. While these countries have not formally recognized the Taliban, Russia's boldness in being the first to establish diplomatic relations will likely inspire others to recognize the Taliban's government, which further legitimizes their rule.

Western allies face significant challenges influencing regional security policy as Moscow engages in cooperative security arrangements. Russia sees the Taliban as a partner in limiting the spread of other extremist groups, [such as ISIS-K](#), and has already engaged in limited intelligence sharing with the Taliban. If Afghanistan continues to experience instability due to extremist groups such as ISIS-K, it is likely Moscow will engage in further military agreements.

Increased engagements with the Kremlin will isolate Afghanistan from Western influence and limit opportunities to help Afghanistan's citizens. By providing the Taliban access to resources, the Kremlin has enabled them to expand the scope of their abuses and isolate the Afghan people from Western aid. The United States could help alleviate the humanitarian crisis by putting pressure on the Taliban to stop persecuting women and dissenters, provide humanitarian aid, and monitor resources. This not only fulfills a moral obligation, but provides avenues in which the United States can positively engage in the region. Such engagement would allow the United States to monitor regional insecurity while also countering the anti-Western bloc which seeks to undermine U.S. influence.

Russia's Assault on Ukraine's Social Services

A Harbinger of Systemic Poverty in Ukraine and Instability in Europe

Ann Olivia Radicioni, Kampelman Fellow, Spring 2025

Russia's war of aggression has decimated Ukrainian social services and threatens to create lasting cycles of poverty and inequality in Ukraine, which could destabilize the wider region. Russia's assault on Ukrainian social services is an attrition tactic seeking to demoralize Ukrainian society, enfeeble future generations, and engender a failed Ukrainian state. Failed states – characterized by their [inability to provide public services](#) to citizens – often force neighboring states into high levels of [political instability, civil war, and interstate conflict](#). Putin's attacks on Ukrainian social services similarly weaken the capacity of Ukraine's neighbors, in turn increasing their vulnerability to Russian aggression. To shine light on this strategy of Russian warfare, this piece examines Russia's attacks on Ukraine's education and healthcare systems and projects long-term impacts on Ukrainian prosperity and regional states' social services.

The Educational Impacts of Russia's War on Ukraine

In addition to the forcible transfer, deportation, and passportization of thousands of [Ukrainian children](#), Russia has razed schoolhouses and barred access to classrooms, which risks condemning Ukrainians to generations of poverty. In the lead up to Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukrainian students were already reeling from the [impacts of COVID-19](#) and Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donbas. However, the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion represents a critical juncture for Ukraine's children, as Russia has laid waste to [almost 30%](#) of Ukraine's educational infrastructure. Ukraine's ability to rebuild this infrastructure is key to its future prosperity and success, as education is a [primary determinant of social mobility](#).

Russia's attacks on school infrastructure have forced Ukrainian students into perilous learning environments. In March 2025, the World Bank [calculated](#) that Russia has damaged 3,873 educational institutions and destroyed 385 since February 2022. A 2024 [survey](#) from Save the Children illustrates the human impact of these attacks. Half of the Ukrainian families surveyed said their schools were damaged by Russian attacks with percentages rising to more than 90% in frontline regions. By attacking school infrastructure, Russia strips countless Ukrainians of their right to an education. An estimated [66%](#) of Ukrainian children cannot access preschool education and [19.8%](#) of 15-24 year olds have missed one to two years of formal schooling due to wartime conditions.

Ukrainian children enrolled in school also face wartime educational challenges due to Russian aggression. A February 2025 [educational assessment](#) by UNICEF found that nearly 40 percent of Ukrainian children attend school remotely due to the war. Remote learning poses significant difficulties for Ukrainian children living in poverty and children who reside on the front lines. In a 2023-2024 [survey](#) of 1,000 Ukrainian children and parents, 42 percent of respondents stated that their families' "lack of hardware devices" was a significant barrier to their children's remote learning experience, and 79 percent said that "poor internet connection" was a substantial obstacle. Students living on the front lines are even more vulnerable [as Russia's strikes on energy infrastructure disrupt internet connections](#).

Amid adverse learning conditions, Ukrainian children's ability to meet educational benchmarks has plummeted. A February 2025 UNICEF [assessment](#) found that Ukrainian children learning remotely due to wartime conditions average one to two years behind their peers in educational achievement. These remote learning gaps are most prominent in front-line villages, where children can lag up to four to five [years behind](#) their peers. However, Ukrainian children are not just falling behind in comparison to state educational standards. Russia's assault on Ukraine's education system has impacted Ukrainian students' performance vis-a-vis international educational standards. For example, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which evaluates 15-year-old students' performances in reading, math, and science, [reported dramatic declines](#) in Ukrainian children's scores after the onset of the full-scale invasion. Notably, [PISA](#) documented that Ukrainian students are two and a half years [behind OECD averages](#) in reading and one and a half years behind OECD averages in math.

Russia's attacks on Ukraine's education system foreshadow intergenerational poverty for Ukrainians unless something is done to rebuild it. Analysis shows that Ukrainian children from poor families are likely to remain in poverty if they fail to finish K-12 education. This presents bleak prospects for the millions of Ukrainian children who have lost between one to five years of education during wartime. Without access to an education, Ukrainians may struggle to secure the knowledge and skills needed to acquire well-paying jobs. In turn, Ukrainians born into the upper and middle classes may also fall into cycles of poverty. Ukraine's youngest learners are particularly susceptible, as 66% of Ukrainian children cannot access early childhood education. MIT's First Five Years Fund, a leading working group on early childhood education, emphasizes that many caregivers are forced to quit jobs so they can care for children who cannot attend preschool, sacrificing income to stay at home with young children.

As Ukraine faces unprecedented educational scarcity and inequality, surrounding countries have struggled to accommodate Ukrainian student refugees. This introduces a multi-pronged problem for governments in the region. As of March 2024, an estimated [1.3 million Ukrainian children](#) have received temporary protection in EU countries and approximately [700,000](#) have enrolled in EU schools. EU schools have cited their lack of physical space, teachers, and language immersion classes as [unique barriers to integrating Ukrainian children into their school systems](#). Moreover, schools in [Germany](#) and [Poland](#) have reported that the influx of Ukrainian refugees have strained existing educational resources. However, the estimated 600,000 unenrolled Ukrainian learners also compound state capacity problems for EU countries, as studies from the World Bank and UNICEF note that Ukrainian child refugees are also in desperate need of [mental health](#) and [food](#) assistance. Europe's capacity to provide social services is in peril as it works to incorporate 1.6 million Ukrainian children, many of whose schools and homes have been destroyed.

The Healthcare Impacts of Russia's War on Ukraine

In its ongoing war of aggression, Russia has also sought to [annihilate the Ukrainian healthcare system](#), while Russian attacks increase both the number of individuals needing healthcare and in danger of intergenerational poverty. In this, Putin reveals his maniacal contempt for the sick and marginalized. Ukrainian primary care offices, children's hospitals, and ambulances are but a few of Putin's targets. As a result, Ukrainians struggle to access adequate healthcare and the socially mobilizing benefits it provides.

Russia's war strategy intentionally and cruelly wreaks destruction upon the Ukrainian health system's physical infrastructure and devastates its workers. In February 2025, WHO [reported](#) 2,254 Russian

attacks on Ukrainian healthcare infrastructure since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. These attacks have cascading effects as Ukraine strives to deliver sufficient medical care during wartime. For instance, before the onset of the full-scale invasion, Ukraine already suffered from a dearth of emergency-related healthcare infrastructure. In September 2024, Viktor Liashko, Ukraine's Minister of Health, said that [almost 600 ambulances had been destroyed, damaged, or lost](#), out of the suspected pre-war ambulance stock of 3,118. Moreover, the number of healthcare workers killed nearly [tripled](#) between 2023 and 2024.

Ukraine's declining capacity to deliver healthcare services has direct impacts on Ukrainians' mental and physical health. In 2022, WHO [estimated](#) that nearly 10 million Ukrainians were at risk of mental health conditions due to the stress of war. Recent hospitalization [data](#) confirms WHO's projections: generalized mental health hospitalizations, and hospitalizations specifically related to psychological war trauma have steadily increased since February 2022. Yet, a recent [study](#) in the International Journal of Mental Health Systems assessed 41 percent of all of Ukraine's mental health hospitals and found that the number of psychiatrists, social workers, and junior nurses decreased significantly from January 2022 to May 2024.

Ukrainians needing physical healthcare have also been impacted by staffing shortages. Ukrainian soldiers have reportedly suffered around [390,000 injuries](#) between February 2022 and February 2025 and Ukrainian civilians have reportedly suffered around [30,700 injuries](#) during that period. In mid-2024, the Ukrainian Ministry of Health noted that as many as [100,000 Ukrainians](#) have undergone amputations for wartime injuries and WHO emphasizes that this surge in amputations is largely caused by Ukraine's [severe shortage](#) of trauma specialists, prosthetics, and rehabilitation services. Russia's attacks on Ukrainian health infrastructure, thus, have life-altering consequences for Ukrainian people.

Ukrainian children are exceptionally vulnerable to the cascading effects of Russia's attacks on healthcare. UNICEF emphasizes that [1.5 million Ukrainian children](#) are susceptible to mental illness during the war. Researchers from the European Society of Child and Adult Psychiatry [investigated](#) the most influential factors in Ukrainian children's wartime mental health declines, and found that war-related trauma exposure is the most significant variable. These findings are acutely alarming considering the number of Ukrainian children who have been exposed to Russian violence—UNICEF's February 2025 [report](#) on Ukrainian children during wartime found that 20% of Ukrainian children have lost a friend or relative and 33% of Ukrainian children have seen someone murdered or injured since February 2022.

Russia's destruction of Ukraine's healthcare system risks [triggering cycles of poverty](#) for generations of Ukrainians. A Ukrainian needs assessment published in April 2023 found that 66% of Ukrainians encountered war-time barriers to healthcare. Healthcare accessibility is especially volatile within front-line regions, currently grappling with a shortage of [healthcare staff](#). Without robust efforts to rebuild healthcare institutions and reincorporate Ukrainian patients into them, this access crisis will spiral. Russia's attacks could create a lasting medical desert in Ukraine's front-line regions. Families from across Ukraine are likely to lose income as they are forced to travel for medical procedures and medicines or take off work to care for ailing family members.

Neighboring states' healthcare systems struggle to accommodate Ukrainians' urgent needs. In a March 2022 assessment on Ukrainian refugees' healthcare intake, researchers noted that [neighboring countries](#) such as Poland, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Moldova, the Czech Republic, and Romania, were likely to face

capacity difficulties while incorporating Ukrainians into state health systems. These initial capacity problems have compounded as more Ukrainians fled. A study of Ukrainian refugee intake found that, in addition to standard medical care, Ukrainians living in Poland desperately need bilingual medical documentation and interpreters. In addition, a [study](#) of Ukrainians displaced across Europe emphasized that surrounding host countries may lack doctors who specialize in illnesses which are prevalent in Ukraine.

Rebuilding from Russia's War: The Future of Education and Healthcare in Ukraine and its Impacts on European Prosperity

By intentionally targeting Ukraine's social services, Russia not only risks tipping generations of Ukrainians into cycles of poverty but also risks pushing Europe's social service systems to the breaking point. Restoring Ukraine's educational and healthcare services will require reincorporation, rebuilding, and distribution initiatives by Ukraine and its allies. Ukraine must reincorporate the millions of Ukrainians forced into adverse educational conditions, or outside the education system entirely, back into the education system. Ukraine must also reincorporate those who have experienced cost and accessibility issues back into a revitalized healthcare system. Physical reconstruction efforts are similarly critical. Ukraine faces enormous challenges as it seeks to repair an estimated [\\$46.3 billion](#) damages and losses in the education sector, and an estimated [\\$21 billion](#) damages and losses in the healthcare sector. Finally, Ukraine will require a massive, coordinated distribution effort to work through the claims submitted to Ukraine's Registry of Damages, designed to compensate students and patients who have lost access to services in the war, while directing funds towards institutional reconstruction to prevent state failure. These efforts are crucial to address the vulnerabilities resulting from Russia's purposeful assault on Ukrainian social infrastructure, and they provide a hopeful framework for restoring state capacity, as Ukrainians fight for peace, security, and lasting prosperity.

“I Do Not Want to Die”: The Impact of the War in Ukraine on Domestic Violence in Russia

Heidi Mattson, Intern, Spring 2025

On February 24th, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, expecting to take Kyiv within days. However, three years later, Russia has not achieved its goal, thanks to the resilience of the Ukrainian people. Russian media claims Russia has mobilized an estimated 300,000 soldiers while other sources estimate that the actual number is closer to one million. Only a small portion of these men have returned from the front lines since the start of the war, but there has already been a disturbing trend of increased violence among returning soldiers.

In February 2024, a veteran of the war in Ukraine assaulted his wife and stepdaughter. The veteran told one story, claiming his wife did not support him enough after he returned from the front lines with cancer. He went on to claim that his wife attacked him when he tried to leave her. However, the wife told a different story. She claimed that her husband had been abusive and threatened her with a knife that night, telling her he had “killed people like her and her daughter in Ukraine.” The wife had 5 abrasions and 15 bruises. However, the judge only issued him a fine, claiming that the husband’s status as a combat veteran and illness warranted a lighter penalty.

Another man in Novosibirsk raped two schoolgirls aged 10 and 12. The girls said the man was wearing a “military uniform with a skull on the patch.” The soldier told the girls that if they did not go with him, he would blow them up with a grenade.

In another instance, a woman whose husband returned to Russia after being wounded in Ukraine threatened to cut her head and hands off, beat her up, and burn her in acid. Her husband was abusive before the war, but she claimed he was even worse when he returned from the war. She claimed he had become more radicalized by becoming a “war hero.” The husband said he was “untouchable” and nothing could happen to him. He was never charged and received compensation for being wounded.

In conflict and post-conflict settings, domestic violence rates increase significantly. Many risk factors exacerbated during conflict, including the trauma of war, the return of traumatized soldiers from the front lines, lack of shelters, lack of capacity for police and institutions to address these issues, compromised health and psychosocial services, and the increased vulnerability of women and children. Each conflict has its own circumstances that also contribute to increasing domestic violence rates. Russia presents a particularly alarming case study.

Pre-War Domestic Violence in Russia

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia maintained the structure of the Soviet criminal codes in reference to physical and sexual violence, which did not provide any protection in situations of domestic violence. Victims have relied on general articles of assault, torment, kidnapping, and rape to press charges against their abusers. In 2016, Russian victims of domestic violence began to speak up in large numbers about their experiences. Thousands of victims began to share their stories of abuse on social media under hashtags such as #IAmNotAfraidToTell, #ItIsNotAReasonToKill, and #IDoNotWantToDie.

However, the Russian government moved quickly to quash this popular movement. In 2017, the State Duma passed legislation to decriminalize non-aggravated battery, further weakening the already sparse legal tools available to victims in seeking justice for domestic violence. The law downgraded non-aggravated battery from a criminal offence to a misdemeanor administrative offence for first time offenders. Abusers now only [pay](#) a fine of approximately 5,000 to 30,000 rubles (\$66 to \$400). In 2018, one year after the decriminalization of domestic violence, 5,000 women [died](#) at the hands of their abusers.

Backlash to this decriminalization was immediate but increased in December 2017 when Margarita Gracheva's story went viral throughout Russia. Margarita's husband, Dimitri, drove her to the woods, dragged her from the car, grabbed an axe, and chopped off her hands. This was not the first instance of violence in their relationship. Dimitri had attacked her previously with a knife in front of their children. When she went to the police for help, they told her they would "get back to her in 20 days," to which she pointed out that her husband would be able "to kill her 20 times over by that point." The police simply responded, "So what is the point of getting involved?" Five days later, Dimitri cut off Margarita's hands.

Societal Challenges Exacerbate Domestic Violence in Russia

Shelters, Underfunded and Under Attack

Domestic violence is a systemic problem in Russian society. One major challenge is the lack of access to shelters throughout Russia. There are only [14 state-run shelters](#) for victims in Russia, despite a population of 146 million. In comparison, the United States has approximately [1,500 government-funded shelters](#) for a population of 340 million. The state organizations in Russia that do exist often prioritize family reunification rather than helping victims leave unsafe situations. Since shelters are state-funded, victims can only use their services if they are registered in that city or municipality. This can make it difficult for victims to evade their abusers because they are forced to remain in the same city. Victims also must submit several documents in order to be admitted to the shelter. This is also difficult for many victims because abusers often take their identifying documents. Some shelters even [require](#) a salary certificate, which complicates the process if the victim does not work. Lastly, only shelters in Moscow have SOS placements for victims who are in immediate danger. The lack of resources and options complicates a victim's ability to seek help or leave an abusive situation.

In the years following decriminalization, Russian authorities also began targeting organizations combating domestic violence by declaring them "foreign agents." They designated prominent organizations such as Nasiliu.net, Women's Voice, and the "ANNA" Centre, who led the fight against domestic violence. The Russian government uses foreign agent laws to target organizations it deems undesirable. Foreign agent laws require organizations receiving support from abroad to register as foreign agents. Registered organizations cannot accept foreign money and also cannot receive any money from the state. They also must pay large fines for violations. Without sufficient funds and under threat from the government, organizations can no longer hold educational events. They lose donors and can no longer work with police and other local entities to provide training or educations. It also affects the organizations' direct work with victims, because victims may fear that they will be implicated if they seek help from a "foreign agent."

The Role of The Church

The Russian Orthodox Church further normalizes domestic violence. Relying on the tradition of considering the family a “small church,” the Church asserts that state interference in family matters, such as domestic violence laws, is an imposition on religious liberty. Church officials claim that any legislation combating domestic violence would “undermine the foundations of the traditional family.” After a group of lawmakers attempted to push legislation re-criminalizing domestic violence, Russian authorities promised the Church in 2023 that there would be no law combating domestic violence. Putin assured the Church that they have a “definitive veto” on all legislation combating domestic violence, at least until he declares that the so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine is over.

Protective Orders

Russian law does not allow for protective orders through which victims can leave a situation of domestic violence before they are seriously harmed, as a means to prevent domestic violence. Victims only [receive](#) protective orders if there is a provable act of domestic violence. Furthermore, victims have to go to the police in order to receive a protective order, and many victims in Russia have noted that the police do not help victims. Margarita Gracheva [tells](#) victims experiencing domestic violence to just run as far away as possible because the police will not help them. Many victims also do not report these incidents for various reasons including fear of not being believed, the lack of criminalization, fear of retaliation or the police dismissing them, fear of losing their children, and numerous other reasons. Domestic violence is historically underreported for these reasons, which makes obtaining a protective order even more difficult.

New Challenges as a Result of the Ongoing War in Ukraine

Soldiers Battling PTSD

One of the most common side effects of war is the increased cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many soldiers return from the front lines traumatized by what they experienced. Soldiers feel as though there is danger all around them and are in a heightened state of fear, dramatically altering their everyday life. This suffering can often make a person more prone to violence and substance abuse, which can lead to behavioral changes such as aggression, impaired judgement, and loss of self-control, all of which are risk factors for domestic violence. These soldiers need comprehensive help, yet the official Russian narrative about veterans [neglects](#) any discussion of mental health, opting to discuss heroism and the exploits of “real men.”

Criminals Praised while Russian Citizens Arrested for Speaking Out

The Russian government has also released criminals and deployed them to the frontlines in Ukraine. This paves the way for criminals to return to society with their convictions removed or pardoned if they survive a monthslong battlefield stint. Russian media has begun glorifying these criminals as “heroes,” and Putin has [called](#) them Russia’s new “elites,” normalizing their previous violence. In February 2025, Kirill Cheplygin chased his ex-wife, Yekaterina Polyanskaya, across a playground before throwing her to the ground and stabbing her in the neck, killing her. Kirill Cheplygin is reportedly headed to fight in Ukraine, rather than serving a jail sentence. Many in the community of Achinsk, where the attack occurred, [fear](#) he will return one day and kill again. An ex-convict [received](#) a pardon after fighting in Ukraine and killed a 34-year-old man and a 64-year-old woman when he returned. Soldiers who have returned from the frontlines of Ukraine have killed 378 people and seriously harmed 376 others, including 202 pardoned

and conditionally released soldiers who have committed fatal crimes. Of the 202 criminals, 89 of them were imprisoned for similar crimes.

While Putin pardons and honors convicted killers, the regime is imprisoning Russian citizens for “discrediting the Russian armed forces.” A new law criminalizes discrediting the Russian army and can result in criminal charges and jail time if there are repeated offenses. This law has sparked fear among victims of soldiers and veterans. Victims fear the law will protect their abusers, if they are veterans, rather than them, and lead to charges against them for discrediting Russian forces. This is not a new fear among victims, they have witnessed their abusers glorified as war heroes for years. Abusers feel above the law because of their status within the army, so they continue their abuse undeterred.

Conclusion

Until mass rotations begin, soldiers return, or the war ends, the full impact of the invasion on domestic violence rates is unknown. However, from the cases advocates have seen so far, where soldiers are the perpetrators, they believe “the level of domestic, sexualized and street violence will increase.” Advocates emphasize that the mass effect will be long term. Before the war, Russia was failing to address the issue, and the war will only further erode the little progress that has been made in combating domestic violence. Natalya Baranova, an activist, put it best, “Women were not protected even before the war, now they are in the most vulnerable position and at risk—violence in society will grow and is already growing. Everyone who returns from the war returns with a crippled psyche, with PTSD. There are risks of facing aggression everywhere—both at home and on the streets of the city.”

Patronage and Publicity: Russia's Approach to Influence Operations

A Case Study of the German Bundestag

Sarah Stevens, Kampelman Fellow, Spring 2025

Introduction

Russia has mounted extensive influence operations across Europe. As a crucial part of Russia's shadow war against NATO countries, [influence operations](#) aim to destabilize the NATO region and undermine transatlantic support for Ukraine. These operations target leading politicians in different parties and countries across Europe, including in Germany.

The Kremlin has made aggressive efforts to influence German politicians among newly established parties on the right and left extremes of the German political spectrum, such as in the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht – Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit (BSW) parties. Although they lie on different sides of the spectrum, several in these parties [agree](#) that "NATO and the U.S. are partially to blame" for the Russian war in Ukraine and have called for German rapprochement with Russia while the war continues. Many of the politicians targeted by Russia have expertise in and served on the committees for foreign affairs and other crucial foreign policy committees in the 20th Bundestag from 2021 to 2025.

Russian influence operations among politicians in the Bundestag serve as a case study for their operations across Europe and the NATO region. They can be understood as a two-pronged approach of patronage and publicity to promote the Kremlin's agenda abroad and to create division within targeted countries. Russia has also targeted regions and individuals whose history and perspectives predispose them to sympathize with their positions, often originating in former East Germany.

Background: Historic Ties Between East Germany and Russia

Russian influence operations may find more fertile ground in eastern Germany due to historical attitudes towards Russia and its authoritarian rule. As shown in Germany's February 2025 federal elections, parties with pro-Russia sentiments performed better in eastern Germany, where [lower trust in democratic institutions](#) has given rise to more "radical" parties. Older eastern Germans have [demonstrated](#) a "certain sympathy for Russia," having grown up in a satellite of the Soviet Union and exposed to Russian culture and language. East Germans also may hold a "sense of grievance" from chaotic experiences being incorporated into Western capitalism. Eastern Germany has also held closer economic ties to Russian trade than in western Germany, which could add to a greater desire to rapprochement with Russia.

These common eastern German attitudes have been reflected in modern political preferences. In a 2023 poll that surveyed five eastern German states, researchers [found](#) popular support for "authoritarian statehood," in addition to a majority preferring a "strongman" or "strong party" leadership.⁷ In this survey, eastern German "political attitudes appear to have remained relatively unchanged" since the region's

transition from totalitarian rule. Russia has capitalized on traces of pro-Russia sympathies and Western institutional skepticism that have come to dominate eastern Germany as a former Soviet satellite.

Patronage

Russian State Visits and Events

Through curating a German presence in Russia's state-sponsored and -affiliated events, the Kremlin seeks to create new and closer ties to German politicians and deepen their pro-Russia views. From these events, a minor or opposition politician can gain increased prestige by attracting the attention of a major foreign government. For example, Russian government representatives invited the AfD chairman of the 20th Bundestag's foreign affairs committee to [observe](#) the Russian electoral process in the 2021 State Duma elections in Bashkortostan. During the election observation mission, the politician [praised](#) Russia's voting process, thereby helping to legitimize the result. Independent observers from the elections arm of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), however, [concluded](#) that electoral conditions were "not conducive to free and fair proceedings."

A former member of Germany's Left Party who later joined the BSW traveled to the occupied Donbas region in 2015 to deliver medical supplies to children's hospitals, but his trip was used to legitimize Russia's occupation of Ukraine. This former member of the Bundestag's foreign affairs committee took a photo with separatist leader Alexander Zakharchenko, which was later [used](#) for pro-Russian propaganda.

This strategy of inviting German politicians to state-sponsored and -affiliated events has continued since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Two AfD members, and one former Left Party member who switched to the BSW, [attended](#) a 2023 reception celebrating Russia's Victory Day at the Russian embassy in Berlin. At this reception, one of the AfD politicians personally [presented](#) the Russian ambassador to Germany with a gift "as an expression of gratitude for the liberation from Nazi rule." These invitations attempt to reinforce German politicians' perceptions of Russia as an ally and a liberator, even as Russia continues its genocidal war against Ukraine. The invitations also serve as part of the larger trend of building pro-Russia sentiment and fracturing German resolve against Russian aggression.

Individual Financial Incentives

As part of its patronage strategy, the Kremlin appears to target politicians with tailored financial support, including campaign contributions. For example, a leaked document alleged that an AfD politician [submitted](#) a "request for help" from Russia in his 2017 political campaign in exchange for promoting "good relations with the Russian Federation." In 2019, another leaked document, allegedly from the Kremlin, described him as "our own absolutely controlled MP in the Bundestag." In April 2024, German officials also began an [investigation](#) into another AfD member for accepting Russian payments while a Member of the European Parliament. In his speeches, this member had [called](#) for "empathy" with Russia, rejected the idea of Ukraine joining NATO, and claimed that NATO would be to blame for provoking a Russian attack if Ukraine ever joined the defensive alliance.¹⁸

Other Russian financial aid can target an individual politician's interests outside the Bundestag to try to gain a closer personal connection to the politician. In 2024, in a move that garnered criticism from

members of the Bundestag and even some members from his own party, an AfD politician [accepted](#) an offer from the state-financed Gnessin Russian Academy of Music in Moscow for an honorary professorship position. This politician had participated in the 20th Bundestag's committees for foreign and European Union affairs. Targeted financial assistance from Russia, especially when based on personal interests, can help cement German political attitudes favorable to Russia.

Publicity

Russia has provided German politicians with opportunities to endorse Kremlin talking points on Russian state television. By showcasing Bundestag members repeating Russian state views, propaganda has reached a new, more mainstream and international audience. Through these state media invitations, Russia has sought to use the stature of Bundestag officials to further normalize its views.

The Kremlin has aimed its publicity strategy at German politicians in the AfD and BSW. In 2023, Vladimir Solovyov, a Russian state media figure who is [sanctioned](#) by the EU, hosted an AfD politician who criticized German media for attempting to turn the German people against Russia.²² A BSW member who had sat on the Bundestag's committee for foreign affairs has been regularly invited by Russian state news outlet RT to falsely claim that NATO, Germany, and the EU orchestrated the Ukrainian Maidan Revolution. RT quoted this BSW member as recently as January 2025 for encouraging Germany to [reactivate](#) the NordStream pipeline and for Germany to "stop giving money to Kiev!"²⁵ Such international publicity is an attempt to emphasize and legitimize Kremlin positions when repeated by German politicians.

Conclusion

Russia's attempts to influence elected officials to promote the Kremlin's agenda extend far beyond Germany. As demonstrated in this case study, Russia targets those predisposed to sympathize with Russia or respond to its overtures based on their historical experiences. As such, all democracies must be vigilant against these operations. With a constant and deeper awareness of Russia's influence operation strategies, democracies can work to resist influence operations and prevent further Russian attempts to normalize its aggression.

50 Years of the Helsinki Final Act: A Defining Moment for the U.S.-Led World Order

Anna Baramidze, Anna Maria Papadopoulos & Yasy Celikoyar, Georgetown University

Introduction

The U.S.-led international order stands at a critical juncture. Fifty years after the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, which sought to reduce tensions between great powers and establish principles for peaceful cooperation, the global landscape is once again marked by confrontation and division. Authoritarian regimes are working deliberately to undermine these principles and challenge the leadership of the United States and its democratic allies.

Where the East-West divide of the 1970s was symbolized by the Berlin Wall, today's front line runs through Ukraine. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launched in February 2022, represents not only an assault on a sovereign nation but also a direct challenge to the international norms that have underpinned global stability for decades. Russia pursues the same imperialist ambitions that defined its Cold War posture – but today, the challenge is broader than Moscow alone. Russia is now emboldened by a coalition of authoritarian powers—including China, Iran, and North Korea—each seeking to expand its sphere of influence and reshape the rules of global governance in ways that favor coercion over cooperation, and force over law.

While these regimes may lack a unifying ideology, they are bound by a singular ambition: to overturn the post-World War II order and replace it with a system that tolerates aggression, repression, and impunity.

The erosion of these norms did not begin in 2022. For years, Moscow tested Western resolve, exploiting hesitation and disunity among democratic nations. Efforts to “reset” relations with Russia, along with inconsistent responses to earlier acts of aggression—in Georgia, Crimea, Syria, and elsewhere – signaled a dangerous unwillingness to confront these threats decisively. The result has been an emboldened axis of authoritarian powers, increasingly coordinated in their efforts to challenge Western influence.

The outcome of the war in Ukraine will serve as a defining moment for the future of the international order. Beyond the question of Ukraine's sovereignty, the terms of an eventual settlement will shape the global balance of power for years to come. If the United States does not act from a position of strength, it risks accepting conditions dictated by our adversaries who seek to normalize territorial conquest and coercion. The message sent by the outcome of this war will ripple across the world, reaching those states that have maintained a balancing act between competing interests, the East and the West. In Eastern Europe, Belarus, Serbia, Georgia, and Turkey are at the center of the contest and present opportunities where the United States can effectively partner to strengthen democratic engagement and counter authoritarian influence. In contrast, if Russia emerges with even partial success, it will validate a model of governance where military aggression and coercion supersede international law.

The United States must move beyond half-measures and rhetoric—and resist the temptation to turn inward, abandoning the system of cooperation and leadership that has preserved peace, fostered prosperity, and upheld international stability for generations. By reasserting dominance in the Indo-

Pacific, strengthening military deterrence in Europe, and deploying economic and technological tools to counter authoritarian influence, the United States can ensure that peace is secured through strength.

The History of the Helsinki Commission

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe—commonly known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission—was established in 1976 to monitor compliance with the provisions of the Helsinki Final Act. Signed in 1975 by 35 nations, including the United States, the Soviet Union, and nearly every country in Europe, the Helsinki Final Act was the outcome of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and laid the pillars for a human rights and democracy-centered foreign policy through its ten principles that included territorial integrity, non-intervention, peaceful dispute resolution, economic cooperation, human rights, and fundamental freedoms. President Gerald Ford, speaking at the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, emphasized that peace is “not a static achievement but an ongoing process, requiring mutual restraint and practical arrangements.”

To ensure that the commitments made in Helsinki were not merely symbolic, the U.S. Congress institutionalized oversight of the agreement’s implementation by creating the Helsinki Commission as an independent, bipartisan body within the U.S. government on June 3, 1976. Following the end of the Cold War and dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Helsinki Commission has expanded its focus to reflect the evolving security landscape. Over the past several decades, its work has addressed issues including election integrity, the rule of law, trafficking in persons, anti-Semitism, and anti-corruption issues. Yet its core mission remains unchanged: to hold governments accountable to the principles they endorsed in Helsinki and to advance comprehensive security rooted in the defense of fundamental rights and freedoms.

Nearly five decades later, the work of the Helsinki Commission continues to meet these challenges head-on. A clear pattern emerges from the last five decades: whenever Russia has been in a period of internal weakness, democracy has flourished in Europe. But when Moscow regains strength, it moves swiftly to reverse those gains through military aggression, political interference, and disinformation. After two decades of rising Russian hostility, the world stands at a crossroads. The United States and its allies must choose whether to reinforce the post-Cold War security framework or allow Russian revisionism to go unchecked. The lessons of the past fifty years are clear: when America leads with resolve, democracy thrives. When that leadership recedes, authoritarian powers exploit the vacuum. The Helsinki Commission’s legacy—and its ongoing work—serves as a reminder that defending these principles remains as urgent today as it was at the height of the Cold War.



U.S. President Gerald Ford and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev signing the Helsinki Final Act at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), on August 1, 1975

From Isolation to Coordination: The Rise of the Authoritarian Bloc

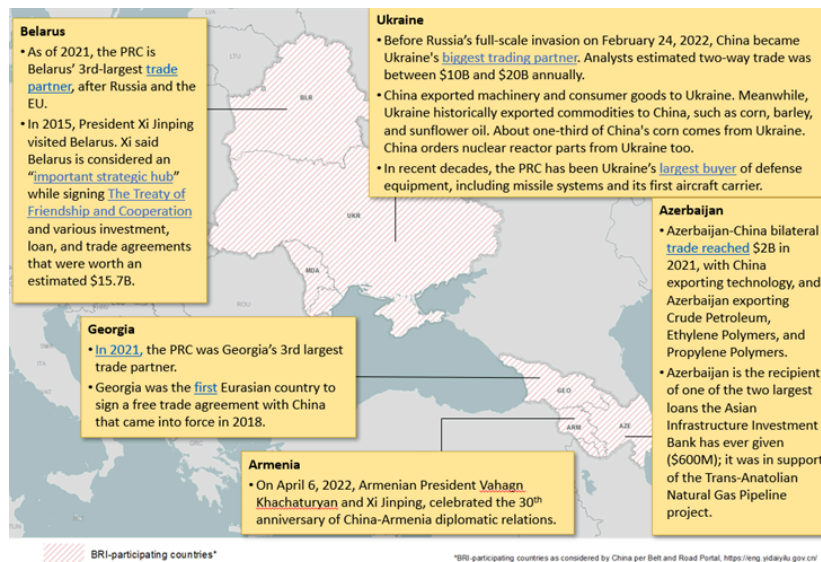
The United States must be assertive in demonstrating that no viable alternatives to the current international system exists. States aligning with the axis of authoritarian powers – Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea – risk international isolation, economic stagnation, and strategic decline. This coalition of American adversaries has capitalized on divisions in the West to forge a coordinated front, offering each other strategic lifelines while expanding their influence in regions once dominated by the West. Nowhere has this realignment been more pronounced than in Eastern Europe, where Russia's war has drawn an irreversible line and forced nations to take sides. While Russia's war has reinforced transatlantic unity in many ways, it has also exposed deep divisions – pushing some traditional U.S. partners closer to Moscow, even as others have doubled down on their commitment to the Western alliance. The emergence of a cohesive authoritarian bloc presents a dangerous alternative to the U.S.-led order, intensifying a global environment defined by ideological and strategic confrontation.

China: Exploiting Chaos, Expanding Influence

Since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, China has positioned itself as the silent enabler of Moscow's war effort, subtly yet effectively ensuring Moscow's economic survival while positioning itself as the dominant force in this emerging alliance. Officially neutral yet unmistakably pro-Kremlin, Beijing has extended critical political and economic support that has helped Moscow survive Western sanctions.

China has seized the opportunity to purchase discounted Russian energy, which has allowed Russia to bypass sanctions, stabilized the Kremlin's revenues, and deepened Moscow's dependence on Chinese markets and financial systems. Meanwhile, under the guise of civilian exports, Beijing has supplied Russia with critical dual-use technologies for weapons manufacturing. Military cooperation has expanded, including through joint naval drills near Japan and Alaska.

While Russia wages war in Europe, Beijing reaps the benefits and has used the distraction to prepare for its own confrontation in Taiwan by expanding its military presence in the South China Sea and increasing airspace incursions. Additionally, China has expanded its footprint in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus through Belt and Road Initiative investments, digital infrastructure, arms sales to Belarus, and cultural programs like Confucius Institutes—signaling its long-term intent to reshape the regional order.



China's expanding influence in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus
- Graphic by U.S. House of Representatives, Foreign Affairs Committee

Iran: An Authoritarian Alliance Solidified

Iran has seized Russia's war on Ukraine to emerge as an indispensable player in the new authoritarian coalition. What began as a pragmatic alliance between Moscow and Tehran—rooted in mutual hostility toward the West—has evolved into a deeply entrenched security partnership with global consequences. Iran's provision of lethal Shahed-136 drones has enabled Moscow to sustain its brutal onslaught against Ukrainian infrastructure, while growing cooperation with Belarus has made these logistical networks more efficient and resilient. In return, Russia has provided Iran with surveillance and cyber capabilities, aiding Tehran in suppressing domestic dissent and reinforcing its grip on power. The recently signed Comprehensive Strategic Partnership cements long-term military and security collaboration. Beyond the battlefield, Tehran and Moscow have worked to bypass Western sanctions and deepen economic ties. Iran's bid to join the Eurasian Economic Union signals its desire to further integrate with Russia's economic sphere. Emboldened by this alliance, Tehran has escalated its destabilizing activities across the Middle East—arming Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and other militias—while accelerating its nuclear ambitions under cover of geopolitical chaos, most notably in the lead-up to the October 7 attack on Israel.

North Korea: The Rogue State at Russia's Side

Russia and North Korea are bound by mutual interest, not trust—a partnership driven exclusively by reciprocal gains. Kim Jong-un used the outset of Russia's war on Ukraine to strengthen his relationship with Moscow by positioning Pyongyang as a critical supplier of munitions. Since 2022, North Korea has transferred an estimated 2.8 million artillery shells annually to Russia, sustaining its relentless bombardment of Ukrainian positions. In return, Russia has extended unprecedented diplomatic and economic support, accelerating North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. The Putin–Kim summits of 2023 and 2024 culminated in an agreement that revived elements of their Soviet-era military pact; Article 3 of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty commits both nations to provide "military and other assistance by all means available" in the event of war. As of late 2024, 10,000 North Korean

troops have already been deployed to Ukraine, reinforcing exhausted Russian units on the front lines—a provocative move that Seoul and NATO cannot ignore.



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russia's President Vladimir Putin shake hands after signing a comprehensive strategic partnership in Pyongyang, North Korea, June 19, 2024

Catalyzed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, autocratic states have increased their strategic coordination, collaborating while offering economic, military, and diplomatic support to regimes that resist Western pressure. This growing unity underscores the fracturing of the international order, where alliances and rivalries are increasingly shaped by national interests rather than ideological alignment. The outcome of the conflict will determine whether Moscow's influence over its region and growing alignment with other illiberal regimes weakens under sustained Western resistance or tightens into a more entrenched authoritarian coalition.

The United States and its allies now find themselves in a race to counterbalance this emergent axis. If left unchecked, this coalition of autocrats will continue to escalate tensions, drawing more nations into its fold and further eroding the fragile stability that has defined the post-Cold War era. The invasion of Ukraine has marked a turning point with irreversible consequences, forcing states that previously cloaked themselves in democratic rhetoric to reveal their true allegiances. The world has entered a period of open strategic recalibration, where the illusion of neutrality has been shattered. Authoritarian regimes worldwide are no longer isolated: they are emboldened, coordinated, and defiant. And we must meet them head-on.

Pressure Points for U.S. Engagement

When the United States withdraws from global leadership, Russia advances—filling strategic vacuums with authoritarian influence. Nowhere is this more evident than in Eastern Europe, where diminished U.S. engagement has emboldened Moscow's regional ambitions. Yet Belarus, Serbia, Turkey, and Georgia each represent critical pressure points where U.S. leadership can shift the balance. Recent mass demonstrations in Belgrade, Tbilisi, and Istanbul reveal populations willing to resist authoritarian drift. Reorienting Belarus and Serbia away from Russia and re-anchoring Georgia and Turkey more firmly to the West would signal that the United States remains committed to shaping the strategic landscape, not abandoning it. All four countries, in different ways, have enabled Russia's war effort—whether through

close trade ties, sanctions evasion, military cooperation, disinformation campaigns, or alignment with the Kremlin's foreign policy. Seizing the opportunities to push the needle would send a clear signal that the United States is not retreating in Eastern Europe but instead leading through strength. The impact of such leadership would extend well beyond Europe, into the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.

Belarus: A Regime Shackled to Moscow

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Belarus has ceased to function as an independent state. Instead, it has become an extension of Moscow, facilitating Putin's war while shielding him from accountability.

For over three decades, Alyaksandr Lukashenka has ruled Belarus with an iron grip, becoming one of Europe's most isolated and repressive regimes. The January 2025 presidential election exposed a total disregard for democratic norms. Opposition candidates were mere props, barred from criticizing the regime, and the outcome was predetermined. Yet beneath this display of control, the foundations of Lukashenka's grip on power are increasingly fragile. As Lukashenka begins his most unpredictable term, two challenges threaten his rule: Belarus's growing dependence on Russia and the uncertainty of his succession.

Belarus is now fully in Putin's orbit, even though it maintains some alliances within the broader axis. These relationships are largely mediated through Moscow, with its economy tethered to Russia's fortunes—its currency moving with the ruble and its industries dependent on Kremlin decisions. Any turbulence in Russia—economic downturns, political upheaval, or military setbacks—has the potential to send shockwaves through Minsk. Lukashenka's desperate attempts to portray himself as a neutral actor ring hollow as his country has become a vassal of the Kremlin. Russian troops use Belarus as a launchpad for attacks on Ukraine, while Moscow's nuclear weapons are stationed on Belarusian soil. Joint exercises between Russian and Belarusian forces are no longer routine drills; they are dress rehearsals for potential conflict. The upcoming Zapad-2025 exercise will bring over 13,000 troops to Belarus, reinforcing its status as a forward base for Russian aggression. As Russia uses Belarus as a base for its military operations, Belarus is becoming a growing threat to Ukraine and NATO's eastern flank.

Belarus stands at a precipice. The war in Ukraine is drawing to its end, and when the battlefield quiets, Russia will reassess its priorities. If Moscow sees Belarus as a strategic asset worth integrating more deeply, Lukashenka may find himself discarded. If Russia's ability to subsidize Belarus diminishes, Lukashenka will be forced to find new ways to maintain his grip on power in an increasingly volatile environment.

Belarus is not doomed to eternal subjugation. The Belarusian people have already shown their willingness to resist dictatorship, most vividly in the mass protests of 2020 and the election of Svitlana Tsikhanovskaya in the same year. If the moment arrives when the regime falters, there remains a path toward a different future. A Belarusian state that is free of Russian military entanglements, reintegrated with the European community, and charting its own independent course would reshape the security dynamics of Eastern Europe. The West must be ready for this possibility. To do otherwise is to cede Belarus's fate entirely to Moscow.

For now, Lukashenka may revel in his manufactured victories and his illusion of control. But history is not on his side. The machinery of repression cannot last forever, and the grip of a dictator, even one as

entrenched as Lukashenka, will eventually falter. When that moment comes, the question will not be whether Belarus can change but whether the world is ready to help it do so.

Serbia: A State in Play

Serbia represents both a complex challenge and a potential opening for Western engagement. While Belgrade is among Russia's closest allies in Europe, it has also signaled a willingness to engage with the West as it positions itself as a pragmatic foreign policy actor. This balancing act presents an opportunity for the United States and its allies to counteract Russian influence and encourage a more democratic and westward Serbia – yet a passive approach could allow Moscow to tighten its hold over the state, further destabilizing the Balkans and Europe at large.

Serbia has benefited from Moscow's diplomatic backing on the Kosovo issue while deepening its reliance through a joint three-year energy agreement. In return, Belgrade has refrained from imposing sanctions on Russia following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine and has maintained stable diplomatic relations. Russian involvement in Serbia extends beyond traditional diplomacy: it cultivates influence through shared religion, Orthodox Christianity, common pan-Slavic ideations, and a deep-rooted history of partnership, as well as substantial modern-day financial investments in key industries. Russia leverages Gazprom and Sberbank to strategically invest in Serbia, strengthening its political influence and leverage in the state. The Kremlin has also played a direct role in training nationalist and paramilitary groups in Serbia.

Despite these troubling partnerships, Serbia has also demonstrated a calculated openness to engage with the West. Notably, Serbia voted in the UN to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine and canceled numerous Russian weapons contracts, defying Moscow to maintain a viable path toward the West.

Prime Minister Milos Vucevic decision to step down in the face of mass demonstrations—sparked by what is widely perceived as government corruption—demonstrated that Belgrade is not immune to public pressure. To preserve his hold on power, President Aleksandar Vucic appointed Djuro Macut, a loyalist with no independent political agenda, as prime minister, making it unlikely he will pose any challenge to Vucic's authority.

Internally, the Serbian government's democratic institutions have steadily deteriorated under President Vucic. His administration has consolidated power through media control, electoral manipulation, and the suppression of opposition voices. Vucic's malign policies don't stop at Serbia's borders—they spill over into neighboring states. In Kosovo, Belgrade has repeatedly escalated tensions by supporting Serbian nationalist groups and refusing to recognize Kosovo's sovereignty. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia has provided political and financial backing to Republika Srpska's separatist leader, Milorad Dodik, whose rhetoric and policies threaten the territorial integrity of the Bosnian state. By refusing to distance itself from Russia's aggression and fueling instability in the Balkans, Serbia risks becoming a conduit for authoritarian influence at the heart of Europe.

While Serbia's close ties with Russia pose a clear challenge to U.S. foreign policy in the region, Belgrade's willingness to engage with both sides presents a rare opportunity for Western policymakers. The United States and its European allies must recognize that Belgrade's actions are driven not by ideological loyalty but by strategic pragmatism and work to gradually shift it into the Western orbit. Failure to act will continue to allow the Kremlin to leverage Serbia as a destabilizing force in the

Balkans. The next few years will be critical in determining whether Serbia takes steps to become a reliable partner for the West or a persistent obstacle in the arena of strategic competition.

Turkey: Toeing the Line Between the East and the West

Turkey has positioned itself as both an ally and a disruptor in the global arena. A NATO member with regional influence across Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia, Turkey under President Erdogan has increasingly embraced a self-serving, pragmatic, and transactional foreign policy. Rather than reinforcing democracy at home and neoliberal principles in its foreign policy, Ankara has chosen, at times, to engage with adversaries of the United States as a broader strategy to enhance its global influence and pursue President Erdogan's interests.

While publicly supporting Ukrainian sovereignty, Turkey has simultaneously expanded economic ties with Moscow, providing the Kremlin with vital economic relief from Western sanctions. By maintaining open trade and deepening energy cooperation with Russia—now its top crude oil and natural gas supplier—Turkey has actively eroded the Western pressure designed to isolate Putin's regime. Yet Ankara's diplomatic relationship with Moscow has also enabled it to play a unique mediating role, including negotiating prisoner-of-war exchanges that even Kyiv has acknowledged as valuable.

Within NATO, Turkey's behavior has further challenged alliance cohesion. Ankara has used its strategic position to delay the accession of Sweden and Finland, extract concessions, and delay pivotal security decisions. While NATO is built on a collective commitment to democracy, Turkey's domestic governance trends have been of high concern as Ankara centralizes executive authority and undermines judicial independence.

Yet 2025 has shown the desire within Turkish society for a more accountable and pluralistic government. Turkey has been engulfed in large-scale protests since the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu—Erdogan's biggest challenger—and the annulment of his university degree just before his expected presidential nomination. The mass movement reflects an increasing popular desire for a more accountable and less corrupt government, with the promise of laying the foundation for an era of democratic renewal.

Adding to the cautious optimism is the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) recent declaration of a ceasefire following a historic call by its imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan to disarm and dissolve. Though Ankara has not yet reopened formal peace talks, the ceasefire—if sustained—represents a rare opportunity to de-escalate a 40-year conflict that has cost thousands of lives. The conflict has been a friction point between Ankara and Washington. Normalizing relations between historically adversarial parties could alleviate diplomatic strain and lead to increased cooperation over regional security and military operations.

The survival of the international order depends not only on countering external threats but also on confronting those within the system who undermine its core tenets. Turkey's role in this struggle is pivotal. A Turkey that recommits to values of NATO and the EU would be a strategic asset: its geographic position, military strength, and economic potential could serve as a vital anchor against Russian aggression, Iranian ambitions, and instability in the Eastern Mediterranean. Conversely, a more autocratic Turkey lacking any semblance of the rule of law could embolden other quasi-authoritarians within NATO's ranks.

The United States must reject complacency. Ankara can no longer play both sides. Half-measures have already emboldened Moscow and soon will embolden Beijing and Tehran. America's message must be loud and clear: those who undermine our order—ally or not—will face consequences. At the same time, we must recognize and support those within Turkey who are fighting for a more democratic Turkey accountable to its people and constitution. The path forward lies not in isolation but in conditional engagement: providing tangible incentives for reform while preparing to impose costs for continued defiance of universal values Turkey has voluntarily taken upon itself to uphold.

Georgia: Between Moscow's Grip and Europe's Promise

It is strategically important for the United States to ensure the existence of a democratic Georgia in a region plagued by a long history of authoritarianism. For years, Georgia stood as a beacon of democratic progress and European aspiration in the post-Soviet space, acting as a constructive partner. Tbilisi's trajectory reflected a clear rejection of Russian dominance and a fundamental belief that Georgia's long-term security and prosperity lay within the Euro-Atlantic community.

Georgia's reversal came in 2022, when, as the world united to confront Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, Georgian Dream – led by oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili who had made his fortune in Russian and still maintains close ties to the country—chose appeasement over solidarity. As Europe and the United States imposed sweeping sanctions to isolate Russia's war economy, the Georgian government welcomed Russian capital, opened its financial systems to Moscow's needs, and reinstituted direct flights between the two capitals. The Georgian Dream government also enabled the evasion of sanctions imposed against Russia. Tbilisi emerged as a critical economic and political satellite of Moscow.

Georgian Dream simultaneously launched a sustained campaign against the very civil society organizations, independent media outlets, and pro-democracy activists that had for decades served as the backbone of Georgia's democratic progress. Georgian Dream's rhetoric grew increasingly hostile toward the West, falsely blaming Brussels and Washington for trying to destabilize the country and drag it into war with Russia. Ivanishvili's government framed Georgia's supposed neutrality—in reality, a quiet alignment with Moscow—as the only way to avoid becoming another Ukraine.

The rigged parliamentary elections of 2024 marked the culmination of the authoritarian drift. Independent observers, including the OSCE, found widespread irregularities and concluded that the elections did not meet democratic standards. The election was not just a domestic affair, it was a geopolitical turning point that signaled Georgia's transition from a flawed democracy to a Russian client state.

The outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine will have profound consequences for Georgia's future. While parts of Ukraine are occupied by the Russian military, Georgia has been equally infiltrated by Russia through its intelligence apparatus. A Russian victory or even a protracted frozen conflict will embolden Ivanishvili's government, validating its narrative that accommodating Moscow is the only path to security and stability. However, a Ukrainian victory, particularly one backed by sustained Western military and economic support, would send a clear message to Georgians that Russian imperial ambitions can be defeated and that resisting Moscow remains both possible and necessary.

For the United States and its European allies, Georgia's backsliding is not just a regional concern; it is a direct threat to the strategic balance in the Black Sea and South Caucasus. Georgia has long served as

a critical node for east-west trade, energy transit, and regional security cooperation. Losing Georgia to Moscow would isolate Ukraine, weaken Western influence in the South Caucasus, and embolden Russian revisionism across the region. Georgia's shift also undermines the credibility of Western support for democracy and sovereignty across the post-Soviet space.

The U.S. and EU must act decisively and in unison. The 2024 elections should not be recognized, nor should the illegitimate government in Tbilisi. Furthermore, the U.S. should pass the bipartisan Megobari Act, imposing targeted sanctions on Ivanishvili and the corrupt government, defense, and media officials who have facilitated Georgia's authoritarian slide. Any future Western engagement with Georgia's government should be strictly conditioned on new, internationally monitored elections that reflect the genuine will of the Georgian people.

Georgia exemplifies the high stakes of a retreat from Ukraine. Georgian and Ukrainian futures are one and the same. If Moscow is allowed to dominate over Kyiv, Tbilisi will suffer the same fate. Failure to act with strength risks more than the loss of two allies—it threatens the collapse of Western influence in the Eastern European region.



Rally in support of the MEGOBARI Act, introduced by Commission Co-Chairman Rep. Joe Wilson in the U.S. House of Representatives, on March 27, 2025, in Tbilisi, Georgia

All four countries reveal a pattern of democratic decline and increasing alignment with Russian interests, though to varying degrees. All four have experienced a rise in democratic backsliding, where ruling parties concentrate power, weaken institutions, and silence dissent. Each has played a role—direct or indirect—in helping Russia evade Western sanctions, whether through trade, financial channels, or energy partnerships. Anti-Western rhetoric is another commonality, with leaders blaming the United States and Europe for internal challenges while presenting themselves as defenders of national sovereignty. Politically, they have all moved closer to the Kremlin, though the depth of alignment differs. Belarus stands as the most extreme case, effectively a Russian satellite state hosting Moscow's troops and nuclear weapons, with no real autonomy. Turkey, by contrast, remains a formal NATO ally but has pursued an increasingly transactional relationship with the West while expanding economic and diplomatic ties with Russia. Serbia and Georgia occupy an uneasy middle ground—engaging with the West rhetorically but enabling Russian influence in practice.

Yet, amid these deteriorating conditions, one powerful thread connects all four countries: their people. Each has seen mass demonstrations—clear, courageous expressions of public resistance to

authoritarianism and Russian influence. These movements reflect a deep desire for transparency, accountability, and a democratic future tied to the West. The United States must recognize that a new generation is emerging as a powerful force for change. By supporting democratic movements, engagements conditioned on Western reforms, and countering Russian entrenchment, the U.S. can help push the needle.

From Tbilisi to Belgrade, the rally cry calls for a free future—one outside of Moscow’s shadow and under the Western promise.

The Ukraine War and Its Broader Implications

As the war in Ukraine drags into its fourth year, the United States and its allies face a defining moment in the preservation of global stability. The trajectory of the conflict holds profound implications not only for Ukraine’s sovereignty but also for the integrity of the transatlantic alliance and U.S. regional presence. The outcomes of this war will set a precedent for future conflicts, determining whether territorial conquest through force is met with decisive resistance or tacit acceptance. American leadership in the coming months will define whether authoritarian regimes worldwide perceive military aggression as a viable tool for achieving their strategic ambitions or face clear limits to audacious actions.

The Ripple Effect

The outcome of peace negotiations in Ukraine will set the precedent for 21st-century international security. The foundational principles of the international system that have preserved relative peace and stability hangs in the balance. Ukrainian victory would signal the resilience of the Western alliance and its global authority. Borders cannot be redrawn by force, war crimes will be accounted for, and American adversaries will pay the cost for their aggressions—Russia will serve as an example for those who dare test the Western resolve.

Failure to secure a just peace will have lasting implications for U.S. interests and transatlantic cohesion. A victorious or partially successful Russia would fuel demands for further NATO expansion, the deployment of U.S. forces deeper into Eastern Europe, and the creation of new security frameworks to contain Moscow. Such an outcome would tie down American military resources, draw Washington into an indefinite European security commitment, and detract from U.S. strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, it would fracture confidence in the U.S.-led international order. Preventing these outcomes begins with Ukraine’s victory; only through the defeat of Russian aggression can Europe stabilize, NATO endure, and American global leadership remain credible.

The peace forged in Ukraine must make clear that wars of conquest will end in ruin, not reward.

Negotiating for Ukraine’s Future: The Terms of A Just Peace

The U.S. approach to peace in Ukraine must begin with an unambiguous commitment to Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. Putin must not be allowed to achieve his imperialistic ambitions of territorial expansion through the devastation of the Ukrainian land and people. The precedent of altering borders through force could challenge long-standing principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, destroying international norms that have kept the United States and many of our partners free and largely at peace for almost a century.

The U.S. must be at the helm of any meaningful peace settlement. However, it must approach negotiations with calculated skepticism. Moscow's consistent pattern of violating agreements—from the Helsinki Final Act to the Budapest Memorandum and the most recent temporary ceasefire of the Jeddah talks—underscores a basic reality: sustainable peace can never be built on Russia's promises alone.

An agreement to end the war must include ironclad security guarantees for Ukraine backed not only by words but by concrete military commitments and binding defense frameworks. Continued military support—including the provision of advanced weaponry, intelligence sharing, and joint training initiatives—will further enhance Ukraine's capacity to defend itself and ensure that its military is equipped to meet future challenges without requiring the same level of emergency support. Ultimately, Ukraine's successful integration into key strategic alliance frameworks, supported by a sustained and unwavering partnership with the United States and Europe, will be the most powerful guarantee of peace and stability after the war.

Any comprehensive commitment to Ukraine's future must place the Ukrainian people at its core. A durable peace must include a comprehensive plan to reconstruct Ukraine's civilian infrastructure, devastated by Russian carpet-bombardments. The fastest and most just solution is to leverage the roughly \$300 billion in frozen Russian sovereign assets held abroad. This initiative would alleviate the burden on international aid mechanisms and ensure that the cost of rebuilding Ukraine is assumed by Moscow rather than Western taxpayers.

Any post-war recovery plan must also hold Russia accountable for war crimes. The estimated 20,000 Ukrainian children who were forcibly deported to Russian-controlled territories and indoctrinated must be returned to their homeland. Further, Russia must face consequences for its campaign of terror against Ukrainian civilians – indiscriminate missile strikes, the targeting of civilian infrastructure, filtration camps, torture, and sexual violence. Putin must not be allowed to trample on international law and just war principles.

Finally, peace in Ukraine must not signal the end of Western engagement but rather the deepening of Ukraine's integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. Enhanced economic, military, and political cooperation will firmly bind Ukraine permanently to the West. Such an unwavering partnership will not only ensure a prosperous future for Ukraine but also ensure that Moscow's brutal gamble ends in strategic defeat.

Conclusion: The Rules-Based Order Will Not Survive Another Retreat

The survival of the U.S.-led international order depends not on rhetoric but on the relentless enforcement of its principles. The Helsinki Final Act was a strategic declaration that the postwar order would be governed by rules, not by force. For decades, the West has indulged in misguided illusions—that Russia could be reasoned with, that economic interdependence would replace military deterrence, and that treaties and international institutions alone could prevent great-power conflict. These illusions were shattered on February 24, 2022 when Russia launched its full scale invasion of Ukraine. This most recent attempt to redraw its borders by force has made clear that Putin and his partners wish to replace the rules-based order we created with a world characterized by instability and governed by force. The failure to respond decisively in 2008, 2014, and the early stages of this war emboldened not only Moscow but also Beijing, Tehran, and Pyongyang. Half-measures do not deter aggression; they invite it.

There is no neutral ground in this struggle. If the United States fails to lead, others will fill the vacuum—Russia with coercion, China with economic dominance, Iran with regional destabilization, and North Korea with nuclear escalation. The balance of power is shifting, and each act of Western hesitation accelerates that shift. The transatlantic alliance must not only sustain Ukraine’s military resistance but also secure its long-term integration into Western frameworks, preventing any future attempts to dismantle its sovereignty. We must use the economic and technological tools at our disposal ruthlessly against Moscow and its allies, ensuring that their capacity to wage war is permanently crippled.

This is the inflection point. The United States can either reaffirm its role as the indispensable leader of the free world or resign itself to a future where revisionist powers dictate the terms of global order. History will not judge kindly those who choose to appease and accommodate.

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