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Introduction

The Volume's Context and Foci

Felix Riefer

On the evening of 23 February 2022, as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) convened an emergency meeting to prevent further escalation in Ukraine, Russia launched its full-scale invasion.¹ During the meeting, President Vladimir Putin's declaration of a "special military operation" was broadcast live. Simultaneously, Russian military actions commenced across multiple locations in Ukraine, starkly illustrating the disconnect between diplomatic engagement and the unfolding military aggression. Reflecting on this moment in a subsequent meeting, Germany's then Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock remarked: "You, Russia, broke the peace in Europe."² Her statement encapsulated the growing consensus among international leaders that Russia was not engaging in diplomacy in good faith, but rather exploiting the global stage to manipulate public opinion while pursuing a war of territorial expansion.

By 2025, between February and May, the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war entered a new phase marked by intensified international engagement and complex diplomatic maneuvering – reflecting both growing Western impatience and Russia's continued pursuit of revisionist objectives.

On 18 February 2025, the newly re-elected U.S. President Donald Trump, amid his campaign efforts, reignited controversy with inflammatory remarks directed at Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Concurrently, reports surfaced suggesting that Trump

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- 1 United Nations (2022) "Russian Federation Announces 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine as Security Council Meets in Eleventh-Hour Effort to Avoid Full-Scale Conflict," February 23, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14803.doc.htm>.
 - 2 United Nations (2024) "Marking Two Years Since Russian Federation's Full-Scale Invasion, Secretary-General Stresses Charter, International Law Guides to Peace in Ukraine," February 23, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15601.doc.htm>.

may have promised significant concessions to Russian President Vladimir Putin, raising concerns about a potential dramatic shift in U.S. policy toward the war.³ These developments culminated in a failed bilateral meeting between Trump and Zelensky on 28 February, which ended in scandal and a complete breakdown of the talks that day. This incident highlights the instability and fragmentation of international responses to the Russian aggression against Ukraine.⁴

Nevertheless, under mounting pressure to deliver on his campaign pledge to end the war swiftly, Trump's administration brokered a 30-day Black Sea ceasefire not covering the general front-line, and announced on 18 March 2025.⁵ While initially welcomed, the ceasefire was widely perceived as tactical; observers noted Russia's lack of commitment to a durable resolution, as it continued to demand preconditions unacceptable to Ukraine and its allies such as the reversal of NATO's eastward expansion and the denial of Ukrainian sovereignty.

A significant diplomatic development unfolded on 10 May 2025, when four key European leaders—newly elected German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, French President Emmanuel Macron, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk—jointly visited Kyiv's Maidan to commemorate the victims of the Russian aggression.⁶ The event concluded with the issuance of a European ultimatum demanding an immediate and

3 Sharp, A. (2025) "Trump Trades Barbs with Zelensky," *Foreign Policy*, February 19, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/19/zelensky-trump-dictator-ukraine-elections-putin/>.

4 King's College London (2025) "Understanding the Fallout from the Trump-Zelensky Oval Office Meeting," March 3, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/understanding-the-fallout-from-the-trump-zelensky-oval-office-meeting>.

5 Cancian, M. and Snegovaya, M. (2025) "The Trump-Putin Phone Call: Some Promise, Some Disappointments, and Many Questions," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, March 18, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/trump-putin-phone-call-some-promise-some-disappointments-and-many-questions>.

6 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (2025) "Was Merz, Macron, Starmer und Tusk in Kiew erreichen wollen," May 9, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ukraine/ukraine-besuch-was-merz-macron-starmer-und-tusk-in-kiew-erreichen-wollen-110467982.html>.

unconditional ceasefire,⁷ symbolizing a moment of rare political unity and transnational solidarity among Western powers.⁸

Subsequently, on 19 May 2025, Russia appeared to moderate its rhetoric slightly by proposing the formulation of a memorandum to guide potential peace negotiations. However, this gesture was undercut by Moscow's simultaneous reaffirmation of its long-standing strategic objectives—particularly the dismantling of Ukrainian statehood and the rollback of the Western security architecture in Eastern Europe—casting significant doubt on the sincerity of its proposal.⁹

Amid ongoing developments, Pope Leo XIV offered the Vatican as a mediator in the peace process, proposing to suspend enforcement of the ICC's (International Criminal Court) arrest warrants against Russian leadership during formal negotiations. A prerequisite for Putin's participation in talks with Ukrainian President Zelensky would be Rome's assurance that it would not execute the ICC warrant against him. Reportedly, the Italian Ministry of Justice has not forwarded the ICC warrant to the Rome Public Prosecutor's Office, making it unenforceable under current law. Italian media also suggest the government may join the Vatican's mediation efforts, positioning Rome as a neutral venue for dialogue.¹⁰

Despite these diplomatic openings, the Ukrainian government and its Western allies have remained firm in their position: any negotiations must begin with an immediate ceasefire and aim toward a just and sustainable peace grounded in international law and the

7 The Economist (2025) "Ukraine's European backers challenge Putin to commit to a 30-day ceasefire," May 10, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/05/10/ukraines-european-backers-challenge-putin-to-commit-to-a-30-day-cease-fire>.

8 European Council (2025) "Press release EUCO 11/25 on Ukraine," March 20, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/03/20/european-council-20-march-2025-ukraine/>.

9 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (2025) "Russland nennt Bedingungen für Waffenruhe," May 31, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ukraine/die-lage-in-der-ukraine-russland-nennt-bedingungen-fuer-waffenruhe-110509376.html>.

10 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (2025) "Gibt es bald Verhandlungen im Vatikan?" May 20, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ukraine/ukrainekrieg-gibt-es-bald-verhandlungen-im-vatikan-110487772.html>.

restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Deep skepticism persists regarding Russia's intentions, particularly given its continued military aggression and uncompromising demands.

Thus, Trump's peace initiatives concerning Ukraine dominated the second half of 2025, following a consistent pattern:¹¹ Washington first tabled a Kremlin-friendly proposal. Ukraine and its allies then sought to moderate it, yielding a compromise – only for Russia to reject it and demand impossible conditions. Pressure subsequently mounted anew on Ukraine.

Finally, the second Trump presidency has redefined the international order. Rather than anchoring and projecting liberal principles, it has consolidated personalized authoritarian rule and accelerated withdrawal from international institutions.¹² Speculation about Greenland's annexation, questioning Western alliance structures, and the recent capture of Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro underscores the destabilizing potential of this form of "unconventional diplomacy."¹³ Nevertheless, the latest Paris summit on 6 January 2026 produced several noteworthy shifts in this emerging configuration of power.¹⁴

Consequently, European states must assume greater responsibility for their own security and defense. To deter Russia, Eastern Central European countries remain primarily reliant on the two nuclear powers, Great Britain and France, as well as on reassurance from Germany. Moreover, a rules-based order – intended for indefinite enforcement – requires more rigorous conceptualization in power-political terms to render it truly realizable.

11 Economist (2025) "Ukraine struggles to cope with America's destructive peace plans," 11 December, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/12/11/ukraine-struggles-to-cope-with-americas-destructive-peace-plans>.

12 Riefer, F. (2025) "Russland-Politik im Spiegel der doppelten Zeitenwende" lecture at the Zwetajewa-Zentrum University of Freiburg, 20 May, <https://youtube.com/RXEEzjGfscQ?si=deNjBln3UI3EEImk>.

13 NSS (2025) "National Security Strategy of the United States of America" official document, November, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

14 Paris Declaration (2026) "Robust Security Guarantees for a Solid and Lasting Peace in Ukraine," official document, 6 January, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2026/01/06/robust-security-guarantees-for-a-solid-and-lasting-peace-in-ukraine>.

This ongoing situation exemplifies the intricate interplay of symbolic diplomacy, great-power rivalry, and the search for credible mediation mechanisms in a conflict at the heart of Europe's security order amid shifting paradigms in international affairs. Therefore, for many European nations, 24 February 2022 has become a historical watershed in relations with Moscow—a *Zeitenwende*, as former German Chancellor Olaf Scholz famously termed it. Germany, long known for its conciliatory posture toward the Kremlin, has since emerged as a central supporter of Kyiv. Yet many policy-makers still fail to grasp the deeper dynamics at play in Russia, Ukraine, and other post-Soviet states. Against this background, our volume proposes to revisit earlier scholarly contributions published mainly (but not exclusively) in the *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* (JSPPS), and *Forum für osteuropäische Ideen- und Zeitgeschichte* (Forum for the Contemporary History and Ideas of Eastern Europe), with the aim of critically reflecting on certain relevant developments in Russia before 2022—namely, the evolution of its historical memory, ideological currents, and foreign policy ambitions.

The first part of this omnibus volume examines various aspects of Russian post-Soviet nationalism, imperialism and anti-Westernism as components of current Russian identity. The second half explores geopolitics and conspiracy theories, highlighting the factors contributing to Russia's involvement in regional conflicts and its military actions against Ukraine.

The anthology opens with **Michael McFaul's** chapter, which critically examines the evolving relationship between Russian society and imperialism under Vladimir Putin. Initially, post-Soviet Russia showed promise for democratic reform and Western alignment. However, over two decades, Russia regressed into autocracy, driven by Putin's manipulation of political institutions, media control, and anti-Western rhetoric. The Russian public, once diverse in opinion, now includes a mix of staunch regime supporters, oppositionists, and a politically apathetic majority. McFaul argues that Russia's imperial aggression in Ukraine is no longer solely Putin's war and reflects broader societal complicity. Yet, he also suggests hope. As in previous eras, a shift away from autocracy and toward

democratic engagement may reemerge once Putin's regime ends, reshaping societal attitudes anew.

Kaarina Aitamurto's chapter explores *Rodnoverie* (Slavic Native Faith)—a revivalist Slavic Pagan movement intertwining spiritual, nationalistic, and political discourses in post-Soviet Russia. Rooted in a rejection of Western liberalism and Christian universality, *Rodnoverie* seeks to reestablish a native Russian identity through ethnic spirituality. The movement's permutations vary widely: from extreme ethno-nationalist and xenophobic factions to more pluralistic, ecologically oriented groups like the Circle of Pagan Tradition. Although once marginal, *Rodnoverie* has gained visibility within nationalist politics, particularly as a critique of globalization, multiculturalism, and liberal modernity. Simultaneously, it embodies postmodern religious individualism, mirroring global Pagan trends. The study underscores *Rodnoverie's* dual role in both reinforcing nationalist mythologies and fragmenting them through decentralized, adaptive spirituality. Aitamurto presents *Rodnoverie* as both a cultural critique and a complex identity-making practice in modern Russia.

Leonid Luks critically examines the Russian journal *Elementy*, which aligns itself with classical Eurasianism but substantially diverges from its ideological core. While Eurasianism sought to preserve Russian cultural identity against Western influence through isolationism and unity among diverse ethnic groups, *Elementy* embraces a radical, militant worldview rooted in the anti-liberal extremism of the Weimar German Right. The journal exalts National Bolshevism and praises aspects of Nazi ideology, particularly its opposition to liberal democracy and universalism. Luks argues that *Elementy* distorts Eurasianist thought to legitimize far-right extremism, conspiratorial antisemitism, and geopolitical ambitions of Russian imperial revival, favoring ideological confrontation over cultural autonomy.

The chapter by **Andreas Umland** discusses whether Vladimir Zhirinovskii's ideology, as expressed in his 1993 book *The Last Dash to the South*, can be classified as a form of fascism. Umland argues that Zhirinovskii's vision of a Russian empire expanding to the Indian Ocean, framed as a civilizing mission against the "South," fits

Roger Griffin's definition of generic fascism as "palingenetic ultranationalism". The article critiques a 1994 court ruling against Egor Gaidar's description of Zhirinovskii as a fascist, asserting that such a label is justified. Umland also introduces the concept of "revolutionary imperialism" to describe this peculiar form of Russian fascism, which centers on national rebirth through a revolutionary rather than restorationist territorial conquest, i.e. an expansion going beyond lost irredenta of the past and rejuvenating the imperial nation.

Mikhail D. Suslov investigates two competing forms of contemporary Russian pan-Slavism: nationalist pan-Slavic fundamentalism and imperialist Eurasian pan-Slavism. While both ideologies claim historical and cultural legitimacy, they differ in scope and intent. Pan-Slavic fundamentalism, rooted in Orthodox Christian revivalism or neo-paganism, emphasizes cultural and spiritual unity among Slavs, often driven by anti-Western sentiment. Conversely, Eurasian pan-Slavism advances a broader imperial vision, aligning Russia with non-Western civilizations in opposition to Atlanticism. Suslov argues that Russia's pragmatic foreign policy masks an underlying ideological agenda shaped by these utopias. Ultimately, he predicts a synthesis of both movements—combining Orthodox messianism with imperial Eurasianism—highlighting their shared isolationist and anti-Western orientations as central to modern Russian identity politics.

Rosalind Marsh rounds up the first half of this volume by arguing that the late 1990s and early 2000s saw the emergence of a "new political novel" in Russia. This genre, encompassing varied ideological perspectives, reflects renewed literary engagement with political issues under Putin's "managed democracy." The paper examines the resurgence of right-wing, national-patriotic fiction, focusing first on established figures like Aleksandr Prokhanov and Eduard Limonov, who gained prominence in the early 21st century. It then explores a newer wave of nationalist literature, notably the *imperskii roman* (imperial novel), by younger authors such as Pavel Krusanov and Dmitrii Bykov. These works, advocating a strong state and imperialist vision, have found broad readership and critical acclaim.

The second half begins by the examination of the rise of oil-related conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia, focusing on their cultural, political, and economic underpinnings. The chapter by **Alexander Etkind** and **Ilya Yablokov** argues that Russia's dependence on oil has not only shaped its economy but also fostered a conspiratorial worldview, particularly during crises like the 2014-ruble collapse. The authors analyze how public figures, from state officials to media personalities, propagate narratives blaming the West for oil price manipulations. These theories serve both to justify domestic policy failures and to reinforce national identity. The study situates these narratives within the discipline of "Energy Humanities," highlighting their role in Russia's ideological demodernization and political discourse, ultimately portraying conspiracy theories as strategic tools used by elites to manage public perception and assert geopolitical agency in an unstable global energy market.

The paper by **Andrey Makarychev** and **Alexandra Yatsyk** explores the Night Wolves motorcycle club's performative anti-Maidan activism as a cultural manifestation of Russian imperial nationalism. Applying frameworks from cultural semiotics, critical discourse analysis, and popular geopolitics, the authors analyze how the Night Wolves' spectacles—especially their annual biker shows—blend Orthodox Christianity and Soviet nostalgia to construct a hegemonic nationalist discourse. These performances symbolically reaffirm Russia's moral and historical superiority while vilifying the West and post-Maidan Ukraine. The shows operate within a biopolitical and thanatopolitical logic, glorifying sacrifice and violence. Ultimately, the article argues that such cultural performances contribute to normalizing imperial ambitions and justifying political aggression, including the annexation of Crimea.

Boris Barkanov's account analyzes how Sergei A. Karaganov, a leading Russian realist intellectual, perceived threats and U.S.-Russia relations between 2003 and 2019. Using narrative analysis and self-categorization theory (SCT), it tracks Karaganov's shift from viewing the U.S. as a realist partner to an ideological adversary and finally an existential enemy. Key turning points include NATO's expansion, the 2008 Georgia war, the Obama Reset, the 2014 Ukraine crisis, and Western sanctions. These events prompted

reevaluations of American rationality and realist alignment, shaping threat perception. The study categorizes Karaganov's evolving views through a revised "cultures of anarchy" framework and identifies identity-based cognitive mechanisms underlying threat construction. It contributes to international relations theory by linking identity formation with threat perception and offering hypotheses about realist identity schemes in the Russian elite's foreign policy discourse.

This is followed by **Michael Kirkwood's** review of Alexander Zinoviev's extensive body of work on ideology, which reflects an evolving perspective shaped by historical and political shifts. Initially critical of Soviet communism, Zinoviev examined its ideological structure as central to its societal function, warning the West against its influence. However, following the Soviet Union's collapse, Zinoviev reoriented his critique toward the West, portraying it as ideologically dominant and culturally corrosive. He argued that Western "pluralist" ideology, though decentralized, functions with greater efficacy than Soviet ideology through pervasive social institutions. In his later years, Zinoviev proposed a new "logical sociology" and a scientifically grounded ideology as an antidote to "Westernoid" dominance, as he formulated it. Zinoviev's paradoxical trajectory—from anti-Soviet to neo-Communist—raises questions about the ideological neutrality of his analyses and reflects his disillusionment with global ideological developments.

Felix Riefer critically examines the Kremlin's assertion of a unified Russian-speaking diaspora in Germany, arguing that such a narrative distorts and oversimplifies the heterogeneous trajectories of post-Soviet migrants—most prominently the *russland-deutsche (Spät-)Aussiedler*, or Russia German (late) resettlers. These ethnic Germans, long dispersed across various republics of the former Soviet Union, experienced systemic persecution under the communist regime. Permitted to emigrate collectively during Gorbachev's reforms, they have since evolved into one of Germany's largest migrant communities. The resettlement policies adopted by Bonn and later Berlin were driven less by ethnic affiliation than by a moral and political rationale of restitution for their *Kriegsfolgeschicksal* ("war effects fate")—a term denoting their wartime and

postwar discrimination and suffering in the USSR. In this context, Russia's recent efforts to instrumentalize Russophone populations for geopolitical purposes misrepresent both the origins and self-perception of these groups. Simultaneously, the anti-government demonstrations by Russian speakers in Germany in 2016 and 2022 reveal the resonance of Moscow's disinformation strategies among post-Soviet communities. However, German media and scholarship have at times reproduced these essentialist diaspora narratives rather than critically unpacking them. This chapter offers a nuanced perspective on post-Soviet German migration, providing critical analysis of Russian influence, immigration policy and overlooked historical contexts.

Mischa Gabowitsch's concluding chapter discusses the Russian Federal Military Memorial Cemetery (FMMC), which was inaugurated in 2013 as Russia's national military cemetery, intended to replace the Kremlin Wall Necropolis. Initially inspired by the US's Arlington National Cemetery in the State of Virginia, the FMMC evolved into a monumental, highly selective burial site dominated by Soviet-style aesthetics. The article traces the site's contentious planning and construction, highlighting conflicts between architects, sculptors, and state authorities, particularly within the Ministry of Defense. Gabowitsch introduces the concept of "panhistorical militarism" to analyze the cemetery's symbolic framework, comparing it to national cemeteries in postcolonial and revolutionary states. He argues that the FMMC serves more as a departmental cemetery for the Russian elites than as a democratic resting place for all soldiers.