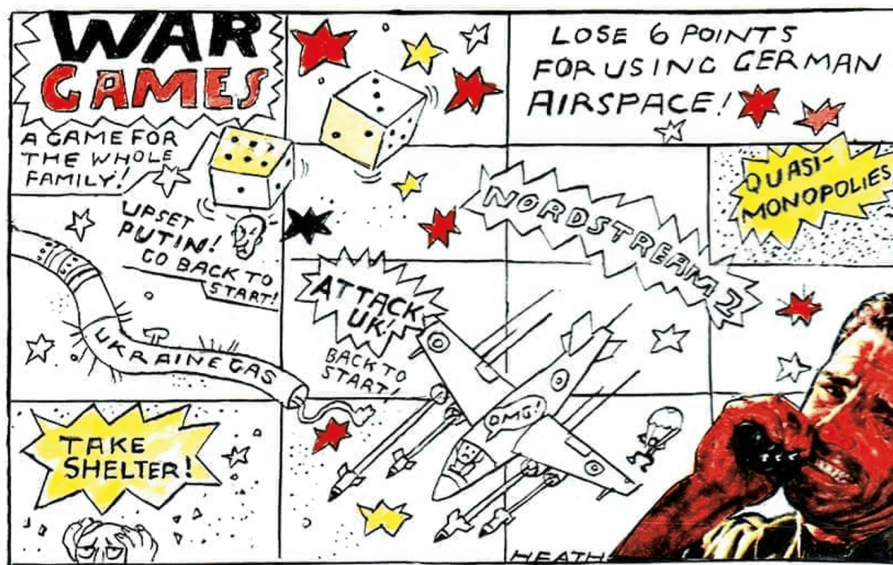


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Whisper it, but Putin has a point in Ukraine

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Around 100,000 Russian troops are currently massed on the Ukrainian border. Talk of an invasion fills the air. British intelligence claims President Putin is planning to install a Kremlin-friendly leader in Kiev. For the first time in at least a generation, there is the real prospect of war in Europe. It is easy for politicians in the West to talk about ‘Russian aggression’. What else is a massive build-up of troops if not an aggressive posture? But Russia is acting because its leadership feels threatened. From the high towers of the Kremlin, Ukraine looks like an increasingly hostile, American-backed Potemkin state.

It was not always this way. In the decade following the collapse of the USSR, the newly created Russian Federation had sought western integration. And not only via the rapid adoption of free-market capitalism. Initially, Vladimir Putin sought a security alliance and even membership of Nato. In this, he was following a path set out by Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1989, the last Soviet leader spoke of a 'common European home' stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. There was the possibility of a new order in which Russia would take its rightful place as a great power in a transformed western community.

Putin gave voice to similar sentiments in his September 2001 Bundestag speech: Russia's destiny was to be a European one. Nevertheless, he insisted that the relationship could not be based on hierarchy, identifying the tensions that would later destroy the whole edifice of Russia's relations with the West. Russia's post-USSR leaders sought to join a transformed collective West to turn it into what would, with Russia's membership, have become a greater West. Instead, Moscow was faced with an expanding Atlantic power system, with Russia firmly on the outside.

Since the era of German reunification, Moscow had been repeatedly assured that there would be no enlargement of Nato beyond a united Germany. Then in 1999, the alliance brought in the former Soviet countries of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Five years later came the 'big bang' enlargement, encompassing another seven former communist countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia). In February 2007, Putin condemned the dangers of establishing a 'unipolar world' and listed a range of strategic and security concerns, including the marginalisation of the UN, the installation of ballistic missile defences in Eastern Europe — and above all Nato enlargement. He stressed that Russia 'with a thousand years of history' did not need to be instructed on how to behave in international affairs. How did the West respond? With the accession of Albania and Croatia in 2009, Nato membership rose to 28. The addition of

Montenegro and North Macedonian in the last five years has brought that number to 30.

Even now it could be argued that it is not so much Nato enlargement that is the problem but the way it was done, above all the absence of a larger pan-continental security framework in which Russia could be accommodated. Atlanticism was held to be supreme, overshadowing continental European, let alone Eurasian, models of regionalism.

Putin has naturally become obsessed with Ukraine — a crucial node in the antagonism between the West and Russia. His fixation is often explained in cultural and historical terms: he has spoken often of Ukraine and Russia as constituting one people. And many see his lament at the passing of the Soviet Union — ‘one of the greatest geopolitical catastrophes of the century’ — as an expression of a long-held desire to unite the two countries once again.

Here we see two processes of Atlanticism — the chosen model of state-building and growing geopolitical contestation — combining to devastating effect. The interaction between the two reinforced the view that Ukraine, in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse, had to be separated from Russia in all fundamental respects. The human rights of the Russophone population were ensured, but as a political constituency their concerns were denigrated. The 1996 constitution embraced a unitary model, thereby excluding federal devolution to the diverse regions (with the exception of Crimea).

Above all, Ukrainian was made the only state language, even though Russian is the native language of just under a third of the population, and a much larger proportion is fluent in the language. Russian was relegated ‘to the kitchen’ (as Russophone Ukrainians put it), and although prominent in the media it was gradually squeezed out of public institutions. This runs directly against the inclusive — even multicultural — trend practised everywhere else in the Atlantic world. Today Russian and other minority languages are effectively proscribed in the public sphere, provoking a shocking lack of condemnation from

countries who like to think of themselves as part of the 'league of democracies'.

In 2008, Ukraine was promised Nato membership — and although enlargement was not on the agenda in the Obama years, Russia feared then, as it does today, that a bilateral security deal with Kiev would create a bridgehead for US forces in the country. Fear that the crucial Black Sea port of Sevastopol would fall into Washington's hands prompted the seizure of Crimea in March 2014. This was a defensive move, although couched in the expansive cultural terms of the reunification of the 'Russian world' — quite apart from being the freely-expressed wish of the great majority of the Crimean population.

Yet Russia's aspiration for Ukraine is not as dramatic as it's often made out to be. Nowhere has Putin suggested that he envisages a future single state, and there's little reason to believe the Kremlin — hemmed in by a struggling economy, stagnant living standards, and a population which has demonstrated absolutely no appetite for dangerous foreign adventures — intends to reconstitute the Soviet Union. Instead, to protect its own security, Russia desires a neutral, friendly, multilingual Ukraine.

It is not an unreasonable wish. But as the western powers arm and encourage a militant and hostile neighbour — whether it comes to pass is far from certain. In the first Cold War, we emerged relatively unscathed from the Cuban missile crisis. This time around, with a real military threat on the doorstep of the USSR's nuclear inheritor, we may not be so lucky.

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