

Overcoming Military Bloc Rivalry in Europe - Russian left perspectives

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What could lasting peace in Europe look like from a leftist perspective? And what principles could form the foundation for a fair European security architecture? In their report, social researchers Grigory Yudin and Ilya Budraytskis propose answers to these pressing questions.

Introduction

For nearly three years, a brutal war has been raging in Europe with no end in sight. Many initial predictions proved wrong: from assumptions that Vladimir Putin would quickly conquer Ukraine to opposing claims about the complete failure of the invasion and the inevitability of its collapse. Moreover, this conflict has expanded beyond a regional dispute and brought serious consequences for European security. By late 2024, the war had transformed Europe's political landscape: voters in many countries are punishing liberal governments attempting to maintain the status quo at all costs. There is a growing demand for a new vision, especially beyond political elites.

The threat of war normalization and its transformation into new forms across Europe is becoming increasingly apparent. In the alarming atmosphere of militarisation and increased state control over daily life in many countries, an image of a more closed, isolated, and divided Europe is taking shape. Such a Europe is incapable of responding to crucial global challenges such as the crisis of democracy, social inequality, and the looming climate catastrophe. To avoid this grim scenario, new conditions for lasting peace must be created. It is evident that the existing security architecture in Europe can no longer ensure stability but, on the contrary, contributes to the escalation of conflicts at various levels.

This text will examine the fundamental flaw in Europe's current security architecture - namely, the division into hostile military-political blocs. We believe this growing confrontation undermines efforts to build lasting peace. As a possible solution, we propose creating a comprehensive security structure that would include all European countries. Additionally, we will explore potential ways for this new structure to interact with existing organisations such as NATO, CSTO [Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russia-led military alliance], EU, OSCE and UN.

It's important to note that this text does not address several other crucial aspects of European security - such as Europe's place in the US-China confrontation, the development of a European army, or the creation of EU security structures. Nor does it propose a detailed plan for ending the war in Ukraine. However, the ideas presented here could potentially lay the groundwork for discussing all these issues. One of the key obstacles to meaningful discussions on these topics is the dominance of two opposing military blocs in Europe.

It should also be recognised that creating a new security architecture should not be a task delegated exclusively to existing political elites. As long as social and democratic movements are excluded

from security decision-making processes, any proposed solution is likely to be short-lived. The current international crisis is linked to a crisis of democratic representation: one military bloc represents a completely authoritarian principle, while the other is characterised by a lack of broad public support for existing governments.

The proposal substantiated in this work aims to move beyond the current model, where a narrow circle of elites makes vital security decisions through closed and opaque agreements. This model must be replaced with broad democratic participation in European security discussions. We believe our proposals can strengthen democratic control over decision-making and limit the opportunism of irresponsible politicians and bureaucrats.

Causes of War

There are two main factors contributing to the continuation of the war in Ukraine and Russia: firstly, the imperialist ambitions of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and secondly, Europe's division into two opposing blocs, which constantly reinforces the sense of threat on both sides. These factors differ in several key aspects: the first is driven by individual actions, while the second is structural in nature; the first can be changed through a change in Russian leadership and its course, while the second requires broader reforms at the European level; the first places responsibility for the war and its destructive consequences on specific actors, while the second focuses on systemic conditions created collectively by all parties, without specifying anyone's particular guilt or responsibility.

This text will focus primarily on the second problem - Europe's division into two military blocs. However, it's important to emphasise that both factors are necessary conditions for the war's continuation. This is a war started by Vladimir Putin's personal desire, and this decision cannot be considered forced. Russia was not in immediate danger in either 2014 or 2022. Instead of seeking ways to cooperate with post-Soviet countries, Putin responded to their attempts to escape Russian influence with a determination to force them into submission - and this was his conscious choice. This war would not have happened without Putin's decisions, made against the mood in Russian society and even against the recommendations of his own appointed officials, many of whom advised against starting the invasion.

However, at this stage, even if Putin is removed from power, establishing long-term peace is unlikely as the structural causes of war will remain. The current security architecture in Europe is defined by the existence of two opposing military blocs: NATO and states that remain more or less oriented towards Russia. Although Putin's attempts to establish the CSTO as a viable alternative to NATO have largely failed, the logic of military blocs permeates decision-making in countries close to Russia. Armenia is the most striking example: on the verge of leaving CSTO due to the organisation's inaction during the Karabakh conflict, the Armenian government faces a difficult choice between orientation towards the 'West' (NATO) and maintaining Russia as a military patron. Similar dilemmas are already being discussed by governments of several Eastern and Central European countries.

Initially, NATO was created to counter the military threat from the Soviet Union, however, the alliance was not dissolved after the USSR's collapse and the end of the Cold War. Decades of life under imposed Soviet domination pushed former Warsaw Pact countries to join NATO. NATO leaders largely responded positively to applications, based on the assumption that Russia would either not perceive expansion as a threat or would be too weak militarily to respond to it.

The objective reality in Europe before 2014 was that the NATO bloc continued to expand eastward, viewing Russia as its main opponent.

Even the most well-intentioned government in Russia now would face an external environment that is perceived in the country as a potential threat. Putin's reckless war has led NATO countries to sharply increase arms production and defence spending. The brutal invasion and atrocities in Ukraine have caused justified anger and concern, especially among NATO's Eastern European members. This hostility is keenly felt in Russia, where elites are convinced that Putin has permanently destroyed relations with Europe and that it will now be deeply hostile to any Russians. Without efforts to overcome and mitigate this perception, any Russian government that doesn't view Russia as a besieged fortress will face difficulties in maintaining power. Although such fears can obviously be exaggerated, they have already become a central element in the worldview of both Russian elites and ordinary citizens. Thus, further intensification of confrontation between two military blocs in Europe will make it practically impossible for a stable peace-loving government to emerge in Russia.

At the same time, dismantling the existing authoritarian system that allowed one person to start a war will lead to a more balanced and rational understanding of both real and perceived threats to Russia. Only a broad discussion within Russia that would include civil movements and democratic forces will allow separating paranoia and ideological imperialism from genuine public demand for security. However, for such transformation in Russia to become possible, it needs to be made clear that democratisation will not make the country more vulnerable in security matters.

A question might arise: why focus so much on the problem of inter-bloc rivalry if Putin's imperialist policy remains the main cause of war? There are two reasons for this.

Firstly, as long as Russians perceive the surrounding world as increasingly hostile, Russian elites and population have little incentive to remove Putin from power. Although the war was never popular in Russia and poor segments of society are even more sceptical about it than the wealthy, at present all alternatives seem much worse. The widespread belief that ending the war will lead to catastrophic security threats for Russia makes any political changes impossible. The logic of military conflict suggests that Russian troops should be withdrawn before meaningful discussions about post-war world order can begin, but in reality, the opposite is true. As long as Russia has no viable future, the motivation of its elites or potential leaders to remove Putin and end the war remains minimal. They believe that, despite any costs incurred as a result of the invasion, ending it now would lead to a catastrophe that would be far worse than anything they would have to endure under Putin.

Secondly, Russia will sooner or later have new leadership. It's important that options making peace an attractive and viable strategy for a new government are ready when this happens. This preparation requires urgent action.

Another question arises: if the international community recognises the legitimacy of Russian leadership's concerns, why not start negotiations with Putin right now? The problem is that his imperialist worldview makes such negotiations practically impossible. The war he wages is openly justified by imperialist goals, such as claims that "Odessa is a Russian city," or boastful statements that the Sea of Azov has become "Russia's internal sea" for the first time since Peter the Great's era. Beyond these territorial ambitions, the military bloc that Putin tries to create around Russia is also deeply ideological in nature. Post-Soviet countries falling under Russian influence are expected to adapt their political systems to the Kremlin's standards. This includes consolidating the power vertical, suppressing political opposition, and promoting "traditional values" such as restricting women's rights and criminalising LGBTQ+. A recent example of such evolution is Georgia, which is now rapidly moving under Moscow's control.

Recognition of all European countries' sovereignty is fundamental to any discussions of new security architecture. However, Putin openly questions the sovereignty of not only Ukraine but virtually all

major European states, seeking direct agreement with the US about dividing Europe into spheres of influence. This makes him an unlikely partner for any meaningful peace negotiations. Nevertheless, it is crucial to begin creating conditions for negotiations with a future Russian government - one that is responsible, free from imperialist ambitions, and ready to respect other countries' sovereignty.

In this context, military confrontation also has a clear political and ideological dimension. While the ideas of free market and liberal democracy - principles that NATO supposedly defends - are experiencing a deep crisis, leftist forces can play a crucial role. They must offer a social and political alternative that will be attractive to people on both sides of the geopolitical divide.

Thus, of the two main factors prolonging the current military conflict, the logic of military bloc confrontation needs to be overcome first. This solution has the potential to change Russian political actors' calculations and stimulate changes within Russian society and changes in the Russian government.

Overcoming Inter-bloc Rivalry

NATO contributes to the logic of confrontation, stimulates mutual militarisation, and ultimately contributes to instability in Europe. This is a fact that leftist commentators particularly often point out. Nevertheless, calls for limiting or even dissolving NATO are now inappropriate. One could argue that it would have been reasonable to dissolve or repurpose NATO in the 1990s, after Russian leaders were given informal promises not to expand the bloc. Critics sometimes object that such a step would have made Eastern European countries vulnerable to Russian aggression in the 2010s and 2020s. However, it's impossible to predict whether this aggression would have happened at all in a less confrontational environment. The assumption that Russia will always act aggressively makes any efforts to ensure peace meaningless.

However, at present, discussion of NATO dissolution is clearly untimely. Since 2022, NATO membership has become the most important security guarantee for countries close to Russia, as confirmed by Sweden and Finland's rapid accession to the bloc. Calls to eliminate NATO miss the fundamental security needs and will of residents of Eastern and Northern European countries, where NATO membership rests on broad public consensus. Proposals to dissolve NATO without providing clear and viable security guarantees for states that have every reason to feel threatened are likely to provoke strong resistance and hostility among Europeans.

It should also be recognised that besides its role in increasing mutual hostility in Europe, NATO somewhat paradoxically simultaneously plays a role in deterring military adventurism by individual members. Of course, any individual member of the bloc can decide to start a war despite objections from other participants - especially the US as the leading military power in the bloc. Nevertheless, NATO membership still imposes obligations to coordinate actions with other countries, which may be less aggressive. And this is a big difference from the Russia-led CSTO, where there are no mechanisms for collective decision-making that take into account the interests of all organisation members. In this context, immediate NATO dissolution without offering an alternative security system could lead to more, not less aggressive behaviour from key global actors.

A more promising approach would be creating a new common structure that would include all European actors currently divided into hostile blocs. Instead of calling for dissolution of existing military blocs - and such a demand is inevitably perceived as serving one side's interests during acute conflict - it's necessary to defend the idea of creating an all-European security organisation. Although creating such an organisation uniting representatives of both blocs is a difficult task during acute conflict, historical precedents show that this task is solvable if the initiative is carefully planned. A particularly relevant example is the 1975 Helsinki Accords, which led to the creation of

the OSCE.

For such an initiative to succeed, three main principles must be followed. Firstly, security in Europe must be shared by all participants. Secondly, decisions within the organisation must be consensual and binding for all, meaning that each member will have a key to European security. Thirdly, the organisation must fully and equally respect the sovereignty of all European countries, rejecting any hints that some countries' security can be achieved at the expense of others' sovereignty.

Shared Security. The logic of military blocs inevitably leads countries to perceive their own security as "security against others." Although the formula "security against" became particularly pronounced in both blocs after 2022, this thinking was deeply rooted much earlier. Both NATO expansion and Moscow's statements that Ukraine's sovereignty threatens Russian security are based on the common belief that collective security in Europe is unattainable. A new organisation that includes all European countries must operate on the premise that security is shared and achievable only through cooperation with others.

Decision-making Mechanisms. Participation in the new organisation does not imply surrendering sovereignty, however, all members agree to comply with collectively made decisions. Military operations and increases in certain types of armaments must be ratified by all organisation members. Although the organisation is not a military alliance, it facilitates and encourages joint military exercises among its members to build trust and cooperation. The consensus-based decision-making process ensures that all participants play a key role in European security, rejecting in any form the idea of ensuring one's national security at the expense of other countries.

Respect for Sovereignty. Each participating state maintains full and equal sovereignty in security matters and has the right to participate in other alliances and security organisations. This means that existing blocs don't need to be dissolved; rather, their European participants join a broader union without abandoning their commitments in other organisations. For NATO member countries in Europe, this will reduce dependence on the US and create additional security mechanisms - which is particularly relevant under Donald Trump's second presidency.

The idea of creating joint security structures to prevent alienation of non-NATO countries (and especially Russia) is not new. This was the rationale behind creating the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council, which was renamed the NATO-Russia Council in 2002. However, this body's structure was not very functional from the start: since NATO was represented in the Council as a single bloc, this pushed Russia towards building a counter-alliance. Ultimately, the Council became merely a negotiating platform between two hostile blocs, lacking effective mechanisms for making common decisions and ensuring actions in accordance with them.

The proposed security structure, including representatives of both military and political blocs, can only be successful if there is a basic level of trust between its participants. This trust must be based on common principles, with the unacceptability of war in Europe and each country's sovereignty becoming the main such principles. It's important to remember that the relative success of the Helsinki Accords in the 1970s was linked not only to security issues but also to a broader set of common values. This included human rights guarantees (which, for example, led to reduced political repression in the USSR) and impetus for nuclear disarmament.

Today, this framework clearly needs to be expanded and updated to respond to fundamentally new challenges. A key aspect is the urgent need for real democratisation on both sides of the conflict. Concentration of power in single hands or structures, crisis of political representation, and general disillusionment are felt across Europe, creating a breeding ground for irresponsible elite militarism. Democratisation can impose necessary constraints on current decision-making systems, reduce

opportunities for uncontrolled political manoeuvres, and increase overall security. This approach will benefit all sides of the conflict, as did the emphasis on human rights that was the foundation of the Helsinki Accords. A common agenda - for example, collective action to combat climate change and inequality - can also become a solid foundation for such agreements.

The proposed approach, instead of relying exclusively on the role of nation-states, envisions significant participation of civil society, trade unions, NGOs, local and other communities in European security dialogue. The new structure, combined with democratisation commitments, will create a framework in which non-state actors can exert influence in two key ways. First, they will gain greater influence over governments in their countries. Second, they will be able to appeal to the new organisation, raising crucial security issues before they develop into conflicts, and effectively forcing national governments to comply with common agreement principles.

Left forces, with their programme of building peace based on justice, can play a decisive role in creating this foundation for a new and inclusive security architecture. Adoption of the outlined idea of European security by progressive forces across Europe would help bring programmatic clarity to the peace movement. In conditions of acute military conflict and limited legal space for political struggle in many countries, slogans of "peace" and "disarmament" can be filled with arbitrary content and become subject to political manipulation by pro-Putin and far-right forces. It's time to replace vague calls for peace with a concrete proposal for achieving sustainable peace that doesn't depend on the goodwill of individual politicians with a long history of opportunistic behaviour.

The new structure must include all European countries as individual members, avoiding the situation of confrontation between military blocs. Existing military alliances will remain in force and continue to influence individual participants' national security strategy. This approach will allow countries to maintain their prior commitments, however, joint membership in the new common structure will provide balance between existing blocs and principles of shared security. There is reason to hope that if this approach is successful, existing military alliances in Europe will become obsolete in the foreseeable future, allowing them to be dismantled or reoriented without compromising anyone's security.

Implementation

How can we be sure that the new organisational principles will overcome the impulse towards division generated by bloc participation? After all, there is no sovereign power standing above individual countries, and any organisation member can potentially ignore collective decisions or simply suspend their membership and resort to unilateral military action. Although this scenario cannot be completely ruled out as long as states maintain their sovereignty, there are ways to significantly reduce incentives for unconstructive behaviour.

Lasting peace in Europe can only be achieved through agreements between all European states, however, European security is a concern for a much wider range of actors in today's globalised world. Therefore, uniting European countries will be more stable with the participation of external observers. Leading Global South countries can play an important role as mediators, helping facilitate dialogue between European states. As the war in Ukraine shows, countries like India, Brazil, and South Africa clearly prefer to see peace rather than war in Europe - if only to avoid global consequences of European conflicts. Currently, these countries have few levers to influence warring states' behaviour, but in an official observer status, they could be more effective mediators.

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Although non-European leaders cannot directly prevent war between Europeans, their concerns cannot be ignored if expressed through solid institutions. All sides of potential conflicts are deeply dependent on relations with major powers, and opposing their will - while potentially possible - would come with much higher costs. In 2022, leaders of such countries participated in diplomacy only after the fact, having no opportunity to prevent the war's start. Providing formal observer status would give them a real opportunity to influence outcomes, as well as bestow responsibility that comes with this role.

One way these countries can influence the situation is through their voice in the United Nations, whose significance must seriously increase. The danger of becoming a UN outcast for ignoring non-European countries' statements will serve as an additional deterrent against harmful intentions of individual European actors. This emphasises the need for substantial UN reform, however this issue is beyond the scope of this text. Obviously, the degradation of the UN and other institutions supporting international law will continue to be a significant obstacle to any peace initiative. However, the general strategy proposed here is to build greater interdependence between major global actors, rather than limiting cooperation only to blocs and alliances. Creating a system of interconnected decision-making mechanisms in Europe can help revive the spirit of common security at the global level and transform crucial international institutions.

China and the US are less suitable for mediator roles since both countries are deeply involved in supporting one of the competing blocs in Europe: the US as the leading force within NATO, and China as Putin's close ally who promised "partnership without borders" with Xi Jinping. Nevertheless, the presence of these two major powers as observers is necessary for forming consensus within the organisation. Importantly, none of the observers will have decision-making rights within the organisation; the purpose of their participation is to engage non-European countries as mediators before conflicts enter an acute phase. European security remains, ultimately, Europeans' responsibility - this is a key principle, especially in an era of growing tension between China and the US. Uniting European countries within a single structure is a key factor that will prevent turning the continent into a battlefield for proxy wars between non-European powers.

Creating a new organisation is always a challenging task, but there are precedents to build upon. The OSCE currently remains a platform whose formal members still include all potential participants of the new organisation. Although the OSCE primarily functioned as a negotiating platform and is clearly not a model for the more comprehensive structure proposed here, it can still serve as a starting point. Negotiations on creating new security architecture in Europe could naturally begin within the OSCE framework.

Most importantly, the OSCE proves that when sufficient political will exists, a new format of interaction among European countries can be created. The 1970s were marked by mutual desire from both sides of the "Cold War" to establish common rules of the game. This process required not only separate negotiations but also creating a new, sustainable body with its own agenda. Although the current conflict may require broader cooperation than envisioned by the OSCE, this approach still seems fruitful for forming a solid and inclusive security structure in Europe.

For the new organisation to function effectively, trust must be built from scratch. It's important to recognise that trust cannot be created simply by signing agreements, as both sides likely won't take them seriously if they feel threatened (a situation that remains quite likely under current conditions). Joint actions are much more effective for building trust than simple commitments. Therefore, the organisation should focus on common efforts, such as assessing external risks to European security, joint military exercises, and developing collective norms in areas like cybersecurity and counter-terrorism. Creating a common agenda will be the most effective protection against centrifugal forces and help ensure long-term cohesion.

Conclusion

With growing demand for a long-term solution to the military crisis tearing Europe apart, progressive forces must defend a principle that corresponds to their political convictions - the principle of solidarity. Conflicts will hardly be resolved by tightening borders, arms races, or strengthening military blocs, even if these measures prove necessary in the short term. Ruling parties in Europe desperately oscillate between two equally fruitless options: waging war without a clear end goal or sacrificing individual European countries' sovereignty. Both paths only exacerbate disagreements within Europe. This text offers a different approach - it aims to build, not destroy. The proposed solution lies in creating a collective organisation that unites European countries within a new security architecture - a project that will likely resonate with European peoples and which progressive political forces should support.

The approach proposed here aims to contribute to a just resolution of the war in Ukraine and Russia, as well as prevent further military conflicts in Europe. Although details of a future peace agreement are beyond the scope of this discussion, it's obvious that a forum is needed where the destructive logic of blocs won't interfere with developing a solution acceptable to all. This forum must address critically important issues such as reparations, accountability for war crimes, and the right to self-determination. The belief that lasting peace can be achieved without eliminating incentives for conflict renewal is a dangerous illusion. For Europe, there is no return to the status quo of 2021, but there is a path forward - towards cooperation, solidarity, and sustainable peace.

Proposals for new security architecture can only be successful if they are developed collectively by political forces across Europe - from East to West, from North to South, on both sides of the dangerous divide. It must be clear that peace benefits European peoples, while war serves elite interests. Creating a common concept of a new European security system is a key task for European leftists. Once progressive forces on both sides agree on the framework of a new order that benefits all countries, the attractiveness of such proposals to a broad audience will significantly increase. If progressive forces have a shared vision of Europe's future, they can set an example and inspire others to follow.

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P.S.

This is a major analytical report presented at a conference in Berlin on 30 November 2024, organised by the Institute for Global Reconstitution and Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. The conference brought together left-wing parties from Germany, Ukraine, Denmark, Switzerland and Russian anti-war emigrants.