

HOW DID THE RENAISSANCE OF WAR IN EUROPE COME ABOUT?

Europe is rearming. As early as an EU summit in March 2025, it was decided – following a proposal by the European Commission – to spend €800 billion on defence projects by 2030. With this **'Re-Arm Europe Plan'**, the Commission aims to allow EU member states to take on new debt for their defence without risking an EU deficit procedure. In addition, a new EU fund with €150 billion in loans for defence investment is planned. This will enable Member States to jointly procure, for example, air and missile defence systems, artillery systems, ammunition, drones or cyber defence systems.

Although, under the European treaties, national defence falls within the remit of the nation states, the elites in Brussels suddenly see an opportunity to use crises and wars to strengthen their power **and centralise** decision-making within the **European Union**. In any case, the EU has significantly expanded its role in foreign and defence policy, particularly as a result of the war in Ukraine. The European Commission, in particular, has gained greater influence in these areas, and new powers have been created.

Individual states also intend to significantly increase their military spending in the coming years. Germany aims to spend 3.5% of GDP on defence by 2029; France, 2.5% by 2030; and the UK, 3

per cent of GDP 'in the near future'. Chancellor Friedrich Merz explicitly speaks of to expand "the Bundeswehr into Europe's strongest conventional army". The focus of French rearmament is on nuclear deterrence, ammunition, air defence, drones and preparations for high-intensity wars. In this context, the French Chief of the General Staff, Fabien Mandon, has clearly stated that his compatriots must prepare for the possibility that their children may fall in a war against Russia. Keir Starmer's government in the UK announced that it would also increase defence spending. However, as some ministers did not agree to the necessary cuts in education and healthcare, Defence Secretary John Healey resigned in June 2026. He insisted on more funding for his department.

Other countries, too, will ultimately face the question of how far **military build-up and the welfare state** can be reconciled. After all, Germany intends to spend €150 billion a year on the military by the end of this decade; France, €80 billion a year; and the UK, up to €90 billion a year. The question remains as to how much this military build-up actually boosts the domestic economy. Money spent on tanks and missiles cannot be spent on schools, infrastructure or the health service at the same time. Purchasing fighter aircraft from the US does little to boost the domestic economy. Many economists regard civilian investment as more productive in the long term, as is also evident from the article 'Europe bets on military spending' in the New York Times on 29 August 2025.

In any case, this policy of rearmament stands in stark contrast to the peace project established in Europe after the Second World War. Beginning with the Council of Europe, founded in 1949, a 'revolution in European foreign policy' took place. The power politics practised in this sphere for centuries was replaced by a policy geared towards the welfare of citizens. Whereas the traditional aim of foreign policy had been to secure power, influence and glory for one's own country, the focus was now on working together to improve citizens' quality of life. Warfare gave way to welfare; confrontation gave way to cooperation.

This revolution did not take place in the USA. There, the principle that 'foreign policy without the backing of the military is like a baseball game without a baseball bat' continued to apply. In other words, military strength is regarded as a legitimate means of asserting national interests. Other countries, however, may perceive such an attitude as a threat. Yet there have also been dissenting voices in America. For instance, in his book **The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined**, published in 2011, **Steven Pinker** put forward the thesis that the history of humankind is not a history of increasing violence, but rather, in the long term, a history of its containment; through the rule of law, trade, the Enlightenment, human rights, or the strengthening of reason and empathy. According to Pinker, humanity is probably living today in the most peaceful era of its history. The Harvard professor argues that violence has declined sharply over the long term and that the modern state, with its monopoly on the use of force, has greatly curbed violence. Pinker saw his theories confirmed by the fact that major powers have not waged war against one another since the end of the Second World War.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the East-West conflict, this belief that major wars in Europe were a thing of the past was further reinforced.

Another, quite decisive factor in the return of power-political thinking to Europe was **NATO's eastward expansion**. Following victory in the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the group within the US that sought to use this 'unique moment' to consolidate and expand American hegemony in Europe as well. Even those who were initially sceptical and warned that NATO's eastward expansion might encourage rather than curb Russian nationalist tendencies ultimately became supporters of the expansion. Strobe Talbott, a Russia expert and Deputy US Secretary of State in Bill Clinton's administration, clearly demonstrated this in his book **The Great Experiment: The Story of Ancient Empires, Modern States and the Quest for a Global Nation**. When NATO enlargement began in 1997, it was widely argued in the West that this was "not directed against Russia". In Russia, however, the view was quite different. Even President Boris Yeltsin, who was otherwise extremely accommodating towards the West, protested against it. And the then Finnish President, Martti Ahtisaari, repeatedly emphasised that NATO enlargement should bring greater security, not greater insecurity; greater stability, not greater instability.

It is, after all, an iron law of international relations that one should not unnecessarily challenge great powers, as anyone who can still recall the 'Cuban Missile Crisis' of 1962 and President John F. Kennedy's response will know.

But the power-political urge to expand American influence in Europe, particularly in the former communist countries, was too great. In his book **The Grand Chessboard**, published in 1997, **Zbigniew Brzezinski** argued that Eurasia is the geopolitical centre of the world. And anyone who wishes to dominate Eurasia must have supremacy over Ukraine. 'Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire.' An independent Ukraine, on the other hand, weakens Russia, whilst Russian influence in Ukraine would strengthen Moscow. In any case, dominance in Ukraine is a prerequisite for dominance in Eurasia.

Accordingly, the US then invested those billions of dollars in Ukraine, from which the US Deputy Secretary of State, Victoria Nuland, derived her country's right to determine who should govern in Kyiv. At the 2008 NATO summit, the French President and the German Chancellor had still spoken out against NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, so as not to provoke Russia. However, on the occasion of the signing of the Association Agreement in 2013, Brussels prohibited Ukraine from assuming a 'bridge function' between East and West – a role which, for example, Federal President Rudolf Kirchschläger has repeatedly claimed for Austria. The **Maidan coup** then brought down the democratically elected government in Kyiv at the time; Crimea was annexed by Russia, and events took their course.

In September 2014 and February 2015, **agreements** were reached in **Minsk**, brokered by Angela Merkel and François Hollande, to secure a ceasefire in eastern Ukraine and a political solution for the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. However, Ukraine was not prepared to implement key provisions of the Minsk Agreements. The special status promised to the two eastern provinces was never implemented; the agreed local elections were never held; and the agreed ceasefire was never observed by Kyiv. Later, both Merkel and Hollande stated that the Minsk Agreements were intended solely to buy Ukraine time to rearm.

In fact, Ukraine was **massively re-armed by the West**. The US, the UK, Canada and other NATO states trained tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers.

State-of-the-art communications and reconnaissance technology was supplied to Ukraine. Radar systems and protective equipment were just as much a part of the military aid as anti-tank missiles. From 2022 onwards, HIMARS rocket launchers, main battle tanks such as the Leopard 2 and Abrams, artillery systems, cruise missiles and combat aircraft were also supplied. Ukraine was effectively turned into a military outpost of the West, which is why the US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, was probably right to speak of a **proxy war** being waged between Ukraine and Russia. This statement certainly stands in contrast to the notion of an 'unprovoked war of aggression' that is repeatedly referred to in the Western media. And long before that, Ross Douthat wrote under the headline 'The American Empire in the fog of Ukraine': 'America is fighting Russia via proxy'. (New York Times, 3 July 2023)

What were the other causes of the resurgence of war in Europe? Very soon after he took office, the **demonisation** of Russian President Vladimir Putin began. As early as 2003, *The Economist* portrayed him as 'Vlad the Impaler', a bloodsucker. Putin was systematically labelled the 'new Hitler', just as Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi and other figures unwelcome to the West had been before him. And if someone is a new Hitler, any course of action against them is permissible. This is particularly true when, in keeping with American tradition, one is always the victim oneself and stands solely for the greater good. In this vein, John W. Dover puts forward the thesis in his book *Cultures of War* that wars arise not only from power interests, but also from historical myths, cultural self-images, enemy stereotypes and ideological prejudices. This fosters moral self-righteousness, the demonisation of the opponent and the denial of one's own responsibility.

In any case, an image is repeatedly painted of Vladimir Vladimirovich which may be partly true, but perhaps not. Stig Förster, for instance, writes in his otherwise very interesting book on 'German Military History' that **Putin's aim** is 'to reverse the Soviet defeat in the Cold War and regain Russia's traditional sphere of influence'. Is this really the case, or is the Russian President simply concerned with his country's security interests? Can one really say that Putin wants to 'start a general war', as Hitler did in the 1930s, simply to avoid having to make any compromises? But isn't all diplomacy dependent on compromise?

The elites in Brussels have focused far more on the war in Ukraine than on negotiations and peaceful solutions. As tensions escalated and Putin proposed security guarantees for his country in autumn 2021 – under which Ukraine was to declare itself militarily neutral and undertake not to deploy offensive weapon systems near the Russian border – these proposals were “not even ignored”, as NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg remarked. Yet these proposals, which also included the protection of the Russian minority, largely corresponded to what Austria had conceded to the Allies in its State Treaty and **declaration of neutrality**. Here in Austria, these concessions were still being celebrated 70 years later as the 'regaining of freedom and sovereignty'. To Ukraine, however, it was explained that these concessions meant a loss of freedom and capitulation. Indeed, when President Zelenskyy appeared to be backing down following the Russian invasion in February 2022, the then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson flew to Kyiv and pledged military support “for as long as it takes”.

Whilst the EU initially followed the US's lead in supporting Ukraine within the framework of the 'Western community of values', the situation changed when Donald Trump's presidency brought about a shift in the American stance. Under President Joe Biden, US policy was clearly geared towards using Ukraine to severely weaken Russia. Donald Trump's strategy, by contrast, aimed to increase pressure on both sides of the conflict in order to end the war. Above all, the Trump administration viewed Ukraine's NATO membership with scepticism. The Americans recognised the difficulties of the situation and, as President Calvin Coolidge noted 100 years ago, 'the business of America is business'. Brussels, on the other hand, demanded all the more strongly that we 'must become fit for war'. In doing so, they have evidently forgotten that there is no military solution to security in Europe, but only solutions achieved through negotiation. Thus, the war in Ukraine increasingly became a **war between the EU and Russia**.

The EU's financial support for Ukraine has been stepped up, as have arms deliveries and intelligence support, with the UK in particular repeatedly distinguishing itself in this regard. Leading Western media outlets insist on unconditional support for Ukraine. Military strikes deep into Russian territory are celebrated, and the high figures for Russian casualties cited by the Ukrainian side are welcomed. The motto is 'We want Russia to burn even more', as the news portal Politico quotes the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence as saying. This is the justification given by the Ukrainian side for their demand for an additional \$20 billion in military aid for attacks on Russian logistics, energy and military targets. The fact that a nuclear power, whose annual casualty figures exceed half a million, might consider using nuclear weapons is scarcely mentioned. Yet there are numerous examples showing that modern wars are evolving into an increasingly extreme form of violence.

In the war in Ukraine, the EU has chosen the **most dangerous of all strategies**: an arms race coupled with a refusal to engage in dialogue with the other side. During the Cold War, too, there was an arms build-up on a scale never before seen in peacetime. But at the same time, there were talks, arms control agreements and summit meetings.

One reason for this **radicalisation** is that the EU's foreign and security policy has increasingly been entrusted to the Poles and the Balts. Kaja Kallas from Estonia became the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs in 2024; the Commissioner responsible for defence is Andrius Kubilius from Lithuania. However much these countries have suffered under Russian rule time and again throughout history, the European peace project following the Second World War was built on the basis of resolving old enmities and seeking new forms of cooperation. This peace project has been turned on its head in the context of the war in Ukraine. This is also because leading politicians in Berlin, Paris and London wanted to "warlords". They even made a pilgrimage to Donald Trump to thwart his peace efforts. Yet Merz, Macron and Starmer are fighting for their political survival at home. Or is this precisely why they are trying to make a name for themselves in a war? Do they perhaps believe that creating external enemies leads to greater unity at home? Are they seeking to divert attention from social and economic problems in their own countries?

In doing so, they regularly cite reports from the 'British secret service' claiming that 'Putin' intends to attack the rest of Europe in five years' time. But why should he? Russia has sufficient landmass and has benefited from peaceful relations with the rest of Europe just as much as those countries have. The fact that the war in Ukraine is not about territory, but primarily about Russian security interests, must not even be mentioned

. However, as this war is escalating dangerously, it is high time to take a sober look at what is propaganda and what is reality. Mistakes are an inevitable part of any war. But that is precisely why one should try to view one's own situation and that of the opponent as they really are.

Klaus von Dohnanyi and Erich Vad have outlined a possible solution to the war in Ukraine in their book ***Peace – How Does It Work?***, when they write that peace is not achieved through escalation, but through dialogue, negotiations and the courage to exercise political wisdom. In this sense, a willingness to engage in dialogue, a sense of proportion and a sense of responsibility are required from all sides.

() Dr Wendelin Ettmayer; former Member of the National Council; Austrian Ambassador to Finland/Estonia; Canada/Jamaica and to the Council of Europe; author
www.wendelinettmayer.at*