

Where Should Europe End? Constructing the Eastern Frontier

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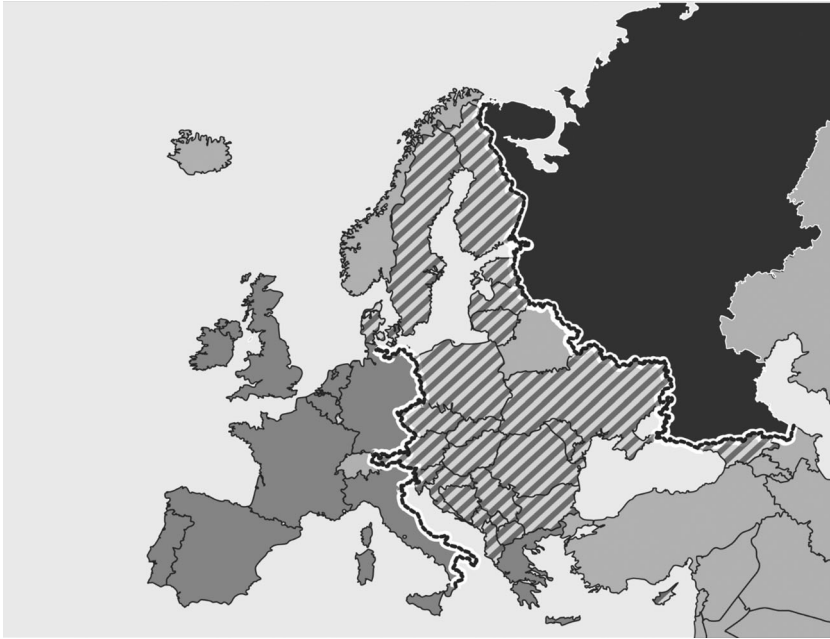
Introduction

The world's first thinker to dedicate an entire work to borders, Lord Curzon, remarked that by the 20th century, most wars came about due to rivalry over the state borders, with the more personalistic reasons of the past – vengeance, honour, faith – becoming historical vestiges (Lord Curzon, 1907). Ten years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Václav Havel warned that another arrangement needs to be put in place, because ‘blurred borders’ – ‘the uncertainty as to where entities began and where they ended’ – had been the most frequent causes of wars in the 20th century (Havel, 2001). Despite efforts to diminish or eliminate them, the importance of borders (hard or soft) has not gone away from contemporary Europe, the home to the world's most ambitious project in supranational government, the European Union (EU). On one hand, new challenges affecting their nature make borders return with a vengeance (Christiansen and Jørgensen, 2000; Zielonka, 2017). On the other, the old understanding of borders as demarcation between two sovereign states in the European post-Westphalian system (Starr, 2006, p. 3) resurfaced to prominence due to Brexit, the crisis of refugees and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Bakardjieva Engelbrekt et al., 2024). With an ongoing war in Eastern Europe, and European states officially supporting Ukraine against Russia, the question of where lies the EU's ultimate Eastern frontier becomes crucial. But is there an objective answer to this question – one that geography, international law or political science can provide a full answer to?

And yet 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the EU had so much to rejoice in. A simple look at the map of the European continent (see Figure 1) showed a remarkable reversal of fortunes between the West and the East of the continent. The Soviet colours, which had engulfed Berlin and edged the outskirts of Vienna and Trieste, had by then given way to the EU colours in the centre, the South and the North. The consequence of European and NATO enlargement towards the East, however, was the gradual elimination of the territory between the former Soviet Union (FSU) and the EU. The EU integration thus pushed the Russian border far to the East and enlarged or planned to enlarge to all the area in between. In doing so, it finally met an exogenous process of great magnitude – the unfinished nation and state-building of post-communist Europe (Roeder, 1999). This encounter is the topic of this article.

The question of the future border between Europe and Russia, once all the intermediate area in between is eliminated, has been scarce in the public debate or disguised as a question about EU enlargement. It may be that the border will simply fall where the contingencies of the war determine a cease-fire. But would such a border create a sustainable peace and vicinity, or just plant, like many provisional borders, the seeds of a future conflict?

Figure 1: Expansion of the European Union (Including Members and Accession Countries) 1990–2024.



Notes: EU in 1990 shaded grey; 2024 Russia in black; cross-hatched area indicates the ‘borderland’ countries which joined or applied to join the EU since the end of Cold War to the present.

Most observers argue that the Middle East conflict will not end if an agreed political solution is not found: is it different from the Eastern European war? Bordering is a process that needs to be imagined, debated and negotiated (Maier, 2016, p. 477). To start designing a solution, one needs to understand the nature of the differences between the two sides of the border, as well as how the border is constructed by the actors involved. This must be at the root of any policy on the Eastern border.

Unsurprisingly, more than one perspective exists to read this reality. However, the numerous explanations and predictions of various analysts fall into a limited number of patterns, displaying largely similar assumptions on the causes of the problem, the category it belongs to and the types of viable solutions. Similar to the Cuban missile crisis (Allison, 1969), the current theories on the border conflict with Russia are better described as conceptual models or paradigms – belief systems characterised by similar assumptions providing both explanations for a phenomenon and a theory of change (Kuhn, 1962). Being socially constructed and shared beyond the most knowledgeable circle of experts and policy-makers with media and larger public, they draw on and generate social representations (Moscovici, 1988). In the new social media context, theories are often reduced to much simplified frames, ‘schematas of interpretation’ offered by content creators (media or otherwise), which help people organise an otherwise meaningless succession of events into consistent and meaningful cognitive patterns (Goffman, 1974, p.

21). Each theory has its circles of followers, who vary in the sophistication of beliefs and intensity of the corresponding attitudinal affect.

Without any claim to a full-fledged meta-analysis, this article reviews the dominant paradigms shaping the current understandings of how far to the East the EU should stretch and what kind of border would it have. I follow a congruence analysis approach, as in the case of the Cuban missile crisis, with the caveat that international relations paradigms fall short of hypotheses (Allison, 1969). As they mix fact with social construction, they cannot be fully invalidated, even if they can be checked and found to differ in their accounting of facts when the causes of the problem are concerned. Where their predictive ability is in question, however, the human agency and effect invested in such theories become a part of and a cause of alteration. Lord Curzon, then the Viceroy of India, was under the illusion – when invading Tibet in 1903 – that he pre-empted a threat from autocratic Russia (Morris, 1978, p. 128). General von Moltke, the Chief of the General Staff of the German Army in 1914, engaged in the 1st World War because the Russian mobilisation, fitted his long-held belief that Russia would attack Germany one day (Clark, 2012). Vladimir Putin professed publicly several times his fear of NATO getting too close to Russia's border before he removed this threat by invading Ukraine himself. Powerful metaphors like, 'Thucydides', trap' deal with imagined or misconstrued threats, which often result in real wars (Allison, 2017). Whilst sufficient evidence exists to check each paradigm against the facts up to a certain point, their following affects the forecast of the problem, as they *become* facts, when not altogether self-fulfilling prophecies.

This methodological choice – a qualitative analytical approach using both historical and statistical facts – is meant to hopefully bridge the gulf between various disciplines in approaching this topic of large interest. The next section of this article will deal with the first paradigm, the Eastern border framed as a border between European identity and other identities. The second paradigm examined will be of a border between democracy and the rule of law versus autocracy. The third will assess the Eastern frontier as a border between civilisations and the fourth and last as a border of geopolitical struggle. Which of these paradigms applied to the Eastern border would solve more problems and provide a better fit for the EU's capacity to sustain and enforce its borders? This question should be at the origin of future full-fledged policy analysis.

I. Border of Identities

Having a European identity is an official precondition of joining the EU and thus offers the first criteria to examine. Every country with a claim to being European (assessed as such by the EU institutions, however) and the capacity to adopt European standards as outlined in Article 49 of the Maastricht Treaty (as amended) can in principle become a member of the EU (The European Parliament, 1998). The EU will reach its territorial margins when the last of such willing and able candidates will join and their border will become the EU border. Identity-based slogans mobilized the pro-accession camps from the very first: *Europeismo* invoked in Spain or *Wir sind Europa* in Austria (Le Gloanec, 2017), before Ukraine's 2014 Revolution of Dignity. However, the identification with Europe is not the only social identity of Europeans and can be accommodated with national or more parochial identities, as in the 'Russian dolls' model (Risse, 2010). In the EU itself, self-ascribed national identity is still the primary identification, although

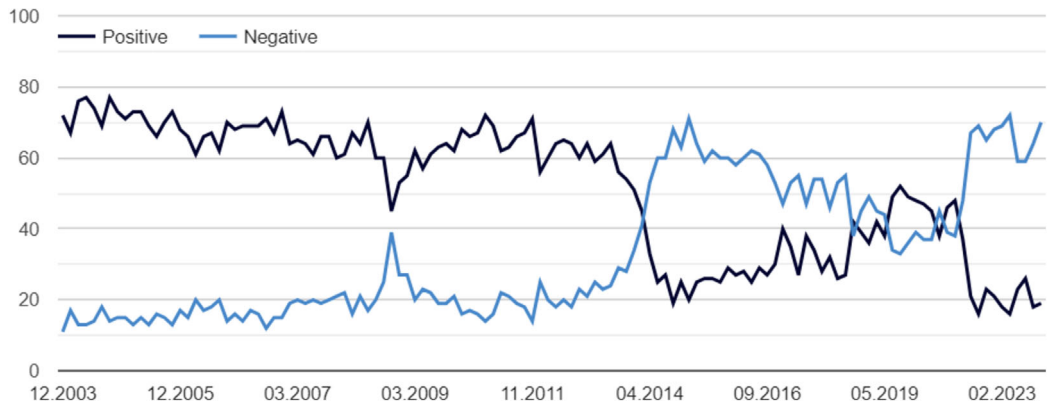
42% of Europeans declare holding both identities (ARTE – BVA Xsight Survey, 2024). Defining national identity just by surveys, even official ones, like the Eurobarometer 508 2021 (Becuwe and Baneth, 2021) seems at least insufficient when Hungarians come on top of European identity and the French are at the bottom. A better indicator than subjective identification may be the goodness of fit to the European core values system. The European identity is allegedly civic, secular and universalistic (efforts to particularize it in the European Constitution having failed), excluding ethnic nationalism, the ideology advocating the perfect congruence between culture and territory (Gellner, 1994; Mungiu-Pippidi and Krastev, 2004).

The attitude towards foreigners can serve as an indicator for the latter. A special Eurobarometer survey (EB 4692018) found that more people perceive migration as a problem rather than an opportunity in the Eastern borderland countries than in the EU average. In another recent survey, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Estonia are on top of countries reluctant to accept migrants – but seven out of 10 Europeans share their beliefs, even in countries where there is a larger experience of cohabitation compared to parochial Eastern Europe (ARTE-BVA-Xsight, 2024). Still, East Europeans are higher on cultural nationalism attitudes and more reluctant to accept Jews, Muslims or LGBT people as neighbours (Evans and Baronavski, 2018), despite professing to be European in surveys.

On the other side, the identity of Russians has undergone many shifts in the 20th century, remaining at core the identity of citizens of a superstate, a near imperial one (Lieven, 1998). This broad identity has always accommodated a European part, but the situation has changed over the past fifteen years (Shevtsova, 2010). In September 2008, 52% of Russians considered Russia a European country: the figure fell to 37% in 2019 and to only 29% in 2021, according to the survey conducted by the independent Levada Centre (2021). The share of Russians who identify themselves as Europeans decreased from 35 in 2008 to 27% in 2021 (Levada Centre, 2021). Seventy-five percent of those in the age group 25–39 do not consider themselves Europeans. The number of Russians agreeing that Russia should remain a ‘superpower’ has grown from 72 in April 1992 to 88 in November 2018 (Levada Centre, 2019). Since the start of the conflict in Ukraine, only 16% of Russians still have a favourable opinion of Europe, whilst positive opinions of China and Iran have skyrocketed (Levada Centre, 2022). This negative trend can be observed in Figure 2: in 2003, positive attitudes towards Europe reached nearly 80%, before the decline started (Levada Centre, 2023).

Where and how did countries on the Eastern border countries acquire their European identity? Eastern Europe had traditionally been part of the spheres of influence of the big powers, even before being occupied by the Nazis and Soviets after 1938. The causes of the politics of such small nations have invariably fallen outside their boundaries (Moore, 1993). As Larry Wolff (1994) argued, the Enlightenment travellers and geographers who exaggerated similarities versus differences to frame the whole kaleidoscopic borderland as a Slavic fringe of Europe ‘invented’ Eastern Europe. The territories to the East of the German and Habsburg empires have always been a constellation of diverse ethnic groups, including aside from the Slavic population groups of Hungarian, Romanian, Jewish, Turkish and Central Asian descent. Alliances and loyalties shifted over centuries. The East was perceived for centuries as a land of ‘barbarians’, with the Popes in Rome designing crusades as much for its conversion (and conquest) as for its

Figure 2: How Europe and Russia Grew Apart.



Source: The Levada Centre survey ‘International Relations: Estimates of May 2023’. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13971)] Notes: Attitudes towards the European Union of the Russians over 20 years in % from total sample.

liberation (Briedis, 2012, p. 27). The Enlightenment (with notable figures such as Voltaire and Diderot bringing substantial contributions) framed all this borderland as a blank area offered for modernization and Europeanization out of the foggy, mythical Scythia and Sarmatia (Wolff, 1994, pp. 220–235, 257–263). On their side, the Russians, during and after Peter the Great, saw themselves as the ‘Europeanisers’ of the borderland reclaimed from the Ottoman Empire (Figes, 2010, pp. 18–19; Wolff, 1994). When the Russians conquered the northern Black Sea seashore in the 18th century, they proceeded to eliminate the Turkish names and restore the map to the Byzantine and even Latin denominations from prior to the Ottoman and Tartar conquests so as to recreate a European background (Durand, 2022). The most advanced representatives of Western Europe proper, who fought to defend and shape the Eastern border of Europe in premodern times, simply by advancing their own interests, were the Habsburgs (McNeill, 1964).

After the fall of Empires, and the two world wars, another identity developed in opposition to Communism: the Central European one. The East European intellectuals and dissidents rekindled it as an anti-communist device. The 1983 essay ‘The Tragedy of Central Europe’ by Milan Kundera, reprinted by Faber in 2023 under the suggestive title of ‘Kidnapped West’ defines the entire region as a borderland: ‘What is Central Europe? An uncertain zone of small nations between Russia and Germany ... [with] a vision based on a deep distrust of history’ (Kundera, 2023, p. 55). The borderland nations shared a fear of extinction due to historical trauma and found their salvation in the EU because it was the only identity allowing them to keep their national one amongst powerful neighbours. Finally, but significantly, political frontiers do not define Central Europe, as they are ‘un-authentic, always imposed by invasions, conquests and occupations’ (Kundera, 2023, p. 57). Nationalism scholar Ernest Gellner (1994) called this area ‘the third time zone’ of Europe, placing this zone of belated nation-state formation ‘east of Trieste’. As the Soviet Union had frozen the processes of more benign assimilationism that had made Western European nations, Gellner warned that cultural as well as political engineering was

needed to complete nation-building after independence, and the Yugoslav war confirmed such fears (Gellner, 1994).

On the whole, nationalism has played a larger role than generally acknowledged in the implosion of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the entire Eastern bloc (Beissinger, 2009; Bunce, 1999; Plokhy, 2017). Both citizens and elites, including Communist elites in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the FSU used the freedom of perestroika to primarily advance their national identities. After mass rallies in favour of national languages and against Russian as the sole official language, the challenge to borders came next. In February 1988, the Nagorno-Karabakh Oblast within Soviet Azerbaijan voted to secede and join with the then Soviet Armenia. In June 1988, Soviet Estonia restored its pre-Soviet flag, made Estonian the official language and declared the precedence of Estonian regulation over the Soviet one. The nations closer to Russia followed suit. Russian historians have worked for over 200 years to prove that the people of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus are in fact a single nation derived from the Kyivan Russ common branch, divided by historical contingency. Many Ukrainian historians (less the Belarussians) have been working in the opposite direction, claiming Ukrainian primacy over the mythical common original state and attributing an European affiliation for Ukraine and an Asian one for Russia (Plokhy, 2023; Wilson, 2000). The first non-communist prime minister of Estonia, Mart Laar, was a student of Estonian identity.

The FSU disintegration risked being as much a contentious affair as the Yugoslav one. It was, however, less bloody, although the institutional design was common in the two superstates, ethno-federalism with blurry borders. This proved a trap, as secessionists could leave without negotiating borders, having a ready-made state apparatus, but also minorities (Bunce, 1999). When Russian ceased to be the lingua franca, various nationalities that woke up in new national states as minorities had to learn Georgian, Ukrainian or Estonian and felt threatened (King, 2001). A few conflicts erupted in the former Soviet Republics and within the Russian Federation – often, but not always prompted by Moscow. In former Yugoslavia, such conflicts were fought out and required Western intervention to be extinguished (which the Russians considered a breach of international law); in FSU, they were mostly frozen after the initial clashes. But nowhere did they go away, as the main predictor of a future conflict is a past conflict amongst ethnic groups (Forbes, 1997).

The reinvention of national states also meant that a significant Russian population (25–30 million) remained in the near abroad, across the borders of these new states. But except for some regional secessionist regions to which nobody, not even Russia, gave official recognition to, the Russian-speaking population did not become a serious threat to the successor states. Thirty years after their independence, in the Baltic states, many Russian speakers who settled there in Soviet times still do not enjoy full citizenship (so they do not vote in either national or EU elections), according to the UNHCR data (2024): 61,000 (4.5% of the population) in Estonia and 175,000 (9%) in Latvia (POLITICO, 2024; The UN Refugee Agency, 2024).

Due to this history, the new EU candidate countries – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – have both disputed territories and identities. Plokhy (2023) remarked that the territorial losses from 2014 created a stronger and more nationalistic Ukraine because the core of the Russian-speaking, Russian-leaning camp (which had won national elections more than once) remained in Crimea (which had a Russian majority) and Donbas. In Moldova and Ukraine, the EU identity camp has won national elections after the 2014 Revolution

of Dignity, and Georgia's main parties have been always pro-EU, but significant parts of their societies remain close to Russia. Aside from the Russians, the Gagauzi, the Abkhazians and the Ossetians feel closer to Russia than to Europe. There is no straightforward European identity story, other than the loss of Russia.

II. Border of Democracy

As many observers argue, the current clash between the West, supporting Ukraine, on one side, and Russia, on the other, is a conflict between democracy (defined in a broad liberal sense, including all Copenhagen political criteria that EU uses as condition for enlargement – rule of law, human rights and respect of minorities) and autocracy (Applebaum, 2024). Russia's despotism has endured the change of many regimes. In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville predicted, using only territorial expansion and demographic growth as independent variables, that the United States and Russia would each dominate half of the world in the 20th century (de Tocqueville, 1835). To achieve the same end, he remarked that America advanced by giving each individual the freedom to follow one's personal interest, whilst Russia concentrated all the power of society in one man. But if Russia was indeed despotic compared to the vibrant nascent US democracy (slavery apart), it was not so unusual at the time compared to its neighbours of then or later, the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century or Hitler's Germany, with whom it struck a pact in 1939. Prior to the 19th-century Crimean War, the pro-war party in Britain also argued that the West should confront Russia because it was a tyranny. Lord Palmerston and his pro-war camp considered that it was better for the Christian Orthodox populations of South-Eastern Europe to remain under Ottoman occupation rather than be 'liberated' by despotic Russia (Figes, 2010, pp. 71–78).

Two complementary sets of data exist to check this theory: a comparison of Russia's democracy with the rest of post-communist Europe and a comparison of Russia against the entire EU-led alliance against her.

Whilst the Central European countries, the Baltic states and the Balkans have experienced real democratic transitions, despite similarly constrained backgrounds to become electoral democracies, some scholars argue that Russia did not have a democratic transition at all, only a period of weakening of its autocratic state (Plokhly, 2023; Shevtsova, 2010). The trends on Russia's democracy have only worsened since 1990, like its moment of separation from the USSR was a climax, followed by a slow, then significant decline (Freedom House, 202a; Papada et al., 2023). The Russians, however, did not understand democracy differently from the rest of the world. By 2012, polls showed that 77% of Russians identified democracy with the 'equality of all citizens before the law', with only 27% caring for 'Russia's return to the status of superpower' (Tsygankov, 2014). Ukraine performed far better than Russia in democracy ratings before the war, but neither were rated free by Freedom House (2024b). However, the two countries were still close across several governance indicators, for instance, Judicial independence by the World Economic Forum (around 4 on a 1–10 scale) (Corruption Risk Forecast, n.d.). They were also comparable to the concentration of wealth in the hands of oligarchs in their post-Soviet economies. Between 2005 and 2012, the aggregate wealth of Russia's billionaires reached 40% of the national income, four times more than in either the United States or Germany (Novokmet et al., 2018). The former Communist regime managed to convert

political into economic power successfully in these two countries up to a certain point (Carrère d'Encausse, 2010, pp. 73–18; Szelenyi and Szélenyi, 1995). But significant differences have appeared over time. The Russian civil society has already begun with a handicap compared to Central Europe, and then it declined to annihilation, whilst Ukraine's, helped by Central Europe's backsliding, surged over Hungary's level (Freedom House, 2024d).

The war affected democracy in both countries. Due to its martial law, Ukraine closed TV stations and compelled the entire media to carry mostly official messages and cancelled parliamentary and presidential elections (Freedom House, 2024b; Gfoeller and Rundell, 2023). Russian President Vladimir Putin was re-elected in 2024 after his main opponents died assassinated or in unclear circumstances or were banned from running. Violence against opposition politicians and journalists is far higher in Russia than in either Central or Western Europe.

However, if the Freedom House scores are plotted on a map (Freedom House, 2024c), two facts blur the expected clear distinction between the two camps that the democracy versus autocracy paradigm presumes. Due to the regression of Hungary and Poland, most Central European countries, but also the Western Balkans, have not yet reached the status of free. But any shades on the left side of the map pale when observing the external ring of autocracies bordering the EU from the North to the South on the Eastern side. Aside from Russia and Belarus, Turkey and Azerbaijan are there, Europe's allies, on a par with Russia when democracy and human rights are concerned. Out of 100 possible points on the Freedom House scale combining civil and political rights (2024), Russia scores 13, compared to Turkey's 33 and Azerbaijan's 7. The Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 enabled the Azerbaijani regime's final assault on Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 and its complete cleansing of Armenians from the region. Azerbaijan is considered by the EU a close friend, as it provides the alternative to Russia for most energy transit routes, despite even proven attempts to corrupt European officials to derail human rights resolutions against it (Knaus, 2015). Together with Turkey, it belongs to the European Neighbourhood Policy, ENP. Turkey, also a NATO member, has practically dropped out from its EU accession course in 2018. EU relies heavily on Turkey to control migration, terrorism and support of Ukraine. When the Council of Europe (CoE) finally expelled Russia (a member since 1996) in spring 2022, Azerbaijan and Turkey had good grounds not to vote in favour, and they did not (Sassounian, 2022).

III. Border of Civilizations

The paradigm of civilizational clash has always been promoted by historians to explain the southeastern border of Europe, but it was brought to the forefront by the Clash of Civilisations theory by Samuel Huntington. He even dedicated three pages to Ukraine as part of Russia's 'near abroad' (Huntington, 1998, pp. 167–170). Huntington, who defined civilization mostly as the religious background of a country, saw Ukraine as fundamentally split between its Western and Eastern parts and facing three possible scenarios: partition, unity under Russian domination or war with Russia. He also set himself the test for the central thesis of his book. If it is true that civilization is the next source of conflicts following ideology, he wrote, violence between Russians and Ukrainians is impossible, as

they belong to the same as '*Slavs, primarily Orthodox and highly intermarried peoples*' (Huntington, 1998, p. 167).

Huntington would have been surprised to see not only the war between Russians and Ukrainians but also the accompanying fight to divide the single traditional Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) into purely national churches in the newly independent states seceding from the Soviet Union after 1991. And yet, this had a precedent. In South-Eastern Europe, after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the emancipated new states, starting with Greece, nationalised and used the church as a nation-building device, subordinated to the state (Kitromilides, 2010), as the Ecumenical Patriarchy had remained under the Ottoman Empire (and later modern Turkey) in Istanbul. Furthermore, in Byzantium, the Orthodox patriarchs traditionally have been appointed only with the approval of secular rulers (in the case of Russia, this also occurred after Peter the Great), and the practice continued in the Balkans states, where rulers assumed both the support and the control of the Church. A similar story occurred after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. As the sole surviving pan-Russian institution from both Communist and pre-Communist times, ROC fought to preserve the unity of the Church even after the splintering of the Soviet Union into several states. In Ukraine, the situation escalated after the Orange Revolution, when President Petro Poroshenko pushed hard for a Ukrainian independent church directly subordinated to the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople, officially cancelling centuries-old Church decisions to ensure the Ukrainian full separation from Russia. The remaining Russian subordinated branch, Ukraine's Orthodox Church (UOC), cut its ties entirely with the Moscow Patriarchate after Russia's invasion in 2022, as the ROC had largely been on the side of the Kremlin since the 2014 conflict (Luchenko, 2023). But Ukrainian officials have considered it a fifth column of Russia long before the invasion (Bachega, 2023). On 24 August 2024, President Volodymyr Zelensky banned the ROC from Ukraine entirely, after it had expelled it in April 2023 from its millennial Pechersk Lavra monastery (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's, 2024). In the Republic of Moldova, a Romanian-speaking Soviet splinter with a sizable Russian minority, two concurrent churches, one subordinated to Moscow and the other to Romania's autocephalous Patriarchate have also been competing for parishes after Moldova had become an independent state for the first time in its history in 1991 (Higgins, 2024). In FSU, Orthodox churches depend on the government for most material issues: no private Swiss guards protect the Patriarch, as in the Vatican, but the state security agents. After Moldova and Ukraine elected leaderships in favour of Europe and against Russia, the state intervened against the church subordinated to ROC (Gfoeller and Rundell, 2023). The dissimilar political views cutting across parishioners (in favour of Russia or against) thus moved from the political to the religious realm.

The Orthodox Church was not only a victim in all this. ROC has traded its support for secular rulers in Russia against the embrace by them of some Church ideology. For instance, the Church's anti-LGBT attitudes have become part of President Putin's official discourse and a favourite weapon against the 'degenerate' West (Stoeckl, 2020). However, these are largely shared attitudes across Eastern borderland countries, regardless of religion (Evans and Baronavski, 2018). Ursula von der Leyen had to threaten withholding the EU funds from the Polish cities that declared themselves 'free of LGBT' (Rankin, 2020). Catholic Poland introduced an abortion ban, whilst a similar idea floated in Russia failed (Stoeckl, 2020). Russia, together with Belarus, is, in fact, amongst the

least religious countries in the region in World Values Survey where a Muslim country, Turkey, leads with over 80%, followed by absolute majorities in Catholic Spain or Poland (World Values Survey Association, n.d.).

The paradigm of a civilisational clash in Eastern Europe surely has some history. After the fall of Byzantium in 1453, Russia emerged indeed as the main seat of Christian Orthodoxy, ‘a Third Rome’, and nourished the dream to liberate the Orthodox from the Islamic empire and restore Constantinople. By the mid-19th century, over 10 million Orthodox subjects lived under the Sultan (McNeill, 1964). Freeing the Orthodox subjects from Ottoman domination and restoring the Byzantine Empire with the capital at Constantinople was discussed in earnest in 1781 by Catherine the Great with Habsburg Emperor Joseph II, two unlikely crusaders. In his biography of Peter the Great, as well as in his letters to Empress Catherine, Voltaire depicts both these Russian enlightened despots as civilisers of the barbarians, in both Russia and the Asian and European near abroad (Reddaway et al., 2012; Wolff, 1994, pp. 198–209). The colonisation of the area smuggled from the Turks was perceived not unlike the American taming of the Wild West. The main losers were the Tartars and other Turkish-speaking populations. (McNeill, 1964, pp. 198–199). With Voltaire’s endorsement, and the swords of generals Rumyantsev and Potemkin, some sort of brutal Europeanization went on in the areas that the Russians had obtained through their successive victories in the Russian-Turkish wars, moving in Christian populations (Ukrainians, Russians, Greeks, Germans, etc). North of Odessa, Catherine transplanted entire German villages from Central Europe, who built Protestant temples and manufactures. Her Western architects designed and built the new cities – Odesa, Cherson and Mariupol from scratch (McNeill, 1964, p. 200). A proud column in Cahul, Moldova still celebrates a victory of Russia in defence of Christianity and against the Ottomans at the end of the 18th century.

The Russian crusading met with a serious check in the Crimean War (1853–1856) (Figes, 2010, p. 13). Protestant England and Catholic France then allied to enable the Sultan to keep his suzerainty over his Orthodox subjects in the Balkans. Of course, the primary goal was to contain Russia’s expansion in that area. Still, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire had to relinquish most of the Balkans (McNeill, 1964). In the 20th century, wars, revolutions and the social engineering of Communism, with its massive interventions, such as famine, deportation and industrialisation, changed the multiethnic character of the Eastern steppe frontier of Czarist Russia, leaving mostly Russian and Ukrainian speakers (Carrère d’Encausse, 2010).

Even if Huntington has been wrong, and state-led nationalism and not religion is the primary driver of conflicts in post-Communist Europe, the frame of the clash of civilisations can develop alongside established churches. President Vladimir Putin has long presented Russia as the last refuge of traditional family values in Europe (Carrère d’Encausse, 2010), even signing a decree granting Russian citizenship to Westerners seeking refuge from what he presents as decadent liberal values (The Moscow Times, 2024). The official Ukrainian propaganda, even from President Poroshenko’s times, frames Russia as J.R.R. Tolkien’s land of evil Mordor and Russians as Orcs. In 2016, hackers made Google’s translation tool to return ‘*мордор*’, Mordor, when translating the word ‘Russia’ from Ukrainian (Leloup, 2022). Fiction is enough to shape a conflict of civilizations.

IV. Border of Realism

Size matters. The 19th-century Europeans, from Alexis de Tocqueville to Lord Palmerston, were scared by the size of both Russia and its expansion: hundreds of square miles per day (Cobden, 1854). Russia's size and ownership of natural resources made US strategy thinkers, like Brzezinski or Kissinger, consider that Russia still needs accounting for even after the Soviet disintegration. Geopolitics, the concept that geography exercises some structural influence on human affairs, may account for the fact that, more than a century and a half after the Crimean War, the West once again allied with Turkey to contain expansionist Russia. The classic 'Eastern question' of British diplomats thus surged again, like two world wars and Communism in between had not happened at all.

Some variant of geopolitics has always been the traditional explanation of borders in the region. Traditionally, it was the rivalry between great powers – the Ottoman, the Habsburg and the Czarist Empire, which shaped up the 'steppe frontier' (McNeill, 1964). Then, of course, evidence exists of a division of 'spheres of influence' between Winston Churchill, trying to save Greece, due to its strategic importance in the Mediterranean, and Joseph Stalin (The National Archives, 1944). Within the Soviet Union itself, as well as its sphere of influence in occupied Eastern Europe after 1945, USSR shaped borders discretionarily. Crimea, reclaimed from the Tartars, had been part of Russia from 1783 to 1954, when the Soviet government transferred it to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. The reasons invoked were the commemoration of the 300th anniversary of the 'reunification of Ukraine with Russia', espousing the 'boundless trust and love the Russian people feel toward the Ukrainian people' (Kramer, 2014). The USSR deported the remaining Tartars, for the most part, to Central Asia during the Stalinist years. Crimea is the primary example of why the history of the Eastern borderland should be better written in regions than states, which came about in their current forms due to historical contingencies preceding their nation-building process. Like Crimea, the borderland provinces – the Galicia, Silesia, Bessarabia, Transcarpathia, Bukovina, Podolia, Livonia and others – changed hands between great powers several times. In 2000, several villages on the Western borders of Moldova and Ukraine from the Black Sea up to Poland still had inhabitants who had lived in four different states without ever moving from the house of their ancestors and were able to sing four different national anthems (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2009).

On the continental scale, the Eastern border often shifted according to geopolitical reasons. Edmund Burke still argued in 1791 that Turkey should not be seen as part of the European system of states, being *de facto* Asian (Burke, 2015). However, due to Britain's interests in India and its competition with Russia in Central Asia, Turkey became an indispensable part of the European balance of power. Lord Grey declared that the shores of the Black Sea were of uttermost interest to every English peasant (Cobden, 1854). A century earlier, the French were still prompting the Ottomans to march in support of Poland, just to prevent the Prussian and Russian expansion, whilst the British considered enough to train the Russian navy to keep the continental balance (Plokhly, 2015, pp. 139–140). Consequently, the Russians sank the Turkish fleet and eventually annexed Crimea, only to face a coalition of British, French and Ottomans fighting them a century later, when they had become too strong. There is no inconsistency if the goal was the 'balance of power', conceived as that 'disposition of things as that no one potentate or state shall be able, absolutely, to predominate and prescribe laws to others' (de Vattel, 2008 bk. 3, chap.

3, para. 47). In the same vein, the prominence of Muslim-dominated Crimea in the Russian-Turkish wars was due to the peninsula's strategic importance in the Black Sea and not some crusading behaviour.

No further back than the end of the Second World War, the Eastern border was in Berlin and Vienna, which the winning Allies, including the Soviet Union, had quartered amongst themselves. The Red Army retired peacefully from Austria in 1955 and from Romania in 1958 (under Nikita Khrushchev). In 1991, the countries of the Warsaw Treaty Organization liquidated the pact without any shot being fired and war having been fought and the Red Army pulled out entirely from Central Europe. The best explanation is a combination of geopolitics and geoeconomics: Russia retired in its natural frontiers, as it was too costly to keep occupying anti-communist Central Europe, whose economies it heavily subsidised through their common market (Bunce, 1985). Still, long before Putin, practically at once when Soviet republics tried to secede, Russia tried to subvert the former Soviet splinters' independence attempts even during Gorbachev (De Stefano, 2023). Russian President Boris Yeltsin wrote to President Clinton that the USSR had retired because the spirit of the Two Plus Four Treaty pertaining to Germany's reunification in 1990 (under Mikhail Gorbachev) precluded the option of expanding NATO into the area that the USSR peacefully vacated (The National Security Archive, 1994). Whilst Yeltsin specified in the same letter that any country is free to join whatever alliance it wants, the peaceful end of the Cold War was possible due to the understanding (by Russia) that Russia would not be isolated, and the freed grounds would remain neutral (Wiegrefe, 2022). The Russians did not expect that the USSR itself would implode. That meant another retirement, from the Baltics, Moldova, Ukraine, beyond the borders of Peter and Catherine the Great. The newly freed countries (including Soviet splinters, like the Baltics) saw their opportunity and rushed to join the EU and NATO. Yeltsin himself gave the green light to Polish President Lech Walesa for Poland to join NATO, but on the condition that Poland would never interfere in Ukraine (Sarotte, 2019). The 'Near Abroad' concept appeared to designate the lost former Soviet republics, which still had ties with Russia and Russian-speaking inhabitants. Then the US and EU democracy aid started, whose doctrine explicitly included regime change, and which helped topple Milosevic in Serbia, Shevardnadze in Georgia, and Yanukovich in Ukraine (amongst others). There was no reason for Putin to believe that he would be spared, when civil society organisations directly funded by Western donors organised protest rallies and discussed openly how to bring down his regime (Mearsheimer, 2014a, 2014b; McFaul et al., 2014).

However, the EU's progression towards the East has not been part of an expansion design. European enlargement has started as an answer to the demand from countries, reproduced similarly from earlier enlargements: it was neither a policy nor a strategy, until at least after the debacle in former Yugoslavia (Le Gloanec, 2017, p. 201; Lucarelli, 2000). From then on, the geopolitical reality drove the south-east and eastward enlargement of the European institutions, as a strategy to prevent division and instability of the European continent (Fischer et al., 2000), even if its narrow institutional approach remained largely the same as before (Zielonka, 2007, chap. 1). The EU was a marginal actor in the security discussion: it was not even a part of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The United States and the UK, jointly with Russia, made Ukraine give up its nuclear arsenal in the early 1990s without discussing borders and in exchange for illusory security guarantees. Following the Dayton Peace in 1995, brokered by the United States, the EU

offered in 2003 enlargement to Western Balkan countries, which still had unfinished state-building issues to stabilise them. By that time, the geopolitical rationale of expanding the EU and NATO eastwards to the Black and Baltic Seas to occupy the areas vacated by Russia had become the chief US policy. Zbigniew Brzezinski (1998, p. 18), wrote that Europe was unfinished business until it met the Russian border. He argued that ‘even a glance at a map indicates why their present scope cannot be considered as final’. The EU and NATO thus advanced, culminating in the untenable promise to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine at the NATO Bucharest summit in 2008, which missed altogether a strategy on its very probable unintended consequence: provoking Russia.

The Ukrainians tried to navigate between both worlds and failed. The 2013 proposed treaty with the EU (DCFTA) asked for lowering customs duties, whilst the rival treaty with the Russian-sponsored Commonwealth (ECU) asked for increasing them: no conciliation on this existed between EU and Russia prior to 2014 (Le Gloanec, 2017, p. 189). The game became a zero-sum one. Once the Revolution of Dignity succeeded in making the hesitant Viktor Yanukovich flee the country without waiting for elections, the Russians green-lighted the separatists in Crimea and Donbas. They could have done so as early as 1991–1992, when they endorsed similar movements in Moldova and Georgia, as those countries tried to emancipate from the Russian Commonwealth earlier. The fact that Russia’s Eastern border was closer to Moscow than it has been since the era of Peter the Great was already an issue for Russia, without adding Ukraine as part of a hostile NATO (Kissinger, 2015, p. 52; Marshall, 2015).

Putin only came to power after NATO and the EU had advanced decisively. He revived and enhanced some earlier opposition strategies, which used secessionist groups, economic embargoes, energy extortion and even sending troops on a few occasions (Bugajski, 2010). The solution promoted by the Minsk II agreement, which would have given an autonomous Donbas a veto over Kyiv’s foreign policy, is the best example of continuity in Russia’s policies, albeit on a different scale. Dmitri Kozak, the Russian president’s representative, presented a similar proposal, nearly 20 years ago, in relation to Moldova’s secessionist Transnistria (Baban, 2015). Russia was thus not a completely passive bystander in this advance of the Western frontier: it just failed in opposing the gravitational pull of the other side and giving strong enough opposition signals. It took the United States negligent retreat from Afghanistan, combined with the failed negotiations over the Minsk II agreement to provide the impetus for Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Plokhly, 2023).

On the EU side, a consistent policy towards Russia has missed for decades, and this allowed history to surprise it (Le Gloanec, 2017, p. 169). Vaclav Havel (1993, p. 3) has argued that Russia has no room in the EU, being a different civilisation, but that the EU and Russia should deal with one another as ‘equals’. This would have meant some special status for Russia, and this has never been on the table. EU did offer to Russia to join its ENP alongside all the other neighbours, which Russia refused. When NATO opened its doors to Ukraine and Georgia at the Bucharest 2008 summit (against Angela Merkel’s opinion), Russia’s feeling of insecurity related to the Eastern border reached a point of no return, and Putin decided to fight back (Le Gloanec, 2017, p. 174).

Conclusion

To conclude, the current European frames of the Eastern border project two deeply hostile identities on both sides of the border and imply that the other – regime, identity or civilisation – is incompatible with the European one. The conflict is thus unavoidable. The only solution ensuing from the identity, democracy and civilisation paradigms is to defeat Russia in order to democratise it or isolate it and build a wall around it. However, Europe and its allies have no plan to conquer Russia, nor to divide it as Germany was divided at the end of the Second World War. The Munich analogy floated around since 2022 misses the point that the West did eventually fight Germany, whilst the United States and EU have clearly ruled out to ever fight Russia directly, as it is the world's largest owner of nuclear weapons. For the EU alone, an intergovernmental entity without an army and increasingly struggling to impose a uniform vision of the rule of law even within its borders, a war with Russia, despite its superior economic prowess is beyond imagination. Russia, on one side, and the United States on the other thus affect the security of Europe. Furthermore, it is the EU, aside from Ukraine, which suffers the gravest consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian border war. Despite sanctions, the Russian economy in 2023 outpaced Europe in terms of growth (also the United States), and forecasts for 2024 show the same situation: its economy adjusted better to the war (Islam and Mullane, 2024).

Immanuel Kant has famously remarked in his *'Perpetual Peace and Other Essays'* (Kant, 1983) that tyrannies went to war more easily than republics, where everybody had a say. This concept found many supporters and even some empirical confirmation (Singer and Small, 1972). Additionally, Kant predicted that whilst republics would be reluctant to engage in war just for predation, as tyrannies did, they might eventually fight on moral grounds. The war in Ukraine – as the bombing of Serbia by NATO in the Yugoslav wars or the invasions on Iraq and Afghanistan by US-led coalitions – seems to be the kind of 'just war' that citizens could approve – at least at the onset. By early 2024, over three-quarters of Europeans approved the EU proxy war in Ukraine, its exports of weaponry and ammunition, aside from the direct funding of Ukraine (EP, Directorate General for Communication and Kantar Public, 2023). Countless rallies in Europe ask for Israel's war in Gaza against Hamas to stop, but hardly anyone rallies for peace in Ukraine.

Following the idealistic paradigms to their logical end, the EU would have to fight Russia – and change radically to do it. The European 'soft power' seems outdated, although the EU did have some successful negotiations with Russia in the past, for instance, over Kaliningrad or Karelia (Le Gloannec, 2017). In the variant of a perpetual conflict with Russia, the EU's hybrid response is not sufficient to solve the Eastern question (Youngs, 2017). EU would need to conscript soldiers, build missile shields, make its economy a war economy and grow faster into its empire-shape (Zielonka, 2017). The designers of the European Political Community plan some sort of neo-imperial entity, with a few centres, many internal peripheries and an external cordon sanitaire (France Diplomatie - Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2022). Even for the European Political Community to be the future, the entire Soviet succession border file needs to be settled between Europe, Russia and the interested countries, regions and groups to be able to coexist and find closure for frozen and active conflicts. Unfortunately, the 50 pages of the Franco-German expert report *'Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and enlarging the EU for the 21st century'* (Costa et al., 2023) commissioned by the EU to

start the conversation manages not to use the word ‘border’ once. Instead, EU promised enlargement in earnest to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

Enlargement worked in the Western Balkans, as a reconstruction, stabilisation and especially development policy (Bechev, 2024; Le Gloannec, 2017). However, after a decade of negotiations with the EU, Serbia has opened only 22 out of 23 chapters and provisionally closed two, whilst Montenegro in 12 years has managed to close three of 31 opened (Bechev, 2024). Recognising Kosovo’s independence, the United States, EU and their allies have allowed a border change – a precedent that infuriated the Russians – but they did not solve the conflict, despite heavy investment. Its management became a permanent task – and an expense of the EU. EU plans to pour similar amounts of funds into a Ukrainian ‘reconstruction’, but the situation is different. This time around, the war is not over, and EU enlargement cannot win it.

The realism paradigm acknowledges that the EU’s Eastern advance, alongside that of NATO, met with the succession wars of the Soviet Union as an unintended consequence. Nobody planned this (but they should have), and yet a full war over the border, plus a new Cold War resulted. Judging by the precedents of Ireland and former Yugoslavia, as well as by the attitude of Russia, the United States would have the uttermost say on *when* the war ceases. It can hardly be otherwise, as the peace would likely imply some recalibration of the global power balance, as Kissinger argued (2015, p. 371).

Could not the EU still play a role in *how* the war ends, under these circumstances and rekindle its old soft power? If this highly destructive war is to have had any purpose at all, the EU needs to promote a settlement of the succession wars of the Soviet Union once and forever. Otherwise, these conflicts will continue to destabilise the EU, as the earlier ones have done, but on an unprecedented scale (Pace, 2008). The settlement should be broad, to cover all the issues, the groups and even the individuals (as so many political and war prisoners exist). Whenever this occurs, it needs to include Russia and be as well prepared and patiently built as the Helsinki 1975 Accords have been.

In April 1917, the month in which the United States entered the 1st World War and long before the outcome was even known, the US Department of State had already started to reflect on the difficulty of piecing together the complex territories affected by the pan-European war. They assembled a vast team of geographers and other scientists to document and assemble statistics, maps and territorial options for the forthcoming Paris Peace Conference. The New York City Public Library hosted the team, which was known under the rather conspiratorial name of ‘The Inquiry’ (Rogers, 1964). Selected experts travelled to Paris and advised President Wilson on the main treaty and the pursuant settlements with Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary and Turkey. The Eastern border needs no less for its files on security, nuclear, trade, sanctions, energy, minorities and human rights. Complex problems cannot be solved by oversimplistic frames (Fabbrini, 2024), and better knowledge, superior understanding and earnest dialogue about the Eastern border are where a peace process should start – long before it takes off.

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