

The False Equivalence of Sovereignty in Melnichenko's Essay in the Economist



by Nona Mikhelidze

- Ukraine's history is marked by imperial conquest and cultural suppression rather than voluntary coexistence with Russia. The current war is therefore not primarily a Russia-West confrontation, but a struggle by a formerly colonised nation to preserve independence from its former imperial ruler.
- Over decades, European security often relied on treating the sovereignty of smaller states as negotiable. The system failed not because it neglected Russia's interests, but because it repeatedly subordinated the sovereignty of ex-Soviet countries to great-power politics.
- Presenting the choice as accepting Kremlin's demands today or facing a more dangerous Russia tomorrow amounts to strategic blackmail, not a path to peace. It rewards aggression and weakens the rules-based international order by making violations appear effective.

The **Economist's invited essay** by the Russian oligarch under Western sanctions, Andrey Melnichenko, "Why a Broken Russia Is Bad for the World", presents itself as an argument for stability, geopolitical realism and a sustainable European security architecture. Beneath this appearance of balance, however, lies a series of assumptions that reproduce precisely the logic that has repeatedly undermined security in Europe. By portraying Russia primarily as a misunderstood great power whose sovereignty must be safeguarded, the author diverts attention from the central reality of the war against Ukraine: Russia's long-standing denial of the sovereignty of its neighbours. Rather than offering a convincing blueprint for peace, the essay revives an outdated vision of European security based on accommodating imperial powers at the expense of smaller states.

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The essay begins by arguing that the collapse of mutual trust and shared security mechanisms produced the war in Ukraine. This diagnosis reverses the actual sequence of events. Relations between Russia and the West did

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not deteriorate because trust mysteriously evaporated or because international institutions weakened on their own. They collapsed because Russia repeatedly violated the very principles on which post-Cold War European security had been constructed, culminating in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Long before that invasion, Russia had already intervened militarily in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine in 2014, while the West consistently sought accommodation rather than confrontation. Instead of imposing meaningful costs for Russia's repeated violations of third countries' sovereignty, Western governments often rewarded Russia with privileged diplomatic roles. Russian troops became the core of so-called peacekeeping missions in the Georgian region of Abkhazia in early 1990s, despite Moscow's direct participation in the conflict. In Moldova, Russia was accepted as a mediator under the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) despite actively supporting Transnistria. These examples demonstrate not Western hostility toward Russia but, if anything, remarkable tolerance of Russian violations of international norms.

A similar historical distortion appears when the article describes Ukraine and Russia as peoples sharing a common historical space. Such language obscures centuries of imperial domination. Ukraine's history cannot simply be reduced to coexistence within a shared civilisation. Much of that "shared space" was created through conquest, colonisation,

forced integration and systematic suppression of Ukrainian political and cultural identity. Consequently, the present war is not fundamentally a geopolitical contest between Russia and the West, but first and foremost a struggle by a formerly colonised nation to preserve its independence from its former imperial ruler. Only after Ukraine resisted Russian aggression did the conflict become part of a broader confrontation between Russia and Western states.

The *Economist* article repeatedly laments the breakdown of a security system that once allowed great powers to coexist. Yet it neglects an essential feature of that system: its stability ultimately depended on limiting the sovereignty of countries situated between those powers. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Cold War and even parts of the post-Cold War period, European security rested on tacit understandings that the interests of smaller states were negotiable. The problem, therefore, was not that the security architecture failed to protect Russia's status. Rather, it was that it consistently failed to protect the sovereignty of post-soviet countries. The current crisis reflects the collapse of that unequal arrangement, not the disappearance of some ideal balance among great powers.

Perhaps the essay's most problematic claim is that Russian sovereignty has somehow become the target of Western policy. This assertion lacks empirical foundation. No Western government has proposed occupying Russia, dismantling the Russian state or denying Russia's legal sovereignty. Western sanctions, military assistance to Ukraine and diplomatic isolation have all been responses to Russian violations of international law rather than attempts to abolish Russian statehood. By contrast, it is Russia that has repeatedly sought to limit the sovereignty of neighbouring states through military intervention, economic coercion, manipulation of frozen conflicts and political pressure. If any states have experienced restricted sovereignty



in the post-Soviet space, they have been Russia's neighbours rather than Russia itself.

The essay's discussion of Ukraine illustrates this inversion particularly clearly. The author argues that Ukrainian security cannot be built upon denying Russia's sovereign agency. Yet no convincing example is provided of Ukraine ever restricting Russia's sovereignty. On the contrary, Ukraine spent decades accommodating Russian demands. It accepted the stationing of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea through long-term lease agreements, even after those arrangements were renegotiated under substantial Russian economic pressure through gas diplomacy in the late 2000s. Far from threatening Russian sovereignty, Ukraine repeatedly compromised its own. Russia nevertheless responded with the annexation of Crimea, war in Donbas and then with full-scale invasion.

Equally unconvincing is the article's insistence that lasting peace requires sovereignty "on both sides" because only sovereign actors can honour agreements. The historical record points in precisely the opposite direction. Russia has signed numerous agreements recognising Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, including 1991 Alma-Ata Protocol, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and the 1997 the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Russia and Ukraine, the 2003 Treaty between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the Russian-Ukrainian State Border. The recurring problem has never been Ukraine's unwillingness to negotiate but Russia's repeated failure to honour the commitments it voluntarily accepted. Predictability cannot arise merely from preserving sovereignty; it requires respect for international and bilateral obligations.

The article also mischaracterises Western strategic objectives. It claims that the prevailing Western discourse seeks to destroy or radically limit Russian sovereignty. In reality, Western governments have consistently articulated a

different vision: ensuring that Russia complies with the rules of the international order to which it has already committed itself, including the United Nations Charter, the Helsinki Final Act and numerous bilateral agreements. The distinction is fundamental. Asking a state to respect international law does not constitute an assault on its sovereignty. On the contrary, the international legal order exists precisely to reconcile sovereign equality with peaceful coexistence.

Ukraine's objective is the restoration of internationally recognised borders

Similarly, the suggestion that Russian defeat in Ukraine would inevitably produce humiliation or revanchism conflates military defeat with the loss of sovereignty. Ukraine's objective is not to occupy Russian territory or dismantle the Russian Federation. Rather, it seeks the restoration of internationally recognised borders – in fact, borders recognised by Russia itself. Russia would remain fully sovereign within its own borders, capable of determining its own political and economic future. The implication that Russia can remain sovereign only if it is allowed to retain conquered territories effectively transforms aggression into a prerequisite for statehood.

The article further argues that a weakened Russia risks becoming subordinate to China, drawing an analogy with Ukraine's relationship to the West. This comparison overlooks a crucial difference: Ukraine retains political agency. It has voluntarily sought integration into the EU, where member states enjoy equal legal standing regardless of size. Ukraine's dependence on Western military assistance has not eliminated its sovereignty; indeed, the war has arguably strengthened Ukrainian national identity and political autonomy. If Russia becomes increasingly dependent on China, that outcome would primarily result from Moscow's



own strategic failures, including the invasion of Ukraine, rather than from Western policy.

The article also presents the fragmentation of Russia as a danger for which the West bears responsibility. Yet the cohesion of multinational states ultimately depends on their internal political arrangements. Durable federations require meaningful regional autonomy, representative institutions and equitable distribution of political and economic power. If Russia faces centrifugal pressures, those pressures arise from its own model of highly centralised governance rather than from Western actions. External actors cannot be expected to preserve the territorial integrity of a state whose own political system fails to accommodate its diversity.

Finally, the essay concludes that the world should prefer a predictable Russia, even if that Russia remains uncomfortable for some countries. This conclusion effectively revives the old logic of spheres of influence. It suggests that smaller states should once again accept limitations on their sovereignty in exchange for the comfort of major powers. Such reasoning has repeatedly failed in European history. Stability achieved through appeasing aggressive revisionist powers has consistently proved

temporary, while the costs have been borne disproportionately by those living along the geopolitical frontier.

Indeed, the article echoes a recurring pattern in Russian strategic discourse: accept Russia's demands today or face an even more dangerous Russia tomorrow. This is less a proposal for durable peace than a form of strategic blackmail. It asks the international community to reward aggression in order to avoid the possibility of greater aggression later. Such logic undermines rather than reinforces the rules-based international order.

Ultimately, the essay presents a false choice between preserving Russian sovereignty and preserving international stability. These objectives are not incompatible. Russia can remain a fully sovereign state while respecting the sovereignty of its neighbours and complying with international law. The real lesson of the war in Ukraine is not that Russia's sovereignty has been endangered, but that durable peace in Europe requires abandoning the assumption that the security of great powers can be purchased at the expense of smaller nations. A stable European order cannot be built by accommodating imperial ambitions; it must be built upon the equal sovereignty of all states, regardless of their size or military power.

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