

Interview – Andreas Umland

Written by E-International Relations

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Andreas Umland is an analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. Umland is based in Kyiv.

Andreas Umland is also an Associate Professor of Political Science at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Umland holds a PhD in Politics from Cambridge, DPhil in History as well Diploma in Politology from FU Berlin, MPhil in Russian Studies from Oxford, and MA in Political Science from Stanford. Umland was a researcher at Stanford's Hoover Institution as well as Harvard's Weatherhead Center, and taught at the Ural State University in Yekaterinburg, St. Antony's College Oxford, Shevchenko University of Kyiv, Catholic University of Eichstätt, and University of Jena. He is the editor of the *ibidem* Press book series "Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society" and "Ukrainian Voices." He is a member of the boards of the International Association for Comparative Fascist Studies, and Boris Nemtsov Academic Center for the Study of Russia at Charles University of Prague.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

After a twenty-year freeze, the debate about Russia's future scenarios is interesting again in East European studies. An intriguing issue is the interconnection between the success or failure of Russia's foreign expansionist, imperial, and hegemonic policies and Russian domestic affairs, regime stability, and political culture—in other words, how Russia's military failures in Ukraine will impact the Russian political system.

In comparative fascist studies, my other field of research, the most interesting discussion concerns Oleksandr Zaitsev's new concept of "ustashism", a type of revolutionary, ultra-nationalism in unfree or incomplete nations. In Zaitsev's view, ustashism differs from the palingenetic extremism of titular nations in established nation-states (i.e., fascism). This kind of revolutionary and radically ethnocentric movement aspires to create a nation-state for its ethnic communities.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

With years of experience, I have come to appreciate the role of institutions in societies. Like many social science students, I started with egalitarian views, tending towards anarchism. Institutions can be criticized as instruments of oppressive power, the imposition of unequal opportunities, the repression of minorities, the suppression of dissent, etc. However, they can also fulfil important safeguarding, constructive, and stabilizing functions. The decline or disappearance of institutions in territories suffering from aggression and devastated by war illustrates the point.

A lesson from the last years has been how important certain words can be for understanding or misunderstanding a particular situation. "Fascism" and "nationalism" were words prominent in Western (not to mention Russian) interpretations of Ukraine's contemporary history and current politics. But what do you do with such terminology after Ukrainians elected a largely Russian-speaking Jew as president in 2019 with 73% of the votes—the best result that any Ukrainian presidential candidate ever received?

How could the re-election of Putin and the recent terror attack in Moscow impact the war in Ukraine in the coming months?

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They may both facilitate further escalation. Neither of these events is, however, particularly disruptive. Russian policy towards Ukraine is principally driven by other factors, like the course of the war in Ukraine and socio-economic developments in Russia. There may also be a proverbial “Black Swan” coming of which we do not know yet. Disruption is possible and, I guess, even likely. Yet, it will probably not be generated within the domestic political regime that seems frozen for now but rather as a function of economic, social, or foreign developments. Only in the second phase will the structural fragility of the over-centralized and under-institutionalized Putin System come to the fore. In particular, the current regime will have problems securing a succession of Putin, as there are no established mechanisms—e.g., a dynastic principle, a clearly established selectorate, democratic elections, etc.—that can direct, structure, and moderate a transfer of power.

In a recent article for New Eastern Europe, you said that “securing a future peace will only be possible with plausible military deterrence against a repeat escalation [from Russia].” What would such a deterrence look like? Do you see an explicit role for the U.S./NATO forces?

Such deterrence could take various forms. As is well-known, Kyiv’s preferred solution to this issue is Ukraine’s entry into NATO. However, after observing for two years how difficult Sweden’s accession to NATO in 2022-24 was, I am now even more sceptical than earlier that full membership of Ukraine in the Alliance can be expected soon. In the meantime, Ukraine’s security needs a coalition of Western and some non-Western countries who are willing to send their troops to Ukraine. Such foreign detachments could protect Ukraine’s nuclear power plants, secure the foreign embassies in Kyiv, and defend Ukraine’s transportation lifelines for importing material, including weaponry, and exporting grain and other foodstuff. In addition, Ukraine needs to build one of the best-equipped European armies with high defensive and offensive capabilities, and its defence industry needs to become one of the most productive in the world.

Putin regularly puts forward the idea that Russia and Ukraine are one country due to their common past. What role does this historical claim play in Russia’s foreign policy and strategic goals?

This idea—rather than a putative defence against NATO enlargement—was the key motivation for the start of the war in 2014. It is an outlook deeply entrenched in modern Russian political thought since the 19th century (if not before). Among the recent relevant texts are Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s seminal essay “How We Should Build Russia” of 1990 and Alexander Dugin’s popular IR textbook “Foundations of Geopolitics” of 1997.

The West perceives NATO enlargement as the primary trigger of Russia’s behaviour. However, there are many indicators that NATO constitutes a competitor rather than a threat to Moscow and that other drivers of expansionism are more critical. For instance, Moldova adopted a constitution in 1994 that established the country’s neutrality and excluded NATO membership. Since that year, Moldova has waited for the Russian troops’ withdrawal from its territory, which has yet to materialize.

Another example is that during Finland’s application and ratification of NATO membership in 2022-23, Russia withdrew troops from its Western and Northern Military Districts, i.e., from the areas east and south of Finland. That happened even though Finland’s accession has now led to NATO’s half-encirclement of Putin’s, Medvedev’s, and Patrushev’s hometown of St. Petersburg, from Estonia in the West to Finland in the North. In conclusion, ultra-nationalist pan-Russianism rather than security considerations triggered Russia’s attack on Ukraine in 2014 and full-scale invasion in 2022.

How do you currently assess Western support for Ukraine, and what can occur in the next few months?

By the end of April, many positive announcements about support in 2024 had been made. Yet, the question remains when and how the promised deliveries will arrive and be used in the war. Hopefully, the West will fully live up to its verbose promises. The prospect for 2025 is even more worrisome since it is uncertain if the Western coalition will still support Ukraine.

What are the long-term implications of Western sanctions against Russia in the diplomatic and economic

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spheres?

Moscow thinks or at least publicly claims that it can easily compensate for the loss of Western economic and political partners by intensifying old or building new partnerships with Asian and other non-Western countries. But this is not as easy as it may look. As long as the Western sanctions regime is in place, potential non-Western partners of Moscow will be constrained in their cooperation with Russia.

Even worse for Russia is that there is no alternative economic and political integration framework equivalent to the partial European and Western integration project that the West offered to Moscow in the 1990s and early 2000s. Back then, Russia was included in the Council of Europe, the G7 became the G8, the EU and Russia signed a cooperation agreement, a special NATO-Russia council was established, etc.

Most of Russia's partnerships outside Europe will be situational and reflect the partners' narrow national interests. Moscow will struggle to establish long-term, win-win cooperation schemes with non-Western countries. Many will happily take advantage of Russia's current isolation and extensive natural resources, but few will seek to comprehensively ally or integrate with Russia—as the EU and NATO once wanted to do.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations?

Be empirical! Theories are useful tools for hypothesis formulation and concept formation but not universal keys to interpreting everything. If you do not know well the history, politics and culture of the countries whose relations you want to study, you may end up imposing an irrelevant theoretical framework on your case and drawing wrong conclusions.

Sometimes, IR scholars who call themselves “realists” like George Friedman of Stratfor or John Mearsheimer of Chicago University oddly tend to ignore the reality they face. They strike me as “un-realists” whose extra-empirical ruminations confuse the minds of their listeners. They deduce from supposedly universal theories parallel worlds whose descriptions contribute little to understanding and solving actual problems. For instance, Mearsheimer's speculations on Germany's future position in Europe in his 2001 magnum opus *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* must have staggered readers familiar with contemporary German history already 20 years ago. Unsurprisingly, his “realist” predictions had no relation to the evolution of Germany's real foreign affairs during the last two decades.

Knowing theories will help sharpen your initial hypotheses and design your research program. However, the main aim of your investigation should be to understand the historical evolution of the confrontations and peculiarities of the conflict parties that you focus on. Look for possibilities to diachronically or synchronically compare the situation you investigate with similar situations in the past or elsewhere! Theories are there to generate possible explanations that can be verified, modified, or falsified. They are not meant to be preached as catechisms, and followed as religions.