

## **Why did Russia invade Ukraine?**

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Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022 has received wide international condemnation. While the invasion cannot be justified, we need to try and explain it, in order to understand how Putin's regime works and what its endgame might be.

Many consider the invasion completely "irrational." Certainly, it has radically estranged Ukrainians' hearts and minds against Russia, even among Russian-speaking groups who had historically seen Russia favorably. It has also led to the strengthening of NATO and to a new cohesion in the Western stance towards Russia. The EU is managing to reduce its dependency on Russian energy, and western economic sanctions are likely to harm the Russian economy more and more over time.

One explanation is that Putin miscalculated. He clearly overestimated the strength of the Russian army, underestimated the valor and capabilities of the Ukrainian army, and completely misread the likely response of the Ukrainian people. However, we still need to understand why Putin wanted the invasion in the first place. There are more fundamental causes at play.

### **Underlying causes**

Fundamentally, the February 2022 invasion was the latest, and arguably desperate, act in a series of attempts by Russia to control Ukraine. Russia tried to use economic and political leverage until 2014. After that strategy conclusively failed, Russia resorted to military means to carve out at least some Ukrainian territory for itself. Ukraine is important to Putin' for several underlying reasons:

### *National identity and ideology*

Ukraine is central to Russia's self-image as a Great Power defined in territorial and militarist terms. This is about (selective) historical memories of huge Russian human losses in several battles fought on Ukrainian territories to defend and expand the Russian empire over several centuries. Today's Ukraine is also seen as the cradle of the Eastern Orthodox Church, while the 10<sup>th</sup> century Kievan Rus' is seen as the birthplace of the Russian state. This territorial-Imperial conception of the Russian state with Ukraine at its core is based in large part on myths. It was dominant in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it is again central to Russian official ideology today. It is probably meant to alleviate the trauma produced by the collapse of the USSR, which took away Great Power status practically overnight. The collapse also left many millions of ethnic Russians outside the borders of the new Russia, most notably in the Eastern and Southern regions of Ukraine.

Putin has regularly lamented this state of affairs through his 20-plus-year reign. Progressively, however, especially from 2012-2014, Putin's regime has made a more concerted effort to revive this ideology and restore this particular conception of the Russian state in a bid to cement its legitimacy. In the meantime, Putin's Russia gradually acquired the means to act upon this ideology and conception, in stark contrast to the weakness of the 1990s. It appears that Putin has come to genuinely believe this ideology in his older years, perhaps looking to claim a place in Russian history alongside Imperial rulers who "gathered the Russian lands."

### *Realpolitik*

Ukraine is also important to Russia for pragmatic reasons: Crimea is strategic for Russian military projection in the Black Sea region; Ukraine could be a buffer zone against a (purely hypothetical) military invasion from the west; Ukraine would have been an important part of Russia's still-born Eurasian Union; there were cross-border industrial interdependencies, etc. The military-strategic aspects are important in part due to Putin's outlook on international relations, where Russia is under constant siege by the West. Putin was also probably reassured in his decision to invade by China's expressions of "friendship without limits", based on sharing some of the same international outlook: Both countries are wary of the US-dominated international order and want to create a multipolar one.

### *The threat of a demonstration effect*

Until Russia's annexation of Crimea, its intervention in the Donbas, and then the full-scale invasion of 2022, Ukraine was also a mirror through which ordinary Russians could potentially see themselves. If Ukraine, one day, were to become a western-integrated, prosperous, dynamic, rule of law-based neighbor, it could be perceived by Russians as an attractive *and attainable* model to emulate. The two countries shared a common history in Soviet times, and, for South-Eastern Ukraine, in pre-Soviet times too. Many Ukrainians had family and close friendship ties across the border. In addition, there were cultural and language links between Russia and South-

Eastern Ukraine, in particular. Many Russians regarded Ukrainians as one and the same “people”, even though this notion is inaccurate and is being used by Putin to help justify his invasion.

From the point of view of the authoritarian regime in Moscow, therefore, a western-integrated Ukraine could be seen as an important “threat” – not a military threat to the Russian state, but for the regime in the form of a potential “demonstration effect” that could undermine the Russian regime from within, via emulation. After all, Putin was a KGB officer in East Germany when the East-Central European “satellite countries” rebelled against their regimes and against Moscow in a cascading fashion that was facilitated by demonstration effects. Putin was also probably aware of how the “colored revolutions” of Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) in part emulated one another. In addition, he most likely took note of the demonstration effects that contributed to the spread of anti-authoritarian protests in the Arab Spring of 2011-2012.

Fundamentally, Russia’s failure to keep Ukraine in its orbit boils down to Russia’s failure to provide an attractive model for its neighbor. Indeed, Russia’s model of governance is hardly cherished at home either. The leadership is old, many senior personalities having been in power for some 20 years. Succession at the top will be very challenging for a highly personalistic regime where “there is no Russia without Putin,” in the words of the chairman of the Lower House of Parliament. The war helps cement the increasingly authoritarian and repressive nature of the regime, which will help prevent elite challenges and, at least for a while, consolidate society with patriotic fervor. However, it also makes the regime even more ossified and brittle and even more detached from reality, incapable of receiving feedback from below or from dissenters.

The regime is trying to appeal to a chauvinist Imperial notion of “Russian national identity” anchored on myths of past military glories or the pure soul of ordinary Russians versus the insidious influence of Western depravity. However, it has no positive, compelling vision of the future - how to deliver a better life for its subjects, or how to boost Russia’s human capital and spur innovation.

### **The destruction of alternative futures**

Fear of a potential “demonstration effect” may help explain why Putin is now seeking to destroy Ukraine, having failed to conquer or control it. He needs to eliminate even the chance that Ukraine may, one day, become a model that Russians could perceive as appealing and attainable. The physical destruction of the civilian infrastructure, turning entire cities to rubble, can probably be explained in that light.

This may also help explain why Russia is bombing the civil infrastructure and apartment buildings in Southern and Eastern Ukraine, which is where ethnic Russians and Russian speakers are concentrated and where cultural, linguistic and historical ties with Russia were strongest. Perhaps the bombing is meant to sever those ties, which could, one day, facilitate emulation by Russians in Russia, should those regions become Western-integrated, prosperous and democratic. More generally, the “character assassination” of Ukrainians via Russian state propaganda, equating

Ukrainians with Nazis and treating them as sub-humans, is probably also aimed at destroying any cultural affinity that the two so-called “brotherly nations” once felt.

Authoritarian rulers constantly seek to eliminate alternatives to themselves. They suppress the domestic opposition and seal off the country from external, anti-regime meddling. But they also suppress external demonstration effects by discrediting alternative foreign models of governance, by trying to subvert and undermine them, or by suppressing them directly where they can.

This is not to say that, if Russia had not invaded, Ukraine would have easily transformed into a paragon of democracy. That transformation was always going to be a daunting task, given the starting point. However, important steps had been taken in that direction, namely Ukrainian citizens obtaining visa-free travel within the EU from 2017 and Ukraine implementing an Association Agreement with the EU from 2016. Indeed, the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement was so threatening for Russia that Putin tried hard to stop it. He pressurized then Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich into not signing it, at the last minute, in late 2013. Ukraine then signed it in 2014, after Yanukovich was ousted. All in all, therefore, it was conceivable that Ukraine could, one day, be started on its EU accession path. The conditionality that comes with that process would have gradually spurred Ukraine towards developing its democratic institutions, supporting civil society, tackling corruption and strengthening the rule of law.

## **Was Russia provoked?**

It was Ukraine’s turn towards the EU following the “revolution of dignity” of the winter of 2013-2014 that triggered Russia to annex Crimea, to foment separatism in the Donbas, to deploy its military there in 2014, and to attempt a full-scale invasion in February 2022. The main underlying reasons for these moves are mentioned above. Instead, Putin cites a number of alleged “provocations”, which Russia had to respond to:

### *Was Ukraine’s NATO membership a threat to Russia?*

It was always very unlikely that Ukraine would join NATO in any foreseeable future. But even if it did, it is very difficult to imagine that NATO would attack nuclear-armed Russia, unprovoked, either via Ukrainian territory or elsewhere. The only plausible scenario in which NATO would probably fight directly against Russia is if it was obliged to do so under Article 5 of its founding treaty – i.e., in response to a Russian aggression against a NATO member state.

It is true that NATO has participated in military operations outside of the Article 5 mechanism, such as the 2011 Libya campaign, for example. But that was under a UN mandate to enforce a no-fly zone “to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack” at the hands of the Gaddafi regime. Arguably, the campaign went beyond the initial UN mandate and this is an aspect that remains controversial. Also, NATO’s 1999 bombing of Serbia had not been authorized by the UN Security Council. Nevertheless, it seems implausible that Russia should fear a similar NATO attack, outside of an Article 5 situation, given its nuclear capabilities.

It is important to remember that support for NATO had been consistently low in Ukraine until Russia annexed Crimea and intervened in the Donbas in 2014. Less than 20% of all Ukrainians held positive views of NATO in repeated surveys in 2008-2013, albeit with marked regional differences. Former Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko (2005-2010) did try to start Ukraine on a formal NATO accession path, but this did not happen due to the opposition of other Ukrainian political forces, with elite divisions reflecting real divisions in society. It is also highly unlikely that key European NATO members would have agreed to it. According to the NATO founding treaty, new countries can join the alliance only by “unanimous agreement” of all current members.

It is true that in 2008 the US pushed NATO to issue a vague promise to have Ukraine accepted in NATO “at some point in the future.” But several European NATO countries remained consistently opposed to starting Ukraine on an accession process. Ukraine’s unresolved sea border demarcation issues with Russia and the presence of the Russian Black Sea fleet in Crimea effectively hindered any hypothetical path towards NATO membership.

#### *A CIA-orchestrated coup d’état in 2014?*

From a shorter-term perspective, Russia justified its 2014 annexation of Crimea and intervention in the Donbas as a reaction to Ukraine’s “revolution of dignity” of the winter of 2013-2014. Russia calls it a CIA-orchestrated *coup d’état* against then President Viktor Yanukovich, following Putin’s pressuring him not to sign the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement mentioned above. In fact, the CIA could not have achieved the extent of genuine popular protest and indignation that fueled the “revolution”, even if they supported it. The US in general or the EU could not have caused that either. The “revolution” ended up affirming Ukraine’s pro-European commitment. It also ended up dramatically sharpening hostility against Russia, given that Putin kept supporting Yanukovich even after he used brutal police violence and then snipers in a failed bid to quell the popular protests. Yanukovich eventually fled Kyiv, likely fearing his arrest.

In the second phase of those Kyiv protests, small groups of far-right militants started to respond to police violence with violence of their own. That allowed the protest movement to continue through several days of violent clashes with police. The fact that far-right militants played a key role in resisting police violence ended up giving them a prominent role in the interim government that was in place for a few months. Their visibility went far beyond their numerical weight among the protesters and meant that the interim government included individuals with very strong anti-Russian rhetoric and agendas, including xenophobic overtones. However, those ultra-nationalist forces were reduced to a purely marginal role after the early election of October 2014.

#### *Were ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine under threat?*

Quickly reacting to the ousting of Yanukovich as a result of the “revolution of dignity”, Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014 and started backing separatist militias in Eastern Ukraine. After two or three months of local insurgency by armed groups in Donetsk and Luhansk, Russia also deployed its armed personnel in their support. According to Russia, such intervention was

necessary in order to protect ethnic Russians and Russian speaking groups from Kyiv's "genocidal" forces.

The temporary government formed in early 2014 on the back of the "revolution of dignity" would have fought the armed insurgents in the East, but hardly posed any physical threat to the generality of ethnic Russian or Russian speaking groups. At the parliamentary elections of October 2014, the anti-Russian and xenophobic groups, which had gained visibility during the "revolution", obtained a combined total of just eight seats out of 450 (they then failed to get any representation at the following elections in 2019).

The internationally-mediated Minsk Agreements of 2014 and 2015 were supposed to bring about a ceasefire and to grant autonomous status to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, putting Russian claims of impending threats to those populations at rest. At that time, the Ukrainian army was no match for the separatists backed by Russian military units and Ukraine had to agree to those conditions. However, the agreements could not be implemented due to disagreements on the sequencing of new elections in the two regions relative to their demilitarization, among other issues.

The diplomatic process, however, did reduce the intensity of the fighting for several years (2015-2021). This allowed the Ukrainian army to receive significant training and equipment from the West, radically improving its capabilities. From Russia's military-tactical perspective, Russia's full-scale invasion came too late in February 2022. By that point, Putin likely feared that further delays would only keep strengthening Ukraine's army.

### **Is the Russian public behind Putin?**

Putin's popularity in Russia spiked up after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, although it declined again in 2018 and reached historically low levels during the pandemic. The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, so far, has again led to higher approval ratings: Levada Center opinion polls show that about 70-80% of Russians currently support the country's military actions in Ukraine, and about 80% support Putin.

In part, this is certainly the effect of a massive propaganda campaign through state TV and cultural productions. However, such propaganda also works because many Russians are ready to believe it. The Levada Center has suggested that some Russians feel a sense of pride in believing the official narrative that Russia is "standing up to the West" and reclaiming its Great Power status. Others see the war as something that happens far away and has nothing to do with them. For others still, uncritical acceptance of the official line blaming the West helps avoid questions of moral responsibility.

According to official propaganda from 2014 in particular, Putin's actions are about protecting "Russian national identity" by restoring Russia's Great Power status. Aggression is presented as defensive and preventative. Putin is effectively fighting an existential battle to protect "what it means to be a Russian". This ideological shift followed a general tightening of authoritarian rule

from 2012 after relatively large protests took place in many Russian cities against election rigging. This was the start of Putin's third term as president. With the economy losing steam, the regime was unable to maintain legitimation on the basis of economic performance, which had been a viable option for most of the 2000s.

Most Russians see the country's leadership as cynical, thoroughly corrupt and incompetent. The regime's neo-Imperial ideology is meant to counter the thought that Russia's leaders are in power purely in order to enrich themselves. Opinion polls show that, by early 2013, about half of all Russians agreed with opposition blogger Alexey Navalny's powerful characterization of the ruling party as the "party of crooks and thieves". Shifting focus to the external field allows Putin to claim that the regime is delivering something valuable to ordinary Russians – namely, a sense of self-esteem or pride in Russia's "hitting back" and restoring its Great Power status, however misplaced and distorted this may be.

This plays well with many Russians, especially those around 50 years of age and older who were socialized during Soviet times. Militarist, "Great Power", anti-American messages exploit deeply-entrenched mental schemas and emotional reflexes that date back to the Soviet Union. Some scholars suggest that most Russians are receptive to this re-formulation of the Russian national identity because, after they lost their Soviet national identity in 1991, nothing else quite replaced it, leaving them longing for a sense of national cohesion and purpose.

According to other social psychological interpretations, a sense of pride in seeing Russia flex its muscles is a compensatory mechanism for otherwise severely depressed living conditions and helplessness. Particularly in the socially depressed provinces of rural Russia, life is routinely subjected to "violence" at the hand of corrupt local authorities, without possibility of recourse. According to this interpretation, the war offers those Russians a chance to (vicariously) transfer their frustration and hit back at external enemies.

It remains to be seen whether this ideology can sustain regime legitimation for more than a few years, especially if a major set-back on the battlefield will force Putin to implement a mass military mobilization. Aside from ideology, the stability of Putin's regime also rests on the patronage opportunities it affords to its elites, in turn resting on the rent extracted from the export of oil and other commodities. A priority there is to keep the repressive apparatus well-fed. The regime also rests on the dependency of most Russians on the state via employment in state institutions or companies, or in companies controlled by Putin's proxy magnates. The share of state employment in the workforce has steadily increased over Putin's years. At the same time, many among the better educated, most dynamic social groups have emigrated. Since the 2022 invasion, hundreds of thousands are estimated to have left the country. Millions are estimated to have left since the start of Putin's presidency in 2000.

## **What next?**

Only the Ukrainians should decide how long they are willing to keep fighting for and for what objectives. However, not all desirable goals may be compatible with one another. Arguably, one

of the most important goals for a post-war Ukraine would be to start its EU accession process as soon as possible: The conditionality involved in that process would offer Ukraine a chance to strengthen the rule of law and its democratic institutions more broadly. Another important goal for Ukraine would be the reconstruction of its economy, including the physical rebuilding of its infrastructure.

However, achieving those two goals arguably requires iron-clad security guarantees from the West. Realistically, the West would be wary of offering such guarantees as long as a military conflict with Russia is either ongoing or likely to resume at any point. No matter how successful Ukraine's military effort will be, Russia won't be as thoroughly defeated as Nazi Germany was in 1945. It was the total nature of Germany's WWII defeat, and the Allied occupation that followed, that laid the foundations for a completely new Germany to emerge, which went on to fully reject nationalism and militarism.

A serious military defeat could perhaps prevent Russia from waging another war of aggression for several years, but probably not for very long. Indeed, a defeat may fuel *ressentiment* and calls for new military adventures. Even if Putin were deposed - and age considerations will eventually necessitate a succession - the new leader or leadership may well seek to avenge the defeat. Even so, a peace settlement that reaffirmed the principle of Ukraine's sovereignty, its territorial integrity and basic principles of international law would probably be the most desirable one for long-term peace, even if that meant greater western involvement in containing Russia.

At present, it would be political suicide for Ukraine's leadership to accept territorial losses. That kind of settlement may, however, eventually come to be considered, *if* it meant that the US could provide security guarantees to Ukraine and that Ukraine could start EU accession negotiations. Those two elements, in turn, would also enable more effective reconstruction. However, even if Ukraine would accept such a settlement, Russia may not.

A settlement that would help Ukraine rebuild its economy and, one day, become a prosperous, rules-based, EU-integrated neighbor would pose a serious threat not to the Russian state, but to Russia's authoritarian kleptocratic regime. The Russian public may, one day, want to emulate the path taken by Ukraine. The insecurity of the Russian regime vis a vis a potential demonstration effect by a "Ukrainian model", more than Putin's Imperial ideology or his alleged security imperatives, may define Russia's endgame. If that reading is correct, Russia would seek to prologue the conflict indefinitely, to keep Ukraine under threat and to keep damaging its economy.