

**Putin Did Fear Attack, but Not Anytime Soon and Not from NATO:
The Causes of the Russo-Ukrainian War and Their Implications for Western and
Ukrainian Strategy**

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Executive Summary

- There is no one cause of Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine; rather, it stems from many factors, both material and ideational.
- In regard to the invasion’s underlying causes, Russia’s president believes that Russians and Ukrainians constitute parts of a single spiritual and ethnic community that are morally bound to remain united in the future; he considers Ukraine’s territory (like all of the former Soviet Union) to be part of “big historical Russia”; and he regards Ukraine’s human and material resources as crucial to the retention of great power status in the future.
- As for the war’s proximate causes, Putin’s anger at Kyiv’s repeated rejection of Moscow’s plans for supranational integration gradually built to a boil, erupting in the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In addition, Moscow’s consistently bellicose policies over the ensuing eight years pushed Ukrainians into outright hostility toward Russia, further dampening the prospects for voluntary reintegration or even friendship between the two states in the future.

- In turn, Kyiv's declarations of intent to restore Ukrainian rule over Crimea threatened the Russian Federation's territorial integrity as the Kremlin defined it, and the slow-but-steady growth of Ukrainian military power made war appear both inevitable and urgent in Putin's eyes.
- The many mutually reinforcing motives behind Russia's "special military operation" mean that Putin is likely to remain extremely resistant to compromise, making the achievement of a peace deal that would be acceptable to Kyiv exceedingly difficult. Put differently, the full restoration of Ukraine's internationally recognized borders will be possible only after either a thorough and extensive change of regime occurs in Moscow or the Russian military suffers catastrophic defeat on the battlefield.

“Fully fifty years ago I learned on the streets of Leningrad the following rule: if a fight is inevitable, it pays to strike first.”

-- Vladimir Putin, October 2015¹

“Putin has never agreed to respect Ukrainian sovereignty — and never will. If anything, Russia’s rhetoric about the war has become more annihilationist, invoking the Russian Orthodox Church and suggesting that the conflict is something like a holy war, with existential consequences.”

-- Andriy Zagorodnyuk and Eliot A. Cohen²

On February 27, 2014, when Russia began a series of military actions to take control of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine, the two countries entered into an eight-year period of low-grade warfare. Almost eight years to the day later, on February 24, 2022, Moscow escalated the conflict to a full-scale invasion of its neighbor and fellow post-Soviet state. While the war immediately became a humanitarian catastrophe, an existential threat to the survival of the Ukrainian nation, and a source of great concern about the potential for nuclear war, it has also evolved into a classic war of attrition. These stark realities have prompted a great deal of discussion of the origins of — as well as solutions to — the havoc, suffering, and dangers that Russia’s actions have generated.

Such solutions are especially elusive due to the starkly incompatible goals of the warring parties. In fact, the present analysis will make clear just how difficult it will be to convince Moscow to make any substantial concessions or accept any meaningful compromise. Discerning the origins of this war is somewhat easier but still presents some degree of difficulty due to the utterly divergent conclusions reached by opposing camps of knowledgeable analysts. At its most basic level, as Charles Glaser writes, “the debate over the causes of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine can be divided between those who emphasize the Kremlin’s greed [that is, domestically driven

¹ “Заседание Международного дискуссионного клуба «Валдай»” [Session of the Valdai International Discussion Club], October 22, 2015, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50548>.

² Andriy Zagorodnyuk and Eliot A. Cohen, “A Theory of Victory for Ukraine: With the Right Support and Approach, Kyiv Can Still Win,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 21, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/theory-victory-ukraine>.

revisionism and expansionism] and those who dwell on its sense of insecurity [vis-à-vis external great powers].”³ Those in the latter camp emphasize past rounds of NATO expansion that have brought the alliance’s military infrastructure closer to Russia’s borders and thereby generated a feeling of “encirclement” in Moscow. In this interpretation, the West “provoked” the Russian invasion and thus bears the blame for it.⁴ In contrast, those unsympathetic to Russia’s actions generally highlight either the ideas dominant in the Kremlin, especially Putin’s newfound infatuation with historical memory and longing to restore the country’s former imperial greatness,⁵ and/or the natural aversion of an autocratic regime to having a successful democracy on its border.⁶

This paper maintains that the arguments of “the West is to blame” camp are deeply flawed, whereas the “Russia is to blame” camp is largely correct but fails to recognize certain key points. First, it elucidates the deep-seated, underlying sources of this catastrophic and dangerous war. Second, it surveys key moments in the evolution of Russo-Ukrainian relations leading up to both the annexation of Crimea and the launch of the full-scale invasion in order to identify the proximate causes of the war. Third, it discusses the evolution of Ukrainian military power after 2014 and the strategic problem that its continued growth potentially created for Moscow—an aspect of the story that has so far received little attention. The concluding section

³ Charles Glaser “Fear Factor: How to Know When You’re in a Security Dilemma,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 103, No. 4 (July/August 2024), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/fear-factor-security-charles-glaser#author-info>.

⁴ Among numerous works, see John Mearsheimer, “The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis,” *The National Interest*, June 23, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/causes-and-consequences-ukraine-crisis-203182>; and Geoffrey Roberts, “‘Now or Never’: The Immediate Origins of Putin’s Preventative War on Ukraine,” *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 22, no. 1 (December 2022), <https://jmss.org/article/view/76584>.

⁵ Jade McGlynn, “Imposing the Past: Putin’s War for History,” *War on the Rocks*, March 15, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/imposing-the-past-putins-war-for-history/>; Serhii Plokhyy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: the Return of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023); and Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Diverging States* (Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press, 2024).

⁶ Michael McFaul and Robert Person, “Why Putin Invaded Ukraine,” in Hal Brands, ed., *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024); Plokhyy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*; and Popova and Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine*, p. 11.

draws out the implications of its findings regarding what can be expected from Russia in the future and Ukrainian and Western policy going forward.

The Sources of Putin's Obsession with Ukraine: Deep-seated Causes of the War

My account of the origins of Russia's invasion of Ukraine begins at the start of the Putin presidency with Moscow's pursuit of an objective that Boris Yeltsin shared and, indeed, almost any Russian leader would similarly have pursued: Ukraine's reintegration with Russia, economically at first and ultimately in the realm of national security.⁷ However, Putin took this understandable objective to an extreme. As Mikhail Zygar writes, Russia's president has been "obsessed with Ukraine almost from day one of his presidency. 'We must do something, or we'll lose it,' he said over and over again" to members of his cabinet.⁸ Moscow's objective of reintegration — and Putin's obsession with achieving it — flow from many sources, both ideational and material. The three most important are as follows.

First, the Kremlin's desire for reintegration stems from Putin's adoption of a Slavophile and Orthodox worldview that Russians and Ukrainians are branches of a single national community. As Putin stated in his major address announcing the commencement of the full-scale invasion, "Ukraine is not just a neighboring country for us. Rather, it is an inseparable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space."⁹ At a press conference two months later, he added, "We [Russians] don't really distinguish where Belarus ends and where Russia begins, or where Russia and Belarus are located. In addition, however strange it might sound today, I have always said that we are a triune people, one that is comprised of Ukraine and Belarus and Russia."¹⁰

⁷ David W. Rivera, "Engagement, Containment, and the International Politics of Eurasia," *Political Science Quarterly*, 118, no. 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 81-106, <https://academics.hamilton.edu/documents/Rivera,%20Engagement.pdf>.

⁸ Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), p. 85.

⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Обращение Президента Российской Федерации" [Address by the President of the Russian Federation], February 24, 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹⁰ "Совместная пресс-конференция с Президентом Белоруссии Александром Лукашенко" [Joint Press Conference with Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko], April 12, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68182>.

A second major source of the Kremlin's desire for close integration with Ukraine lies in the two countries' shared history and a resulting imperial nostalgia on the part of many Russians. That is, many elites (Putin included) view Russia shorn of the territories it conquered between the 17th and 19th centuries — which include Ukraine, the Baltic coastline, Crimea, the Caucasus, and Central Asia — as an unnatural entity and a historical injustice. At a campaign event in 2011, for instance, Putin conveyed his dismay over the dissolution of the USSR by recalling an encounter he had after his return to the country in 1990: "One day I went to a car repair shop to replace a flat tire and the mechanics asked me, 'Are you for the Union or for Russia?' I couldn't believe my ears. I said to them, 'Is there really a difference? They just have different names. The USSR is Russia, a big Russia.'" ¹¹ In his major national address announcing the mobilization of reservists in September 2022, Putin similarly directed his appeal to, among others, "the people of our great Motherland and to all those who are united by our big, historical Russia." ¹²

The third source of Putin's desire for reintegration derives from his concern over preserving Russia's great-power status into the future. With a mere 147M inhabitants in 2021, the Russian Federation is demographically outpaced by the United States (with 337M) and dwarfed by both China and India (with more than 1.4bn each). As a result, the Kremlin has desperately sought to combine its resources with those of other former Soviet republics, especially Ukraine (whose inhabitants numbered 44M prior to the invasion), in some kind of larger union. In a landmark speech to the Valdai International Discussion Club in 2013 on the topic of Moscow's latest vehicle for integrating the post-Soviet area, the Eurasian Economic Union, Putin explained that "Eurasian integration represents a chance for all of the post-Soviet countries to become an independent center of global development and not a periphery to Europe

¹¹ Quoted in David W. Rivera, "NATO Expansion or Putin's Psyche? The Insignificance of Military Insecurity to Russia's War in Ukraine" (Paper presented at the DC Area Postcommunist Politics Social Science Workshop, George Washington University, January 6, 2021), <https://academics.hamilton.edu/documents/RiveraNATOExpansion.pdf>.

¹² Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," September 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390>.

or Asia.”¹³ Or as he wrote in the summer of 2021 in an essay that is widely (and correctly) regarded as an unofficial declaration of war on a sovereign Ukraine, “Together we [Russians and Ukrainians] have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful.”¹⁴

The Kremlin’s Strategy Backfires: Proximate Causes of the Full-Scale Invasion

In practice, meaningful integration, if not a reestablished union, between Russia and Ukraine would require Ukraine to eschew integration with the West and not pursue membership in either the European Union or NATO. And therein lies the crux of the East-West tug-of-war over Ukraine during the last two decades. That is, to the extent that NATO expansion actually played a role in generating this war, it is because Ukraine’s admission into either NATO or the EU would thwart Russia’s effort to integrate it into a larger union-state. Put differently (and as Andrei Kozyrev argues and I have demonstrated elsewhere), Russia’s rulers understood that NATO did not pose a genuine security threat as the term is conventionally understood — i.e., an entity that is likely to initiate an offensive war to seize Russian territory or launch a missile attack on any of its cities.¹⁵ However, it is true that further enlargement of the alliance would imperil one of the Kremlin’s core foreign policy objectives. Putin all but conceded these points when he downplayed the significance of NATO’s decision in June 2022 to add two new members, saying, “For us, the membership of Finland and Sweden is nothing like the membership of Ukraine in NATO. These are completely different things.”¹⁶

¹³ “Заседание международного дискуссионного клуба «Валдай»” [Session of the Valdai International Discussion Club], September 19, 2013, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68182>.

¹⁴ Vladimir Putin, “Статья Владимира Путина «Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев»” [On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians], July 12, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

¹⁵ Nicole Greenberg, Eric Moss, and David W. Rivera, “Common Ground and the War in Ukraine: Fact-Checking a Recent Event,” *The Spectator*, February 16, 2023, <https://spec.hamilton.edu/common-ground-and-the-war-in-ukraine-fact-checking-a-recent-event-6efcd46f3e6d>.

¹⁶ Quoted in Михаил Метцель, “Путин назвал ложным сравнение членства Украины в НАТО с вступлением Швеции и Финляндии” [Putin Claims that Comparisons between Ukrainian Membership in NATO and Sweden’s and Finland’s Joining Are False], *TASS*, June 29, 2022, <https://tass.ru/politika/15078015>.

In the fall of 2013, Putin achieved a short-term tactical victory in his effort to foster close integration with Ukraine when he induced then-President Viktor Yanukovich to shelve an association agreement with the EU. That decision, however, galvanized pro-European segments of the population to protest the move by camping out on Independence Square in the center of Kyiv. During the months of violent and increasingly deadly clashes that ensued, Putin consulted regularly with Yanukovich, offering advice on how to preserve his hold on power. After Yanukovich's security detail abandoned their posts on February 21, however, he fled the capital, prompting the Verkhovna Rada to remove him from office and replace him with pro-European forces the next day. These events, which Ukrainians call the Revolution of Dignity and the Kremlin describes as a Western-orchestrated and violent coup d'état, infuriated Russia's president for all of the reasons discussed above.¹⁷

Since Ukraine's armed forces were little prepared for combat in 2014 (a top Ukrainian general described its army as "literally in ruins" and suffering from "total demoralization"), the Kremlin could exploit its overwhelming coercive advantage to spirit Yanukovich out of the country, deploy special forces to take over both the Crimean parliament and key military installations in the peninsula, and execute an "Anschluss," to borrow Serhii Plokhy's analogy, with that sovereign Ukrainian territory.¹⁸ That annexation was then celebrated with excessive pomp and ceremony before an assemblage of the country's political elite in the St. George Hall of the Grand Kremlin Palace as the "return of Crimea to its native harbor" — i.e., an act of national unification and historical justice. During the ensuing months, similar operations were conducted throughout Ukraine's southeast but succeeded only in Donetsk and Luhansk, where Russian operatives and mercenaries organized and established separatist "people's republics"

¹⁷ In this regard, years earlier Putin had encouraged a reporter to read the memoirs of White Army General Anton Denikin and added that "Denikin discusses Great and Little Russia, Ukraine. He writes that no one may meddle in relations between us; that has always been the business of Russia itself." Quoted in Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, p. 104.

¹⁸ Quoted in "The War Is Making Ukraine a Western Country," *The Economist*, February 25, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2023/02/21/the-war-is-making-ukraine-a-western-country>; and Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, pp. 111-17.

that were not annexed but de facto controlled by Moscow.¹⁹ Putin's main goals in taking all of these steps were to punish Ukraine for its "misbehavior" and to send a signal to the West that Russia would no longer passively tolerate actions that impeded its efforts to reintegrate the lands of its former empire.²⁰

Over the ensuing eight years, Putin clung to the belief that by punishing Ukraine for its westward leanings, he could force Ukrainians to come to their senses, accept that Russians and Ukrainians are in fact "one people," and realize that their true interests lie in integration with Russia and not the West. In case punishment and pressure failed, however, Putin coupled this strategy with a demand that Ukraine undertake constitutional reforms that would give the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic veto power over Ukraine's international orientation. Such changes were a provision of the two Minsk accords — and from the Kremlin's perspective, the most important one.²¹

But the Ukrainians proved Putin's belief to be incorrect. Instead of reconciling to Moscow's embrace, the country's leadership immediately restarted the process of joining the EU; trade and cultural ties with Russia withered; "decommunization laws" were passed that "equated communism with Nazism and criminalized ... the display of both regimes' symbols";²² a new language law mandated increased use of Ukrainian in commerce and the mass media;²³ the public increasingly backed the prospect of NATO membership;²⁴ and the Rada revoked the country's previous non-aligned status and further amended the constitution to require that future governments pursue Ukraine's membership in the EU and NATO.²⁵ In short, whereas Putin

¹⁹ Plokhly, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, pp. 123-25.

²⁰ Rivera, "NATO Expansion or Putin's Psyche."

²¹ Popova and Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine*, pp. 165-76.

²² Popova and Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine*, pp. 181.

²³ Popova and Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine*, pp. 188.

²⁴ Joanna Fomina, "On Ukraine's Geopolitical Identity: Public Opinion Dynamics on NATO Accession in the Aftermath of the War with Russia," in Tomasz Stepniewski and George Soroka, eds., *Ukraine After Maidan: Revisiting Domestic and Regional Security* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2018), Graph 1.

²⁵ "Ukraine Votes to Abandon Neutrality, Set Sights on NATO," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 23, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-parliament-abandons-neutrality/26758725.html>; and *Constitution of Ukraine*, June 28, 1996, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/44a280124.html>. The amendment concerning EU and NATO membership was added in 2019.

believed that seizing territory from Ukraine would induce it to return to the Russian fold, his belligerence only served to alienate, frighten, and unify most of its people.²⁶

Even beyond the various identity and policy shifts taking place in Ukraine, perhaps equally worrisome for the Kremlin was that successive post-Maidan governments pledged to restore the country's internationally recognized borders and conducted combat operations to reassert control over the Donbas. In this regard, in August 2021, Kyiv launched the International Crimea Platform, an organization dedicated to achieving the "full restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty over Crimea," for the purpose of mobilizing international support for the eventual "de-occupation" of the peninsula.²⁷ The platform's inaugural summit featured supportive speeches by numerous European heads of state as well as Jennifer Granholm, the US secretary of energy.²⁸

Russia's full-fledged invasion is a product of Putin's gradual realization that his post-Maidan strategy was an abject failure. For eight years he beamed pro-Russian, anti-Kyiv, and anti-Western propaganda into Ukraine; ordered cyberattacks on Ukrainian banks, electrical grids, and elections; kept a sizeable portion of Ukraine's internationally recognized territory out of Kyiv's control; and even sent ground troops into direct combat for that purpose. Ukrainians continued to vote for leaders who rejected Moscow's demands nevertheless. With his health in question and his time in office appearing like it might be coming to an end, all Putin could think to do to recover from his past strategic failures and convert them into ultimate victory was to position massive military power along Ukraine's borders and thereby give himself the option of

²⁶ Lucy Minicozzi-Wheeland, "Putin's Self-Defeating War Has Succeeded in Uniting Ukrainians," *Ukraine Alert*, February 20, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-self-defeating-war-has-succeeded-in-uniting-ukrainians/>.

²⁷ "Online Summit of the Crimea Platform Raised the Level and Expanded the Geography of Support for the Principles of the Crimea Platform," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine*, August 23, 2022, <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/-lajn-samit-krimskoyi-platformi-pidvishchiv-riven-ta-rozshiriv-geografiyu-pidtrimki-principiv-krimskoyi-platformi>.

²⁸ Emily Channell-Justice, "TCUP in Ukraine: Crimea Platform," *Ukrainian Research Institute: Harvard University*, August 23, 2021, <https://huri.harvard.edu/tcup-ukraine-crimea-platform#>.

escalating the conflict should the country's leaders continue to make the “wrong” choices.²⁹ After giving Kyiv yet more time to change course, on February 24, 2022, Putin took the most fateful step possible — a full-scale invasion — whose ultimate purpose was (and still is) to transform Ukraine from an “anti-Russia” into a subservient client-state on the model of Belarus: namely, a state that grants Russian the status of a national language equal, if not superior, to any other; promotes versions of history in accord with the Kremlin's patriotic and Russo-centric narratives;³⁰ venerates the Orthodox faith and socially conservative values; is ruled autocratically; pursues economic and military integration with the Russian Federation; and accepts the truncated borders that Moscow has imposed on it.

The Preventive-War Aspect of Putin's Motivations

A little-appreciated but nonetheless powerful impetus for this war is that Kyiv's determination to recover occupied territories posed a long-term threat to the major achievement of Putin's third presidential term (2012-2018): the return of Crimea to what the Kremlin considers its rightful owner. Putin himself stressed this aspect of the conflict frequently throughout 2022. During a press conference with the president of Hungary held on February 1, he observed that “Ukraine's very own national security documents state that they intend to take back Crimea, including by military means” before reminding the audience that Crimea “is sovereign Russian territory. We regard this issue to be settled.” He then added ominously, “Has anyone given any thought to the fact that if [Ukraine] creates such threats to Russia, then it will be creating analogous threats to itself?”³¹ Putin repeated these arguments during a press conference a week later and at an infamous meeting of the Security Council on February 21 at

²⁹ For details about the sixty (!) doctors (including an oncologist) that closely attended to Putin's health in the late 2010s, see Mikhail Rubin et al., “Investigation for Vladimir Putin's 70th Birthday,” *Proekt*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.proekt.media/en/investigation-en/putin-health/>. On the risk-acceptance of elderly leaders, see Michael C. Horowitz, Allan C. Stam, and Cali M. Ellis, *Why Leaders Fight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³⁰ McGlynn, “Imposing the Past.”

³¹ “News Conference Following Russian-Hungarian Talks,” *President of Russia*, February 1, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67690>.

which he essentially demanded that every member of the government go on record as advocating recognition of the independence of the two separatist regions under Moscow's control since 2014.³²

The Kremlin's threat-perceptions were undoubtedly driven to a significant extent by the evolution of Ukrainian military might during the preceding eight years. Kyiv had made little effort and even less progress on developing a capable military prior to 2014 in no small part because US policy toward Ukraine during the first two-plus decades of its independence was directed almost exclusively toward disarming the country. Specifically, American military aid to Ukraine between 2003 and 2013 totaled a mere \$504M, of which \$304M was devoted to Ukrainian denuclearization and the safe and secure disposal of radioactive materials left over from the Cold War.³³ In other words, a mere \$20M per year was allocated to strengthening Ukraine's defense capabilities.

But the overarching purpose of US policy changed from nonproliferation to the containment of Russia after Ukraine fell victim to Russian aggression in 2014. NATO summarizes its various forms of cooperation with Ukraine in a document titled "Relations with Ukraine," which right from the start pledges the alliance's commitment to restoring Ukraine's borders of 2013 and then adds that "[s]ince Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the beginning of its aggression in eastern Ukraine in 2014, NATO has reinforced its support for capability development and capacity-building in Ukraine, alongside Allied training of tens of thousands of Ukrainian troops."³⁴ In this regard, NATO unfurled a comprehensive assistance package in 2016 to help Ukraine bring its armed forces up to NATO standards "and to achieve their interoperability with NATO forces by 2020." Among the package's 13 "tailored support measures" were the establishment of an

³² "News Conference Following Russian-French Talks," *President of Russia*, February 8, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67735>; "Security Council Meeting," *President of Russia*, February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67825>.

³³ Elias Yousif, "U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine Breaks All Precedents," Stimson Center, October 20, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/u-s-security-assistance-to-ukraine-breaks-all-precedents/>.

³⁴ NATO, "Relations with Ukraine," https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37750.htm (accessed November 16, 2024).

integrated logistics support system and “strategic communications capabilities in the area of security and defense.”³⁵

Equally significant is that the scope of Western (or at least American) assistance greatly expanded beginning in 2014. As Elias Yousif writes, “U.S. military aid to Ukraine [in 2014] more than doubled the amount provided in the previous fiscal year, rising from \$49 million to \$91 million, before doubling again in FY2015 to \$182 million. The figures would continue to grow and by the eve of Russia’s 2022 invasion, the United States’ investment in Ukrainian security assistance since 2014 totaled \$2.8 billion.”³⁶ Perhaps unsurprisingly, NATO maintains that this spending had a considerable impact, crediting itself with helping bolster “the capacity and resilience of Ukraine’s security and defense sector, as well as its ability to counter hybrid threats” and providing training, education, and equipment to help Ukraine develop its own capabilities.³⁷ (Precisely how much NATO’s assistance and cooperation actually boosted Ukraine’s war-fighting capabilities by 2022 is not clear, but NATO’s public-facing documents certainly create the impression that the amount is substantial.)

Developments such as these raised two separate but interrelated prospects, both of which undoubtedly distressed the Kremlin: 1) that Ukraine would be considerably more difficult to conquer in the future; and 2) that Kyiv might eventually become emboldened to ramp up its operations in the Donbas as well as launch a military operation to take back Crimea. At the February 21 meeting of the Security Council, then-Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu warned, “The next stage of the story consists of weapons deliveries to Ukraine, which are continuing with unclear aims and for unclear purposes. They already have enough weaponry to be able to engage in many varied types of conflicts, both large and small.” Shoigu ventured that Kyiv’s military buildup

³⁵ NATO, “Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine,” July 2016, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_09/20160920_160920-compreh-ass-package-ukra.pdf.

³⁶ Yousif, “U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine Breaks All Precedents.”

³⁷ NATO, “Relations with Ukraine.”

meant that “no one intends to implement the Minsk accords. Rather, everyone is getting ready to settle this matter by means of force.”³⁸

At a press conference the next day, the president himself expounded on this thinking. Asked about the prospects for improving relations with Ukraine, Putin laid out four steps that Kyiv and the West would need to take “so that we could live in peace and there would be no conflicts.” The first three were unremarkable: recognizing the sovereign will of the residents of Crimea as expressed in the referendum of March 2014, disavowing Ukrainian membership in NATO, and implementing the Minsk accords. But then Putin asserted that all three of these demands, including regarding NATO membership, were secondary to “the most important fourth item,” Ukrainian disarmament. “Everything mentioned so far could be reversed at a moment’s notice if our so-called partners continue to pump the current Kyiv authorities full of modern types of weapons,” he commented. “Therefore, the most important point is the demilitarization, to a considerable extent, of current-day Ukraine because it is the only factor that can be objectively monitored, that one can observe and respond to.” In the absence of disarmament, he concluded, “we would be left with an ‘anti-Russia’ armed to the teeth. This is totally unacceptable, particularly now, after Ukraine’s current leadership has declared its nuclear ambitions.”³⁹

In sum, the combination of the Kremlin’s deep-seated desire to reabsorb Ukraine, Kyiv’s stated goal of taking back Crimea, and its expanding military capabilities created the reasonable view in the Kremlin that Russia faced three choices: 1) withdraw forces from the Donbas, return Crimea, and accept Ukraine’s withdrawal from the larger “Russian World”; 2) fight a limited and relatively easy war now; or 3) fight a larger and more difficult war with Ukraine at a later time, possibly of Kyiv’s choosing. Since Putin regarded the first option as unacceptable, war became inevitable in his mind and fighting an easy war now became the wiser of the two remaining

³⁸ “Security Council Meeting.”

³⁹ “Владимир Путин ответил на вопросы журналистов” [Vladimir Putin Answers Questions from Journalists], February 22, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67838>.

courses of action. As he explained at a press conference in April 2022, “I stated even before the start of the operation that ... a conflict with extreme nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine was inevitable, it was only a matter of time. They were preparing and biding their time.”⁴⁰ Sound security policy had thus been reduced to achieving an optimal balance of power during the coming fight. “I want everyone to understand the following,” Putin again explained at a press conference the following October. “What is happening now is rather unpleasant, to put it mildly, but we all would have wound up in the exact same place a bit later anyway. The only difference would be that the conditions would be worse for us. That’s all there is to it. Hence, my actions have been correct and timely.”⁴¹

Implications for the Future Course of the War

In the aftermath of Ukraine’s extensive battlefield gains in the late summer and fall of 2022, its elected leaders adopted maximalist peace terms that included not only the recovery of all occupied territory but also war crimes tribunals for top Russian officials and reparations for all of the damage that Russia has wrought.⁴² The leaders of the G7 simultaneously issued a statement that fully endorsed those objectives.⁴³ Similarly, the Ukrainian public has been exceedingly optimistic regarding the prospects for ultimate victory during most of the conflict, with 97% of survey respondents in April 2022 and February 2023 predicting that Ukraine would win the war and 88% doing so in February 2024.⁴⁴ In addition, the percentage of Ukrainians willing to compromise with or concede territory to Russia in order to end the war declined from

⁴⁰ “Совместная пресс-конференция с Президентом Белоруссии Александром Лукашенко” [Joint Pressconference with Belorussian President Alexander Lukashenko], April 12, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68182>.

⁴¹ “Владимир Путин ответил на вопросы журналистов,” [Vladimir Putin Answers Questions from Journalists], October 14, 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69604>.

⁴² “President Zelenskyy’s 10-point Peace Formula, Full Text of Speech to G20 in Bali,” *The New Voices of Ukraine*, November 15, 2022, <https://english.nv.ua/nation/president-zelenskyy-s-10-point-peace-formula-full-text-of-speech-to-g20-in-bali-50284154.html>.

⁴³ European Council, “G7 Statement on Ukraine,” *Council of the European Union*, October 11, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/10/11/g7-statement-on-ukraine/>.

⁴⁴ “National Survey of Ukraine,” Center for Insights in Survey Research, February 2024, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Ukraine-February-2024-National-Survey_Public.pdf.

46% and 13%, respectively, in February 2022 to 14% and 10% in May 2023.⁴⁵ It is also true that Ukrainians have become less optimistic since the failure of the country's summer 2023 counteroffensive. Specifically, the share of the population willing to entertain the possibility of territorial concessions "in order to achieve peace and preserve independence" rose from 10% in May 2023 to 32% a year later, and has remained around 38% since December 2024.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, as recently as March of this year, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy continued to categorically reject recognizing any of Russia's annexations.⁴⁷

It is quite natural that Ukrainians, in the face of genuine threats to the survival of their state and nation, would opt to expend such large amounts of "blood and treasure" in the pursuit of victory over the course of the last three and a half years. While sympathizing with Ukrainian goals, the international community also needs to formulate policy based on an understanding that Putin will never have a change of heart and voluntarily agree to withdraw his forces to Russia's 2013 borders. For as long as he is in power, Russia will fight to hold on to annexed Ukrainian territories with all the conventional force that it can muster for the reason that the ideational, material, and security goals of Russia's invasion can be achieved only with full Russian control over most of Ukraine's territory and population. Yet another reason to expect intransigence on Putin's part is that drive and determination to accomplish his goals have been character traits of the president since childhood.⁴⁸ As he told a group of young people in 2022, "I had a sambo and judo instructor who taught us to fight to the end. *To the end*. This is an exceedingly important thing for any person, but especially for a future man, for a boy."⁴⁹ Finally, a third reason to

⁴⁵ Yuriy Matsiyevsky, "Victory Despite the Cost: What Ukrainians Think about War, Peace, and Russia," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 851 (August 2023), Figure 1, https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Pepr851_Matsiyevsky_August2023.pdf.

⁴⁶ "Dynamics of Readiness for Territorial Concessions and the Factor of Security Guarantees for Reaching Peace Agreements," Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, January 3, 2025, <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1535&page=1>.

⁴⁷ "Ukraine: The Latest," Podcast, Monday, March 3, 2025, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2845xEOQYte4JkC04mHNP>.

⁴⁸ For examples, see Philip Short, *Putin: His Life and Times* (London: The Bodley Head, 2022), pp. 39 and 49.

⁴⁹ "Открытый урок «Разговор о важном»" [An Open Lesson entitled "A Conversation about Important Things"], September 1, 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69245>.

expect inflexibility from the Kremlin is that it clearly believes not only that Russia is winning the war but also that the very world order has shifted in an anti-Western direction.⁵⁰ Moreover, Russia's president expressed such views even before the president of Ukraine's most important international backer, the United States, had accused Zelenskyy of being a "dictator" who "started" the war.⁵¹

For these reasons, Zelenskyy is correct to fear that a ceasefire not buttressed by hard power — whether in the form of nuclear weapons, tens of thousands of European troops deployed along the frontlines, or NATO membership — would be temporary. While Ukrainian renuclearization has little to no support in foreign capitals, the deployment of European forces to Ukraine was proposed by British Prime Minister Keir Starmer last winter.⁵² In theory, those forces could be deployed in a peacekeeping capacity, as tripwire forces, or in a genuine deterrence-by-denial posture, yet in practice both peacekeeping and deterrence-by-denial would require substantial increases in defense spending by EU countries that should have been undertaken back in 2022 but, by and large, were not. Hence, the form of hard power preferred by Kyiv consists of the security guarantees provided by Article V of the NATO treaty. "An invitation to join NATO is a necessary thing for our survival," Zelenskyy told a press conference in December 2024 after receiving a delegation of EU foreign-policy chiefs. "If we will have a frozen conflict without any strong position for Ukraine, Putin will come back in two, three or five years."⁵³ Or as he stated during his acrimonious meeting with Donald Trump in the Oval

⁵⁰ See Mary Ilyushina, "Putin Says He Saved Russia, but a Year of Challenges Suggests Moscow's Position is Precarious," *Washington Post*, December 31, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/12/31/vladimir-putin-russia-ukraine-war/>.

⁵¹ Quoted in Siobhán O'Grady, David L. Stern, and Serhiy Morgunov, "Echoing Kremlin, Trump Calls Zelensky a Dictator, Angering Ukrainians," *Washington Post*, February 19, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/02/19/ukraine-russia-trump-elections-zelensky/>.

⁵² For a similar call for "European boots on Ukrainian soil, enforcing a ceasefire designed by Kyiv and its European partners, and building towards Ukraine's long-term stability and European integration," see Sam Greene, "This is Europe's War Now," *The New Statesman*, February 18, 2025, https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2025/02/ukraine-russia-europe-war-now?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.

⁵³ Quoted in "Zelensky Says He Needs Nato Guarantees Before Entering Peace Talks with Putin," *The Telegraph*, December 1, 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/12/01/ukraine-zelensky-demands-nato-guarantees-peace-talks-putin/>.

Office on February 28, “We will never accept just a ceasefire without security guarantees. It will not work without security guarantees. ... This document is not strong enough. Strong armies are enough.”⁵⁴

Consistent with both this paper’s analyses and Zelenskyy’s warnings, Moscow has manifested an unbending refusal to end the war long after the chimera of a quick victory had vanished. In June 2024, for instance, Russia’s president told his diplomatic corps that peace would be possible only after Kyiv’s complete capitulation to all of Moscow’s initial demands — from neutrality and demilitarization to regime change and the acceptance of the loss of Crimea — and its recognition of Russia’s wartime annexations of four additional Ukrainian regions.⁵⁵ Referencing that June speech, Putin told then-German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in November 2024 that any peace settlement, in the words of the Kremlin’s summary of their conversation, “would need to take into consideration the security interests of the Russian Federation, proceed from new territorial realities, and, most importantly, eliminate the root causes of the conflict” — all of which is code for the dismemberment and disarmament of Ukraine so that it would never be able to reverse Russia’s conquests of 2014 and 2022.⁵⁶ On the very day that he rejected Trump’s March 2025 proposal for a 30-day ceasefire, Putin donned military fatigues for the first time during the war.⁵⁷ Moreover, Russia’s negotiating team subsequently moved beyond intransigence in June 2025 by presenting its Ukrainian counterpart with yet more demands, such as the resumption of natural gas transit through Ukraine and official status for the Russian

⁵⁴ “Full Meeting between President Trump, VP Vance and Ukrainian President Zelensky in Oval Office,” February 28, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pxbGjvcdyY>.

⁵⁵ Mary Ilyushina, “Putin Demands Ukraine Surrender Four Regions to Stop War,” *Washington Post*, June 14, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/06/14/vladimir-putin-demands-war-ukraine/>.

⁵⁶ “Телефонный разговор с Федеральным канцлером Германии Олафом Шольцем” [Telephone Conversation with Chancellor of the FRG Olaf Scholz], November 15, 2024, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75588>.

⁵⁷ Mikhail Zygar, “Putin Won’t End the War. He Can’t Afford To.” *New York Times*, March 18, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/18/opinion/putin-trump-ukraine-ceasefire.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

language.⁵⁸ A month later, Putin affirmed to his American counterpart that “Russia will achieve its goals” and “will not abandon them,” which finally pushed Trump toward the realization that his efforts to broker a ceasefire had been all but useless.⁵⁹

The depressing reality of Putin’s doggedness also means that Russia will continue to pursue all available means to wreck Ukraine’s economy and civilian infrastructure and depopulate its territories — in short, to make the country effectively uninhabitable — for as long as the war endures. Since the start of the war, its military has bombed scientific institutes devoted to agriculture, as well as farmland and associated infrastructure.⁶⁰ However, energy production has been Russia’s main target. As early as October 2022, Russia’s “propagandist-in-chief,” Dmitrii Kiselev, gleefully and cold-bloodedly boasted that “Russia is methodically destroying Ukraine’s infrastructure. The devastation of the energy realm has definitely reached 45%. If it reaches 60%, a complete collapse will ensue and a ‘domino effect’ will devastate everything else.”⁶¹ A month later, he bragged that Russia’s “highly accurate missiles were systematically and methodically disabling Ukraine’s energy systems” and that the resulting “blackout also means serious interruptions in the supply of water, heat, sewage, and communications, including internet service.”⁶² Russia continued this practice in subsequent years as well. As Theresa Sabonis-Helf writes, “Widespread residential blackouts are frequent across the country.... And

⁵⁸ Joe Barnes, “Putin Hands Surrender Terms to Ukraine,” *The Telegraph*, June 3, 2025, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/06/02/putin-offers-ukraine-truce-surrenders-regime-change/>.

⁵⁹ Quoted in “Putin Tells Trump He Won’t Give Up Goals In Ukraine, Kremlin Says,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 3, 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-trump-call-ukraine-russia-war/33463336.html>.

⁶⁰ Susanne Wengle and Vitalii Dankevych, “Ukrainian Farms Feed Europe and China. Russia Wants to End That,” *Washington Post*, September 1, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/09/01/russia-attacks-ukraine-farm-economy/>; and Hanna Hopko, “Bombing Europe’s Breadbasket: Russia Targets Ukrainian Farmers,” *UkraineAlert*, July 2, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/bombing-europes-breadbasket-russia-targets-ukrainian-farmers/>.

⁶¹ *Vesti nedeli*, October 30, 2022, <https://vesti7.ru/video/2504424/episode/30-10-2022/>.

⁶² *Vesti nedeli*, November 27, 2022, <https://vesti7.ru/episode/27-11-2022/>.

supply seems constantly under threat: There have been over 1,000 attacks on Ukraine's power grid since the start of the war, with Russia escalating its energy-focused attacks in 2024."⁶³

Russia has pursued other means of making Ukraine uninhabitable as well. For instance, the Kremlin almost certainly gave the order in 2023 to destroy the Kakhovka Dam and thereby flood a large swath of Ukrainian territory.⁶⁴ "The breach unleashed a deluge down the Dnipro River, sending toxic sediments and trillions of gallons of fresh water into the salty Black Sea, and wrecking coastal ecosystems during a peak reproductive period for marine organisms."⁶⁵ More recently, Russia committed an act of "ecological genocide" by releasing chemical waste into the Seym River, "a water supply used by millions," which killed all aquatic life along a more than 650 kilometer stretch.⁶⁶ Ukrainian "[p]rosecutors are pursuing 247 cases of environmental war crimes against Russia," 14 of them on the charge of ecocide.⁶⁷ In light of Ukraine's longstanding demographic problems (its population of 52 million at the start of independence in 1991 had already declined to 44 million by 2021), which are now compounded by war, emigration, and plummeting birth rates, Ukrainians constantly need to weigh the very real costs of resistance against the equally real costs of defeat, which include, but are not limited to, the cultural genocide of the Ukrainian nation.⁶⁸

⁶³ Theresa Sabonis-Helf, "The Electricity Front of Russia's War against Ukraine," *War on the Rocks*, February 3, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/02/the-electricity-front-of-russias-war-against-ukraine/>.

⁶⁴ Samantha Schmidt, "As Flood Engulfs Ukraine's Southern Combat Zone, Battlefield Is Redrawn," *Washington Post*, June 7, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/06/07/flood-ukraine-war-kherson-dam/>.

⁶⁵ Brendan Hoffman and Evelina Riabenko, "Ukraine's Ravaged Environment," *New York Times*, April 2, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/04/02/world/europe/ukraine-russia-war-environment.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁶⁶ Luke Harding and Artem Mazhulin, "Everything Is Dead": Ukraine Rushes to Stem Ecocide after River Poisoning," *The Guardian*, October 1, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/01/ukraine-seim-river-poisoning-chernihiv-ecocide-?mkt_tok=NjU5LVdaWC0wNzUAAAGV6RUT-5kJ1L_ftl9V8Y6prsd_noILWwRQVjtj9GQ59Ldn33ec8nHHC_xGRsmwtlqTGxod703vMIXExqYxdKZi8v92gvwtm7M5FRbZzuZM4EXLg.

⁶⁷ Hoffman and Riabenko, "Ukraine's Ravaged Environment."

⁶⁸ Kristina Hooks, "Why Russia's War in Ukraine Is a Genocide," *Foreign Affairs*, July 28, 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/why-russias-war-ukraine-genocide?check_logged_in=1.

Yet another implication of this paper's findings is that a peace deal whose main concession to Moscow is a pledge not to extend NATO membership to Ukraine would not satisfy Putin's Kremlin.⁶⁹ As this paper's core contribution to our understanding of the origins of this war makes clear, Russia's president views the future growth of Ukrainian military power as a greater threat than any further increase in NATO's presence along Russia's borders. That is why Moscow expanded both its attacks on civilians and its list of demands for peace even after the Trump administration categorically ruled out NATO membership for Ukraine on Day 1 of its current term.

Finally, the multilayered web of causes driving this war also means that the full restoration of Ukraine's internationally recognized borders will be possible only after either a thorough and extensive change of regime occurs in Moscow or the Russian military suffers catastrophic defeat, or even collapse, on the battlefield. It thus follows that — if Ukraine's leaders elect to continue to fight and if the dozens of states that have rallied to Ukraine's defense since 2022 remain committed to repulsing Russia's aggression and restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity (or at least limiting its loss of territory) — then the “collective West,” as Russians call it, needs to pursue two broad strategies. First (and most obviously), the liberal democratic world needs to continue its efforts to weaken the Russian military's combat effectiveness and strengthen Ukraine's as much as possible.

Second, the West needs to do everything possible to undermine the Putin regime's legitimacy in the eyes of the Russian people and encourage them to replace their bellicose, paranoid, and expansionist leaders. As Stephen Kotkin comments, “Russian officials and propagandists already obsessively accuse the United States and NATO of fomenting regime change in Moscow — why not commit the offense for which one has already been charged and

⁶⁹ For a peace plan based on such an offer, see Dan Reiter, “Ending the War in Ukraine Requires Something for Everyone to Hate,” Atlantic Council, June 20, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/ending-the-war-in-ukraine-requires-something-for-everyone-to-hate/>.

convicted?”⁷⁰ Whereas Kotkin suggests forming a “Russian government in exile” consisting of former security officials, a less provocative course of action would be to fund existing efforts by various nongovernmental organizations to increase Russians’ access to virtual private networks so that more of the country’s citizens could receive uncensored news about the war and thereby learn the extent of destruction wrought by their country’s military, the scale of the human losses both sides have suffered, and how their leaders have deceived them on such a massive scale about both issues.⁷¹ As Andrei Kolesnikov writes, “Truth is now one of the main threats to the Putin regime, which has built itself on the indifference and ignorance of ordinary Russians. Moscow’s information front is almost as important as its military front running through Ukraine.”⁷² Other ways to break through “Putin’s informational Iron Curtain,” as Michael McFaul terms it, need to be explored as well.⁷³ Moreover, since Putin is all but certain to pick a successor who he believes shares his commitment to the goals outlined at the start of his “special military operation,” it is all the more imperative to do everything possible to increase the likelihood of a thoroughgoing change in the leadership of the country before such a choreographed transfer of power takes place.

⁷⁰ Stephen Kotkin, “Ukraine, Russia, China, and the World,” in Hal Brands, ed., *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), p. 27.

⁷¹ For a discussion of an innovative effort by Ukraine to raise the Russian public’s awareness of unpleasant realities concerning the conduct of the Russian military in Ukraine and thereby undermine support for the war, see Siobhán O’Grady, Kostiantyn Khudov, and Serhiy Morgunov, “In Kursk, Ukrainians try to sway Russian minds. And film it.,” *Washington Post*, February 2, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/02/02/ukraine-russia-kursk-locals-propaganda/>.

⁷² Andrei Kolesnikov, “The Hypnotist in the Kremlin: How Putin Has Used Fear and Disinformation to Neutralize the Russian Public,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 9, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/hypnotist-kremlin-putin-disinformation-russia>.

⁷³ Michael McFaul, “How to Get a Breakthrough in Ukraine: The Case Against Incrementalism,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 30, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/how-get-breakthrough-ukraine>.