

Orthodoxy, Empire, and Security: Putin Did Fear Attack, but Not from NATO

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Paper Presented at the annual Convention of the Association of Slavic, Eastern European, and
Eurasian Studies
Boston, MA
November 21, 2024

Abstract

The drivers of Putin’s decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine are located at multiple levels of analysis and are both material and ideational. In regard to its underlying causes, Russia’s president believes that Russians and Ukrainians comprise parts of a single spiritual and ethnic community that are morally bound to remain united in the future; he considers much, if not all, of Ukraine’s territory to be part of “big historical Russia”; and he regards Ukraine’s human and material resources as crucial to Russia’s retention of great-power status. In regard to the war’s proximate causes, Moscow’s own policies between 2014 and 2021 pushed the Ukrainian population toward a posture of outright hostility toward Russia; and Putin’s frustrations and anger at Kyiv’s rejection of his offers of friendship and economic integration gradually built to a boil. However, another major motivation behind the war has received too little attention: Kyiv’s declarations of intent to restore Ukrainian rule over Crimea—coupled with a slow-but-steady growth of Ukrainian military power—posed a threat to the Russian Federation’s territorial integrity as Putin defines it and made war appear inevitable in his mind. In other words, like other preventive wars before it, Putin’s paramount goal of the “demilitarization” of Ukraine was motivated by the desire to fight when the balance of power is most advantageous and victory is easier to achieve than it would be at a later point in time. Nonetheless, existing “realist” interpretations of the war err greatly by misidentifying what the Kremlin viewed as the strategic problem that needed to be dealt with: Putin did regard a future attack on Russia as possible, but by Ukraine, not NATO.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Heather Dehaan, Kate Graney, Tetiana Hranchuk, Shoshana Keller, and Sharon Werning Rivera for helpful feedback on this article.

“Together we [Russians and Ukrainians] have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people.”

--Vladimir Putin, July 2021¹

“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 2015²

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. Since that time, the war has evolved into 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 among people throughout the world.³ These stark realities have prompted a large amount of discussion of the origins and consequences of—as well as solutions to—the havoc, suffering, and dangers that Russia’s actions have generated.

The geopolitical consequences for Russia are the easiest to understand. In the run-up to the invasion, Russian diplomats presented NATO with a series of sweeping demands, including that it withdraw military assets from the fourteen member states that have joined the alliance since 1997 and also “accept the obligation to exclude further expansion of NATO to Ukraine and other states.”⁴ As a result of the invasion, seismic shifts in European geopolitics have indeed

¹ 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>.

² “Заседание Международного дискуссионного клуба «Валдай»” [Session of the Valdai International Discussion Club], October 22, 2015, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50548>.

³ For instance, see Alexander Gabuev, “Putin’s Doomsday Scenario,” *The Atlantic*, November 11, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/11/russia-putin-nuclear-escalation-ukraine-war/672082/>.

⁴ Quoted in Andrew Kramer and Steven Erlanger, “Russia Lays Out Demands for a Sweeping New Security Deal With NATO,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 17, 2021,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/17/world/europe/russia-nato-security-deal.html?searchResultPosition=1&login=smartlock&auth=login-smartlock>.

occurred—but not to Moscow’s liking. The European Union began to provide arms to a belligerent in a conflict for the first time in its history. Germany, the last state to invade Russia, crossed that same threshold for the first time since World War II, announced a program of rearmament that would once again make it Europe’s dominant military power, and shelved plans to import gas from Russia via the Nordstream-2 pipeline notwithstanding the billions of dollars already invested in its construction.⁵ In fact, “with the exception of Austria, every country in the EU, and even Switzerland, has provided some form of lethal or nonlethal aid and training to the Ukrainian military since the war started” and “[t]he share of Russia’s pipeline gas in EU imports dropped from over 40% in 2021 to about 8% in 2023.”⁶ Just as significant are the moves made by NATO at its 2022 summit: changing its designation of Russia from a “strategic partner” to the “most significant and direct threat” facing the alliance, expanding its Rapid Deployment Force from 40,000 to 300,000 troops, and inviting two of Russia’s neighbors—Sweden and Finland—to become members.⁷

Yet it is in regard to Ukraine where Kremlin policy has—so far at least—proven to be most counterproductive and bankrupt. Both the blatant contempt for Ukrainian national identity that it has manifested and the extensive atrocities and war crimes that its forces have committed

⁵ Emily Haber, “How Putin’s War in Ukraine has Moved Germany into a New Era,” *The Washington Post*, Dec. 5, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/12/05/ambassador-germany-radical-change-ukraine-war/>; and Holly Ellyatt, “Nord Stream 2 Cost \$11 Billion to Build. Now the Russia-Europe Gas Pipeline is Unused and Abandoned,” *CNBC*, Mar. 31, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/31/the-nord-stream-2-pipeline-lies-abandoned-after-russia-invaded-ukraine.html>.

⁶ Alexandra Chinchilla and Jahara Matisek, “Ukraine’s Hidden Advantage: How European Trainers Have Transformed Kyiv’s Army and Changed the War,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 11, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/russia-war-ukraines-hidden-advantage>; and “Where Does the EU’s Gas Come From?” European Council, March 21, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-gas-supply/>.

⁷ “NATO 2022 Strategic Concept,” <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/index.html>; and Steven Erlanger, “NATO will Sharply Increase the Number of Troops On Standby,” *The New York Times*, June 27, 2022 https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/06/27/world/russia-ukraine-war-news?campaign_id=249&emc=edit_ruwb_20220627&instance_id=65164&nl=russia-ukraine-war-briefing®i_id=79053271&segment_id=96943&smid=url-share&te=1&user_id=f8e345dcf0efd5310eba7e4f34fe9dfe#nato-will-sharply-increase-the-number-of-troops-on-standby.

have ensured the existence of an angry and hostile population on Russia's western border well into the future. Cities throughout Ukraine have been replacing the names of streets and metro stations that evoke ties to Russia as part of a process of "decolonization."⁸ Parishes affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church have been severing ties with its hierarchy in Moscow.⁹ The Russian language has been falling out of use and the country's second language is fast becoming English.¹⁰ Perhaps most significantly from Moscow's perspective, NATO defense establishments have been engaged in training and intelligence-sharing with the Ukrainian military to a degree that few could have imagined before the war.¹¹

Whereas understanding the consequences of this war for Russia's position in Europe is relatively easy, discerning its origins represents a much less straightforward and more difficult undertaking. 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 revisionism and expansionism] and those who dwell on its sense of insecurity [vis-à-vis external great powers]."¹² 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

⁸ Erika Solomon, "Goodbye, Tchaikovsky and Tolstoy: Ukrainians Look to 'Decolonize' their Streets," *The New York Times*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/07/world/europe/ukraine-russia-rename-streets.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁹ Neil MacFarquhar, "Ukrainian Orthodox Church Breaks With Moscow Over War," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/28/world/europe/ukraine-orthodox-church-moscow.html?searchResultPosition=1>; Mykyta Vorobiov, "Ukraine Bans Russia's Orthodox Church," Center for European Policy Analysis, August 20, 2024, <https://cepa.org/article/ukraine-bans-russias-orthodox-church/>.

¹⁰ Oleksiy Goncharenko, "Ukraine Officially Embraces English as Historic Westward Pivot Continues," UkraineAlert, June 13, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraine-officially-embraces-english-as-historic-westward-pivot-continues/>.

¹¹ Isabelle Khurshudyan and Kamila Hrabchuk, "NATO-trained Units will Serve as Tip of Spear in Ukraine's Counteroffensive," *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/06/04/ukraine-nato-training-counteroffensive-47th-brigade/>.

¹² 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>.

West “provoked” the Russian invasion and thus bears the blame for it.¹³ In contrast, those unsympathetic to Russia’s positions 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,¹⁴ or the natural aversion of an autocratic regime to having a successful democracy on its border.¹⁵ Maria Snegovaya and Jade McGlynn sum up this general point of view well when they write that “[t]he invasion of Ukraine in 2022 makes very little sense without factoring in ideological components....”¹⁶

This article argues that the arguments of “the West is to blame” camp are deeply flawed, whereas those of the “Russia is to blame” camp are largely correct but also significantly incomplete. The chronological narrative leading to the war that will be presented below begins with Putin’s personal obsession with Ukraine. The major sources of that obsession—what can be regarded as the underlying causes of the war—are indeed to be found, as the “Russia is to blame” camp argues, in: 1) historical legacies from ancient, Tsarist, and Soviet eras; 2) Putin’s adoption of a Slavophile and Orthodox worldview that is intrinsically bound up with the peoples and territory of both Belarus and Ukraine; and 3) his commitment to preserving Russia’s great-power status well into the future. In other words, the main drivers of this war are far more identity-

¹³ Among numerous works, see: “The U.S. Should Be a Force for Peace in the World,” *Eisenhower Media Network*, 2022, no date, <https://eisenhowermedianetwork.org/russia-ukraine-war-peace/>; 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>; and 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>.

¹⁴ Jane Burbank, “The Grand Theory Driving Putin to War,” *The New York Times*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/22/opinion/russia-ukraine-putin-eurasianism.html?searchResultPosition=1>; 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/>; Nicholas Chkhaidze, “Vladimir Putin’s History Obsession Is a Threat to World Peace,” *Ukraine Alert*, March 19, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/vladimir-putins-history-obsession-is-a-threat-to-world-peace/>; Serhii Plokhy, *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).

¹⁵ Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*; and Popova and Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine*. 11.

¹⁶ Maria Snegovaya and Jade McGlynn, “Dissecting Putin’s Regime Ideology,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* (07 Aug 2024), DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2024.2386838, p. 15.

based and emotionally resonant than mere strategic interaction on a geopolitical chessboard with an expanding NATO.

Wars have both underlying causes and immediate or proximate ones, however. The most important proximate developments that triggered the annexation of Crimea and then Russia's full-blown invasion eight years later are as follows: 4) the Ukrainian population's desire to become a European state and concomitant resistance to both geopolitical alignment and economic integration with Russia; 5) the anti-Russian evolution of Ukrainian national identity and politics that resulted from Moscow's hostile policies toward the country in the years following the Revolution of Dignity; 6) pledges by Kyiv to take back the territory that had been annexed in 2014; and 7) steady increases in Ukraine's military power that made its defeat in a war with Russia appear to be a more difficult undertaking in the future than in the present and that might even tempt Kyiv to launch a major operation at some point in the future. This last pair of factors means that, like other preventive wars before it, Putin's intended "demilitarization" of Ukraine has been motivated in part by the desire to fight when the balance of power is most advantageous and victory is relatively easy to achieve.¹⁷ This "security" dimension of Russia's motivations does not rescue the arguments advanced by "the West is to blame" camp either empirically or normatively, however, since the future attack that the Kremlin feared emanated from Ukraine, not any of the major states of NATO, and since the prospect of a more difficult war later could have been completely eliminated simply by returning Crimea to Ukraine and abandoning the desire to absorb and control the country in the first place.

This article elaborates upon these various strands in the web of causes that generated this catastrophic and dangerous war. First, it elucidates its deep-seated, underlying sources. Second,

¹⁷ Jack Levy defines a preventive war as follows: "The preventive motivation for war arises from the perception that one's military power and potential are declining relative to that of a rising adversary, and from the fear of the consequences of that decline. ... The temptation is to fight a war under relatively favorable circumstances *now* in order to block or retard the further rise of an adversary and to avoid both the worsening of the status quo over time and the risk of war under less favorable circumstances later." Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics*, Vol. 40 No. 1 (October 1987), pp. 82-107, <https://www-jstor-org.ez.hamilton.edu/stable/2010195>.

it briefly surveys key moments in the evolution of Russo-Ukrainian relations leading up the annexation of Crimea and the launch of the full-scale invasion. In the concluding section, it summarizes its findings and spells out their implications for the debate over the war's origins.

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

Providing a full account of the origins of Russia and Ukraine's ongoing war could easily fill an entire book.¹⁸ My relatively succinct narrative 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, in economic terms in the short run and in terms of security arrangements in the long run.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ Both the objective of reintegration and Putin's obsession with achieving it derive from numerous sources, both ideational and material. The three most important of them are as follows.

First, the Kremlin's desire for reintegration stems from Putin's adoption of a Slavophile and Orthodox worldview that conceptualizes Russians and Ukrainians as branches of a single national community.²¹ The key fact behind this conceptualization is that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians all trace their origins to a state that existed a thousand years ago called Kyivan Rus'. Putin himself recently touched on this history at the start of an essay, entitled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," that he published in July 2021. "Russians,

¹⁸ Indeed, numerous book-length accounts have already been published.

¹⁹ 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>.

²⁰ Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), p. 85.

²¹ On the origins of Slavophile thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Andrzej Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-century Russian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus', which was the largest state in Europe," he writes. "Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory...were bound together by one language..., economic ties, the rule of the princes of the Rurik dynasty, and—after the baptism of Rus'—the Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, *still largely determines our affinity today.*"²² Because Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine have a common origin, Putin is saying, it is only natural that they should have a common future. In addition to being co-religionists, as Marlene Laruelle explains, it is also the case that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) "promotes the notion of canonical territory—that is, the fact that the spiritual territory of the Church is broader than the borders of the Russian Federation and encompasses or encompassed Belarus, parts of Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. In the Church's worldview, all Eastern Slavic nations form one historical nation with Kyiv as its spiritual cradle."²³

It is worth noting that Putin began his presidency firmly committed to completing the capitalist revolution that Boris Yeltsin had launched and furthering Russia's integration into European institutions and cultural networks—in short, as more of a Westernizer than Slavophile overall.²⁴ Indeed, Yeltsin would not have picked him as his successor had he not believed that to be the case.²⁵ In addition, Putin initially gave little indication of a desire to reverse Yeltsin's largely peaceful, non-imperialist policies toward the other post-Soviet states.²⁶ Putin's worldview

²² 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>; italics added.

²³ Marlene Laruelle, "The Intellectual Origins of Putin's Invasion," *UnHerd*, March 16, 2022, <https://unherd.com/2022/03/the-brains-behind-the-russian-invasion/>.

²⁴ This point is little understood, but evidence to this effect is provided 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>.

²⁵ Yeltsin can legitimately be given the credit for the survival of semi-democracy in Russia in the 1990s. For comparative and quantitative evidence to this effect, see David Rivera and Sharon Werning Rivera, "Yeltsin, Putin, and Clinton: Presidential Leadership and Russian Democratization in Comparative Perspective." *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (September 2009), pp. 591-610.

²⁶ David Rivera, "Engagement, Containment, and the International Politics of Eurasia," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 118, No. 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 81-106.

evolved dramatically, however, over the course of the ensuing decade. Already a person who openly professed his faith (even as an active-duty KGB officer²⁷), he “reportedly became close with Father Tikhon Shevkunov, head of a monastery in central Moscow and a prominent Orthodox Christian intellectual,” during his four years as prime minister (2008-2012) and returned to the presidency “imbued with a sense of history and a mandate from God. The renowned pragmatist and self-avowed public servant, a country manager, had turned into a missionary.”²⁸ Core components of that mission serving to propel the invasion include protecting the “Russian World” (i.e., all co-ethnics throughout the world) and re-uniting the triune Orthodox East Slavs. In this regard, Putin stated the following in his major address announcing the commencement of the full-scale invasion: “I would like to stress once again that for us, Ukraine is not just a neighboring country. Rather, it is an inseparable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space.”²⁹ At a press conference two months later, he added the following: “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.”³⁰

Putin is not alone in the Kremlin leadership in advancing such arguments. While this article does not have sufficient space (or need) to survey a wide array of elites, former prime minister, former president, and current deputy chairman of the Security Council Dmitrii Medvedev arguably deserves special attention. Since its start, the former president has repeatedly

²⁷ Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), p. 42. See also the testimony of Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov as reported in Juliet Samuel, “How Putin Found God,” *The Telegraph*, April 3, 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/04/03/putin-found-god/>.

²⁸ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia’s Breakout From the Post-Cold War System: The Drivers of Putin’s Course,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 22, 2014, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2014/12/22/russia-s-breakout-from-post-cold-war-system-drivers-of-putin-s-course-pub-57589>.

²⁹ 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>.

³⁰ “Совместная пресс-конференция с Президентом Белоруссии Александром Лукашенко” [Joint Press conference with Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko], April 12, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68182>.

parroted his mentor's justifications for the war (and has generally done so with an added dose of belligerence and transparency). "Russia is an immense and rich country. We don't need other people's territories," he declared in November 2022. "But there is such a thing as our land, *which is holy for us* and on which our ancestors lived and our people live today—and which we will never give away to anyone. We are defending our people. We are waging war for all of our own kind, for our land, for our thousand-year-long history."³¹ Echoing Putin's statements from April 2022 that are cited above, Medvedev has also declared the following: "One of Ukraine's former leaders said at some point that Ukraine is not Russia. That concept needs to disappear forever. Ukraine is definitely Russia."³²

As Medvedev's words also suggest, a second major source of the Kremlin's desire for close integration with Ukraine is represented by the two countries' shared history and a resulting imperial nostalgia on the part of many Russians. Even beyond the brew of facts, distortions, and myths that has generated belief in the two nations' triune nature, Ukraine came to be ruled by Moscow with the Treaty of Pereslavl' of 1654, a relationship that would endure until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Numerous wars fought over the course of the ensuing two and a half centuries then brought the Baltic coastline, Crimea, the Caucasus, and Central Asia into the Tsarist Empire. As a result of these historical connections, many elites (Putin included) view Russia shorn of the territories it conquered between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries as an unnatural entity and an historical injustice. At a campaign event in 2011, for instance, Putin made a point of conveying his dismay over the dissolution of the USSR by recounting an encounter he had during the last year of its existence: "I had just returned from [five years stationed in East Germany] and I was shocked to see what was going on in the country. 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

³¹ Дмитрий Медведев, "ПОЧЕМУ НАШЕ ДЕЛО ПРАВОЕ: Ответы на простые вопросы в День народного единства," November 4, 2022, t.me/Medvedev_telegram/206; *italics added*.

³² Quoted in <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/4/medvedev-says-ukraine-is-definitely-russia-rules-out-peace-talks>.

difference? They just have different names. The USSR is Russia, a big Russia.”³³ In this regard, in his major national address announcing the mobilization of reservists in September 2022, Putin directed his appeal to, among others, “the people of our great Motherland and to all those who are united by our big, historical Russia.”³⁴

Putin’s esteem for those past leaders who built the empire was clearly revealed by his much-publicized impromptu remarks analogizing the current war to the Great Northern War (1700-1721) waged by Peter the Great. After describing the Baltic coastline under Swedish control as territory that had been inhabited by Slavs “from time immemorial” and that previously “had been under the control of the Russian state,” Putin justified Peter’s campaigns by asserting that he was not conquering but “taking back and fortifying.” In a clear allusion to his own active military campaigns, the president then lamented that “[a]pparently, it also has fallen on our lot to take back and fortify” before grandiosely proclaiming that Russia will accomplish the goals that it has set “if we proceed from the premise that these very core values [i.e., the obligation to regather Russian lands] constitute the basis of our existence” (!).³⁵ Just a few months later, former president Medvedev predictably expressed an identical interpretation of the war: “We should keep in mind that it is Russia which is defending its citizens. And that it is our country that is taking back and has already taking back historically Russian lands, not the opposite. And this process of taking back will continue.”³⁶

Putin’s reverence for Peter the Great’s martial victories—and especially his penning of the aforementioned essay—reflect the fact that, as Mikhail Zygar’s investigative reporting has discerned, “the president has completely lost interest in the present: The economy, social issues, the coronavirus pandemic, these all annoy him. Instead, he and [trusted friend and adviser Yuri]

³³ Quoted in Rivera, “NATO Expansion or Putin’s Psyche?”

³⁴ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” September 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390>.

³⁵ “Встреча с молодыми предпринимателями, инженерами и учёными” [Meeting with Young Entrepreneurs, Engineers, and Scientists], June 9, 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68606>.

³⁶ Dmitrii Medvedev, November 12, 2022, https://t.me/s/medvedev_telegram.

Kovalchuk obsess over the past.”³⁷ A “former senior official” similarly reports that the president “really believes all the stuff he says about sacrality and Peter the Great. He thinks he will be remembered like Peter.” In an unintentional act of self-deprecation, Putin’s long-serving foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, comments that his boss “has three advisers: Ivan the Terrible. Peter the Great. And Catherine the Great”—all of whom greatly expanded the borders of the empire.³⁸ Putin himself provided testimony supporting the validity of these analyses when he told a group of students in September 2002, “I have always had a passion for studying history, I enjoy it very much.”³⁹

The third source of Putin’s desire for reintegration derives from his concern over preserving Russia’s great-power status into the future. Possessing a mere 147 million inhabitants in 2021, the Russian Federation is demographically outpaced by the United States (with 337 million) and dwarfed by both China and India (with over 1.4 billion 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 44 million in 2021), 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 (EEU), Putin gave voice to the geopolitical motive behind the project when he stated 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 or Asia.”⁴⁰ In this regard, Yuval Weber’s analysis of National Material Capabilities data on the states of the region demonstrates that “[e]ven declining from highs around 25% in the early 2000s—meaning that

³⁷ Mikhail Zygar, “How Vladimir Putin Lost Interest in the Present,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/10/opinion/putin-russia-ukraine.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

³⁸ Quoted in Max Seddon, Christopher Miller, and Felicia Schwartz, “How Putin Blundered into Ukraine—Then Doubled Down,” *The Financial Times*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/80002564-33e8-48fb-b734-44810afb7a49>.

³⁹ “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>.

⁴⁰ “Заседание международного дискуссионного клуба «Валдай»,” September 19, 2013, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68182>.

Ukraine would make the future Eurasian bloc about a quarter more powerful in realist terms—by 2012, Ukraine would still represent an instant enlargement of one-sixth (16.74%) to Eurasian hard power capabilities.” Conversely, as Weber concludes, “[w]ithout Ukraine, Russia’s aspiration to great power status simply dies on the vine because ‘Eurasia’ would be merely modestly larger than Russia itself.”⁴¹ For these reasons, as Serhii Plokhy observes, “[f]or Putin, Ukraine was the key—without the second-largest post-Soviet republic, the Eurasian Union would not be able to perform its function as one of his ‘poles’ of the contemporary world.”⁴² In fact, Putin’s aforementioned historical treatise hints at his awareness of this reality when he asserts, “Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful.”⁴³

On the eve of Russia’s full-scale invasion, Russian television aired a documentary that lamented the collapse of the USSR and credited Putin for personally halting the centrifugal processes that had produced it. A clear message of the film is that centripetal processes now need to take their place—a message that is conveyed by the president himself. In response to a query about what the 1990s meant for him, Putin’s answer channels several of the deep-seated sources of the current war that are discussed above. “The same tragedy that it was for the overwhelming majority of our citizens,” he explains. “The dissolution of the Soviet Union represents the dissolution of historical Russia under the name Soviet Union. … we thereby lost 40% of our territories as well as approximately the same amount of productive capacity and population. We were transformed into a completely different country. And what had been built up over the course of thousands of years to a significant extent was lost.”⁴⁴

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

⁴¹ Yuval Weber, “The Juiciest Fruit Left on the Vine: Ukraine as a Bargaining Failure,” in Tomasz Stepniewski and George Soroka, eds., *Ukraine After Maidan: Revisiting Domestic and Regional Security* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2018), pp. 13-44, at 33 and 37, respectively.

⁴² Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: the Return of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023), p. 93.

⁴³ Vladimir Putin, “Статья Владимира Путина.”

⁴⁴ “Rossiya. Noveishaya istoriya” [Russia: Recent History], Russia Television Network (2021), <https://smotrim.ru/brand/67232>.

In practice, achievement of the Kremlin’s goal of meaningful integration, if not a reestablished union, between Russia and Ukraine necessitates that the latter eschew integration with the West and not pursue membership in either the European Union (EU) 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 due to the fact that, like EU expansion, the possibility of Ukraine’s admission into either organization would represent an obstacle to Russia’s effort to integrate it into a larger union-state. Put differently (and as 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.⁴⁵ However, it is true that further enlargement of the alliance would pose an obstacle to the achievement of one of the Kremlin’s core foreign policy objectives. Fiona Hill and Angela Stent capture this fundamental truth when they write, “Putin’s problem, then, was not NATO in particular. It was that Ukraine wanted to associate with any entity or country other than Russia. Whether Ukraine wanted to join the European Union or NATO or have bilateral relations with the United States—any of these efforts would have been an affront to Russia’s history and dignity.”⁴⁶ Putin all but conceded this point when he downplayed the significance of NATO’s decision in June 2022 to add two new members by stating, “For us, the membership of Finland and Sweden is nothing like the membership of Ukraine in NATO. These are completely different things.”⁴⁷ Or as Peter Dickerson puts it with considerably less charity than do Hill and Stent, Putin’s “inconsistency has little to do with legitimate security concerns. Instead, it reflects the

⁴⁵ 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>.

⁴⁶ Fiona Hill and Angela Stent, “The World Putin Wants: How Distortions About the Past Feed Delusions About the Future,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 25, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/world-putin-wants-fiona-hill-angela-stent>

⁴⁷ 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>.

unapologetic imperialism that shapes Putin’s personal worldview and defines modern Russia’s national identity.”⁴⁸

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 Yanukovych 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 Kyiv’s central square, “The Maidan.” During the months of violent and increasingly deadly clashes that ensued, Putin consulted regularly with Yanukovych, offering advice on how to preserve his hold on power.⁴⁹ After the latter’s security detail abandoned their posts on February 21st, however, Yanukovych fled the capital, which in turn prompted the Verkovna Rada to remove him from office and replace him with pro-European forces the very next day.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

Ukraine barely possessed any armed forces in 2014, so the Kremlin was then able to exploit its overwhelming coercive advantage to accomplish all of the following: spirit Yanukovych 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. (During these events, Moscow’s envoys even threatened targeted violence against the country’s leaders in Kyiv if they put up any forceful resistance to Russia’s actions.⁵²) That annexation was then celebrated with excessive pomp and ceremony before an assemblage of the country’s political elite in the St. George Hall

⁴⁸ Peter Dickinson, “NATO Poses a Threat to Russian Imperialism not Russian Security,” *Ukraine Alert*, April 6, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/nato-poses-a-threat-to-russian-imperialism-not-russian-security/>.

⁴⁹ Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, chap. 5.

⁵⁰ Popova and Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine*, p. 153.

⁵¹ In this regard, years earlier Putin had encouraged a reporter to read the memoirs of White 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.

⁵² Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, pp. 111-17.

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, moreover, 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” that were not annexed but de facto controlled by Moscow.⁵³) Putin’s main goals in taking all of these steps were to punish Ukraine for its “misbehavior” and also 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.⁵⁴

Over the course of 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 therefore reside in integration with Russia and not the West. (Just in case punishment and pressure failed, however, Putin also coupled this strategy with a demand that Ukraine undertake constitutional reforms that would give both 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.⁵⁵) However, Ukrainians proved Putin’s belief to be incorrect. As opposed to reconciling to Moscow’s embrace, all of the following occurred instead: the country’s leadership immediately restarted the process of joining the EU⁵⁶; trade and cultural ties with Russia withered; “decommunization laws” were passed that “equated communism with Nazism and criminalized … the display of both regimes’ symbols”; a new language law mandated increased use of Ukrainian in commerce and the mass media⁵⁷; the public became more desirous of NATO membership, not less⁵⁸; the

⁵³ Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, pp. 123-25.

⁵⁴ Rivera, “NATO Expansion or Putin’s Psyche.”

⁵⁵ Popova and Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine*, pp. 165-76.

⁵⁶ Popova and Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine*, p. 203.

⁵⁷ Popova and Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine*, pp. 181 and 188.

⁵⁸ 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.

Rada revoked the country's previous non-aligned status and then further amended the Constitution to require that all future governments pursue "the strategic course of the state on acquiring full-fledged membership of Ukraine in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization."⁵⁹

Moreover, opinion surveys conducted by Volodymyr Kulyk reveal that "the years after Euromaidan and the Russian aggression were characterized by a kind of bottom-up de-Russification of the Ukrainian population, that is, a popular drift away from Russianness that included significant changes in identifications, language practices, and language policy preferences."⁶⁰ More surface-level political attitudes shifted even more dramatically. According to a telephone survey of residents of Ukraine (occupied territories excluded) conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 80% of respondents expressed positive attitudes toward Russia and only 10% expressed negative sentiments in November 2013. Fifteen months after Russia's annexation of Crimea, however, that pattern had thoroughly reversed: only 30% still had a positive attitude, whereas 57% had a negative one.⁶¹

In short, whereas Putin believed that seizing territory from Ukraine would induce it to return to the Russian fold, his belligerence only served to alienate, frighten, and unify the bulk of its population.⁶² In this regard, on at least one occasion, Putin has inadvertently acknowledged that opinion hardened against Russia even in the east of the country. Specifically, during a public

⁵⁹ "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 latter amendment was added in 2019.

⁶⁰ Volodymyr Kulyk, "Shedding Russianness, Recasting Ukrainianness: the Post-Euromaidan Dynamics of Ethnonational Identifications in Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 34:2-3 (2018), 119-138, DOI: [10.1080/1060586X.2018.1451232](https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1451232)

⁶¹ Anton Hrushetsky, "Dynamics of the Population's Attitude to Russia and the Emotional Background Due to the War: Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted on May 13-18, 2022," *Kyiv International Institute of Sociology*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1112&page=1>.

⁶² 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/>.

forum held in October 2022, he lamented the fact that the residents of the Donbas did not understand their need to be liberated by Russia. “Everybody [living in the Donbas] is of the opinion that Russia is engaging in some kind of aggression,” the president complained. “Nobody understands and nobody knows that after the coup d’etat in Ukraine in 2014, the residents of Donetsk and Luhansk, or at least a considerable portion of them, and of Crimea did not want to accept the outcome of the coup.”⁶³

Even beyond the various identity and policy shifts taking place in Ukraine, perhaps equally as worrisome from the Kremlin’s perspective 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.⁶⁴ The Platform’s inaugural summit featured supportive speeches by numerous European heads of state as well as U.S. Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm.⁶⁵

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. Putin gave full expression to his frustrations over this situation in his 2021 survey of over a thousand years of

⁶³ “Открытый урок «Разговор о важном».”

⁶⁴ “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>.

⁶⁵ Emily Channell-Justice, “TCUP in Ukraine: Crimea Platform,” *Ukrainian Research Institute: Harvard University*, August 23, 2021, <https://huri.harvard.edu/tcup-ukraine-crimea-platform#>.

history that was discussed above. One noteworthy feature of his essay is that the president portrays the Ukrainian people as oppressed by a short-sighted and rapacious political elite as well as desirous of a strengthened relationship with Russia. Revealing his belief that Russia's armies would be greeted as liberators, he asserts that “millions of people [in Ukraine] regard Russia not just warmly but with a great amount of love.” A second noteworthy feature is that he accepts not one iota of responsibility for Ukraine’s hostility toward Moscow and instead accuses Ukraine’s leaders and Western states of conspiring together to transform the country into an “anti-Russia.”⁶⁶ During his June 2022 press-conference in which he expressed indifference toward Finnish and Swedish membership in NATO, Putin elaborated on what this term means. “Ukraine is in the process of being converted into an ‘anti-Russia,’” the president stated, “a bridgehead for attempts to create instability in Russia itself, where Russian culture and the Russian language are fought against, and where people who regard themselves as a part of the Russian world are persecuted.”⁶⁷

All leaders hate to lose, and Putin is no exception. Yet by 2021, with his health failing and his time in office appearing like it might be coming to an end, all he 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 escalating the conflict should the country’s leaders continue to make the “wrong” choices.⁶⁸ After giving Kyiv yet more time to change course, on February 21, 2022, Putin took the first escalatory step by recognizing the independence of and deploying additional troops to the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk that had already been wrested away from Ukraine in 2014. Three days later he took the most fateful step possible—a full-scale invasion—whose purpose

⁶⁶ Putin, “Статья Владимира Путина.”

⁶⁷ Метцель, “Путин назвал ложным сравнение членства Украины в НАТО с вступлением Швеции и Финляндии.”

⁶⁸ On Putin’s health, see “Does Putin Have Cancer?” *bne Intellinews*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.intellinews.com/does-putin-have-cancer-240316/>. 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).

was to transform Ukraine from an “anti-Russia” into a subservient client-state on the model of Belarus: a state that is ruled autocratically, grants Russian the status of a national language equal to any other, promotes versions of history in accord with the Kremlin’s patriotic and Russo-centric narratives,⁶⁹ pursues economic and military integration with the Russian Federation, venerates the Orthodox faith and socially conservative values, and accepts the truncated borders that Moscow has imposed on it.

The Preventive-War Aspect of Putin’s Motivations

In regard to the latter desideratum, a little-appreciated but nonetheless powerful motivating factor behind this war is that Kyiv’s unwavering verbal commitment 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 to be its rightful owner. Putin himself stressed this motive many times over the course of 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” as prologue to reminding the audience that Crimea “is sovereign Russian territory. We regard this issue to be settled.” The president then ominously added: “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?”⁷⁰ Putin subsequently repeated these arguments during both a press conference held a week later and his infamous meeting of the Security Council on February 21st in 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 2014.⁷¹

⁶⁹ McGlynn, “Imposing the Past.”

⁷⁰ “News Conference Following Russian-Hungarian Talks,” *President of Russia*, February 1, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67690>.

⁷¹ “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>.

Such threat-perceptions were compounded by the evolution of Ukrainian military might during the preceding eight years. As was noted above, Kyiv made little effort toward (or at least headway on) developing a capable military through to 2014. In this regard, U.S. policy toward Ukraine during the first two-plus decades of its independence was directed almost exclusively toward achieving the country's nuclear *disarmament*. Both the Bush and Clinton administrations even threatened to terminate all economic assistance to Ukraine if it failed to transfer its warheads to Russia and join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear state, which it did in the mid-1990s. As Timothy Colton and Samuel Charap write (with considerable understatement), "American pressure and aid were central to incentivizing Ukraine to denuclearize."⁷² Even after this "achievement" of American diplomacy, the story remained much the same: Ukrainian denuclearization and the safe and secure disposal of radioactive materials left over from the Cold War remained the primary goals of U.S. policy through to 2013. Specifically, American military aid to Ukraine between 2003 and 2013 totaled a mere \$504 million, of which \$304 million were devoted to those two purposes.⁷³ (In other words, a mere \$20 million per year was devoted to strengthening Ukraine's defense capabilities!)

However, the overarching purpose of U.S. policy changed from non-proliferation 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 entitled "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."⁷⁴ In this regard, NATO unfurled a Comprehensive Assistance Package for

⁷² Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 55.

⁷³ 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/>.

⁷⁴ NATO, "Relations with Ukraine," https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37750.htm (accessed November 16, 2024).

Ukraine in 2016 whose express purpose was to help Ukraine achieve its “stated objective to reform its Armed Forces according to NATO standards and to achieve their interoperability with NATO forces by 2020.” The package specified thirteen “tailored support measures” that include “[t]he establishment of a coherent, coordinated and effective integrated logistics support system” and “[t]he establishment and development of strategic communications capabilities in the area of security and defence.”⁷⁵

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 FY2014] 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.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, NATO maintains that this spending had a considerable impact: “Through these programmes and tailored advice, NATO has significantly strengthened the capacity and resilience of Ukraine’s security and defence sector, as well as its ability to counter hybrid threats. NATO and Allies have also provided extensive support to capability development, including through training and education and the provision of equipment.” (Precisely how much NATO’s assistance and cooperation had actually served to strengthen 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: 1) that Ukraine would be considerably more difficult to conquer in the future than it was in the present; and 2) that Kyiv itself might eventually become emboldened to ramp up its operations in the Donbas as well as act on its stated intentions by launching a military operation to take back Crimea. At the aforementioned February 21st meeting of the Security Council, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu

⁷⁵ 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.

focused on this aspect of the situation. “The next stage of the story consists of weapons deliveries to Ukraine, which are continuing with unclear aims and for unclear purposes,” he stated. “They already have enough weaponry to be able to engage in many varied types of conflicts, both large and small....” Shoigu then closed his remarks by expressing the opinion that Kyiv’s military buildup means that “no one intends to implement the Minsk Accords. Rather, everyone is getting ready to settle this matter by means of force.”⁷⁶

The most revealing exposition of this train of thought was expressed by the president himself at a press-conference held the very next day. 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 are 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. Putin then proceeded to assert, however, that all three of these demands—including NATO membership (!)—are of secondary importance compared 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 Kiev authorities full of modern types of weapons,” he laments. “Therefore, the most important point is the demilitarisation, 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 concludes, “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.”⁷⁷

In sum, the combination of the Kremlin’s deep-seated desire to re-absorb Ukraine, Kyiv’s stated goal of taking back Crimea, and its expanding military arsenal created the reasonable view in the Kremlin that Russia faced three choices: 1) withdraw forces from the Donbas, return

⁷⁶ “Security Council Meeting.”

⁷⁷ “Владимир Путин ответил на вопросы журналистов” [Vladimir Putin Answers Questions from Journalists], February 22, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67838>.

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 point in time (and at a moment that might be chosen by Kyiv). 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 courses of action. As he explained at press conference held 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."⁷⁸ 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."⁷⁹

Conclusions

The drivers of Putin's decision to invade Ukraine are many. There is no one cause of this war; rather, it stems from numerous factors, both material and ideational, located at multiple levels of analysis. In regard to its underlying causes, as we have seen, Russia's president believes that Russians and Ukrainians comprise parts of a single spiritual and ethnic community that are morally bound to remain united in the future; he considers much, if not all, of Ukraine's territory to be part of "big historical Russia"; and he regards Ukraine's human and material resources as crucial to Russia's future status as a great power. As a result of these beliefs, Ukraine has been one of Putin's personal obsessions for almost all of his two and a half decades in power. In

⁷⁸ "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>.

⁷⁹ "Владимир Путин ответил на вопросы журналистов," [Vladimir Putin Answers Questions from Journalists], October 14, 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69604>.

regard to the war's proximate causes, the following stand out: Putin's anger at Kyiv's repeated rejections of Moscow's plans for supra-national integration gradually built to a boil, erupting in the seizure of a portion of its sovereign territory in 2014⁸⁰; Moscow's aggressive and bellicose policies between 2014 and 2021 pushed the Ukrainian population toward a posture of outright hostility toward Russia, further dampening the prospects for voluntary reintegration or even friendship between the two states in the future; Kyiv's declarations of intent to restore Ukrainian rule over Crimea threatened the Russian Federation's territorial integrity as the Kremlin defined it (and also threatened to undo the "righting of an historical wrong" as well as tarnish Putin's place in the pantheon of Russian leaders like little else could); and the slow-but-steady growth of Ukrainian military power made war appear both inevitable and decreasingly advantageous over time. In other words, what Jack Levy theorizes about "preventive wars" in the abstract—that belief in the inevitability of a conflict will become a self-fulfilling prophecy—proved true in this case as well.⁸¹

These findings serve to enhance and even correct existing understandings of the war in several ways. First, the materialist, rationalist, and undifferentiated image of states that realist theorists and those sympathetic to Russia use to describe this conflict bears little resemblance to the real world of Eurasian interstate relations that have been conducted by passionate, aggrieved, egotistical, moralistic, self-righteous, nationalist, and flawed human beings since the mid-2000s.⁸² Second, those liberal and constructivist accounts of the origins of the war that have been advanced by numerous area-studies specialists provide both a richer and more accurate portrait,

⁸⁰ It is also worth mentioning that a necessary condition for this war was the existence in Russia of a highly centralized political system in which Putin could make such a consequential decision unilaterally.

⁸¹ Levy writes: "When decision makers perceive war to be 'inevitable,' they have fewer incentives to attempt to manage the crisis; instead, they concentrate their efforts on defensive preparations for war or on trying to ensure that it occurs at an opportune moment. As Bismarck remarked, 'No government, if it regards war as inevitable even if it does not want it, would be so foolish as to leave to the enemy the choice of time and occasion and to wait for the moment which is most convenient for the enemy.'" "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation," pp. 98-99.

⁸² On the central role of emotion in Putin's foreign-policy decision-making, see Brian Taylor, *The Code of Putinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), chap. 1 and 6; and Rivera, "NATO Expansion or Putin's Psyche?"

especially in regard to its deep-seated wellsprings. In fact, the extensive, repeated, and adamant testimony that Putin himself has provided concerning his views about Ukraine and motives for the war constitute near-definitive evidence that this war is about more than just geopolitical competition and external security in the minds of those who initiated it.

Third and in contrast, these accounts tend to err by completely omitting concerns over trends in the balance of power, perceived threats to territorial integrity, and future war-scenarios from their narratives. That is, those who explain the war with reference to Putin's imperial nationalism (or related ideas) fail, generally speaking, to recognize that Ukraine's growing military power posed an obstacle to both Russia's ability to conquer Ukraine (when and if the necessity to do so arose) and the Russian state's existing borders.⁸³ As a consequence, Moscow's "special military operation" serves to solve a real and tangible strategic problem from Moscow's perspective. That is why NATO's cooperation with Ukraine was perceived as a threat whereas the membership of Finland and Sweden in the alliance has not been.

Fourth and finally, the existence of a military-security dimension to the Kremlin's motivations does little to rescue prominent realist explanations of the war since the latter seriously misrepresent what the Kremlin actually viewed as the nature of the strategic problem faced by Russia. The core threat was not (as Roberts, Mearsheimer, and many others assert or imply⁸⁴) that NATO states would use Ukraine as a launching platform for a broad-based invasion. As even the late former head of the Wagner Group Evgenii Progozhin acknowledged in a fit of excess candor at the start of his ill-fated "March for Justice," "the story that there was insane aggression on the part of Ukraine, and they were going to attack us together with the entire NATO bloc" represents a Kremlin deception from the start.⁸⁵ Rather the strategic problems

⁸³ For an example, see (the otherwise always astute) Peter Dickenson, "Putin's 2022 'Peace Proposal' was a Blueprint for the Destruction of Ukraine," *Ukraine Alert*, November 5, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-2022-peace-proposal-was-a-blueprint-for-the-destruction-of-ukraine/>.

⁸⁴ Roberts, "Now or Never"; Mearsheimer, "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis."

⁸⁵ Quoted in Ani Mejlumyan and Nika Aleksejeva, "How 'Putin's Chef' Undermined the Kremlin's Case for Invading Ukraine," *DRFLab*, June 28, 2023, <https://dfrlab.org/2023/06/28/how-putins-chef-undermined-the-kremlins-case-for-invading-ukraine/>.

perceived by the Kremlin were that Ukraine's membership in NATO would (a) impede Ukraine's re-integration into Russian institutions and structures and (b) contribute to the strengthening of its military capabilities to the point where Kyiv could successfully repel a Russian invasion and perhaps even become emboldened to attempt to take back Crimea.

At the normative level, moreover, the blame that realist scholars cast on Western states for provoking this war is morally perverse because, as these analysts steadfastly fail to acknowledge (and perhaps even recognize), Moscow could have eliminated the military threat that it perceived in an instant simply by returning to Ukraine the territory that it had illegally annexed in 2014, thereby complying with international law and several previously signed international agreements, and by abandoning its imperial quest to force Ukrainians to be full-fledged members of the "Russian World" akin to Belarus. For this reason as well, the normative critiques of Putin's war that generally accompany ideational accounts of its origins are more in touch with reality and convincing than are realist apologetics for it.

Similarly, just as the West does not deserve the blame for the outbreak of this war, nothing in this paper should be interpreted as casting moral blame on the Ukrainian state. Quite the opposite: Ukraine has been in a no-win situation since at least 2014. If it had not built up its armed forces and shown its willingness to use them to take back the Donbas, then the Kremlin would have concluded that the country lacked the will to resist and would have continued to slice away at its territory until all of its coastline had been taken over, a land bridge with Transnistria had been achieved, and Ukraine had been left a rump and landlocked state (if not absorbed completely). Alternatively, if Kyiv chose to constitute an effective military, fight back, and make clear that it would not allow its internationally recognized borders to be violated, then Putin would have eventually concluded that he needed to destroy the country's military potential or take it over completely (or both). Of course, this second scenario is what has actually transpired.