

# A Critical Analysis of Russia's Justification for the Invasion of Ukraine

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explained the underlying mechanisms of the global political economy that have led to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It is thus an alternative perspective to those that see Vladimir Putin's specific psychological qualities as the driving force behind this occurrence. To provide a more balanced assessment, it is important to go back to the Cold War era in the history of the struggle between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). For this paper, Realist Theory was used. Finally, the genuine emotive anger over Putin's aggressiveness smashed any lingering notions about the order in post-Cold War Europe, leaving Ukraine and the West unsure how to respond while Russia revelled in its fait accompli and began to accept its isolation.

**Keywords:** Cold War Era, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Realist Theory, Russia, Ukraine, War

## INTRODUCTION

Ukraine has long played a vital, though sometimes underappreciated, role in the global security order. Today, the country is at the forefront of a resurrected great-power rivalry that many observers believe will dominate international relations in the coming decades. Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represented a significant escalation of the eight-year-old conflict and a watershed moment in European security.

"War," as Clausewitz famously put it, "is merely the continuation of policy by other means." Governments go to war when they believe force will achieve their policy goals; they do not go to war when they believe it would result in disaster. Since 1945, the danger of nuclear weapons, as well as overwhelming American economic and conventional military superiority since 1989, have escalated the costs of conflict to such an extent that few governments are willing to pay them (Morris, 2022).

However, interstate conflicts persist, and governments have devised new strategies to resolve them. As a result, Ukraine. Over the last 400 years, armies from Poland, Sweden, France, and (twice) Germany have threatened or taken Moscow. In 2005, Vladimir Putin was dead serious when he dubbed the Soviet Union's demise, which put Russia's front line 800 kilometres east of the Elbe, the "biggest geopolitical calamity of the century" (Pomerantsev, 2022). Rolling the border westward has been one of Russia's major geopolitical aims for the past 30 years.

Russia began increasing its military presence surrounding Ukraine – including in Belarus, a close Russian ally to the north of Ukraine – in late 2021 under various guises while remaining unclear about its goals. By December, tens of thousands of Russian troops were loitering on the border, effectively surrounding the country and escalating tensions, prompting a phone call between Putin and US President Joe Biden. Before the invasion, Russian President Vladimir Putin recognised the Russian-backed separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (Elliot, 2022a), both of which are located in the disputed Donbas territory, as "autonomous" people's republics and dispatched "peacekeeping" forces to those areas. What began as a worrying scenario surrounded by aspirations for conversation and diplomacy has turned into the "most obvious act of aggression in Europe since" World War II, according to Ukraine's foreign minister.

Ukraine has managed to resist many aspects of Russia's offensive with increased Western aid, but several of its

cities have been pulverised, and one-quarter of its population are now refugees or have been displaced (Masters, 2022). It is unknown if or whether a diplomatic solution will emerge. Ukraine's status in the world, including its future membership in institutions such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), is in jeopardy (Masters, 2022).

The majority of hypotheses for the reasons for the Russian–Ukrainian conflict are focused on foreign policy or geopolitical concerns. The bulk of the literature concentrates on what Portnov (2015) refers to as cognitively reductionist and essentialist views of 'culture identity and 'history' (Antoniuk & Prohnikmak 2015; Kuzio 2015; Kulyk 2019). Despite some earlier studies highlighting Ukraine's remarkable regional stability (Sasse 2007), it is not difficult to find academic publications today that describes the country as a doomed 'land of irreconcilable differences,' where 'identity is a given that cannot be changed' (Molchanov 2016, p. 204) and 'history is irreversible' (Sotiriou 2016). Some writers have gone so far as to portray the 'Ukraine issue' as a 'clash of civilisations,' a civil war between Russophone and Russian Orthodox Ukraine and Galicia-based 'Catholic nationalist radicals' (Loshkariov & Sushentsov, 2016; Petro, 2016).

Another, presumably more promising, strand of this literature contends that the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine was driven by economic factors in some way. The economic determinist hypothesis, as summarised by Buckholz (2019), suggests that the inhabitants of Donbas were particularly inclined towards separatism, either because of the region's economic exposure to Russia or because of the region's economic significance and perceptions of discriminatory wealth redistribution within Ukraine. A recurring theme in economic determinism-driven arguments is that the conflict is a rational response based on the material interests of local industrial workers, who are vulnerable to economic shocks from closer integration with the EU and fighting to maintain historical trading ties with the Russian market (Giuliano 2015; Zhukov 2016). , it has been contended that the war in Donbas was precipitated by Ukraine's local push for fiscal autonomy or even self-determination, to exploit the industrial capabilities of its "cash-generating cities" (Sotiriou, 2016) and establish an economic base for the two breakaway "people's republics" (Matveeva, 2016).

Moreover, as noted by Zimmer (2004) and Osipian (2015), the region's political identity was founded on the founding myth of Donbas as the most developed region of the country ('Donbas feeds the USSR'), and the accompanying belief that the nation's whole economy (first Soviet, subsequently Ukrainian) hinged on Donbas (Horbulin 2015; Libanova 2015 and Maiorova, 2017). As a result, the slogan 'Donbas feeds Ukraine' was later employed by former President Yanukovich's Party of Regions (Partiia rehioniv) in the run-up to the stormy 2004 presidential elections (Wilson 2016, p. 640). The 'affluent independent Donbas' concept has also played an important role in the Kremlin's Ukraine civil war narrative. The following role of President Putin's advisers, Glaz'ev and Vladislav Surkov, in inspiring the "public uprisings" in Ukraine's eastern and southern areas has been widely documented (Toler & Haring 2017). Glaz'ev, for example, insisted two months into the conflict:

The Donets Basin, commonly called [the] Donbas, has all the possibilities to create its own autonomous financial system and Kiev understands this. ... Financial capabilities of [the] Donbas will allow the region to avoid a sharp decline in living standards that the rest of Ukraine will see. [The] Donbas can potentially increase its living standards by half, and become the most prosperous region of the new Ukraine (quoted in Mykhnenko, 2020).

Russia has significant cultural, economic, and political ties with Ukraine, and Ukraine is vital to Russia's identity and vision for itself in the world in many respects.

*Family Ties:* Russia and Ukraine have long-standing familial ties dating back millennia. Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, is sometimes referred to as "the mother of Russian cities," on par with Moscow and St. Petersburg in terms of cultural influence. Christianity was brought to the Slavic peoples from Byzantium in the eighth and ninth centuries in Kyiv. And Christianity was the anchor for Kievan Rus, the early Slavic state from which current Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians sprung.

*Russian Diaspora:* According to a 2001 census, approximately eight million ethnic Russians lived in Ukraine, primarily in the south and east. As a rationale for its activities in Crimea and the Donbas in 2014, Moscow claimed an obligation to defend these people.

*Superpower Image:* Superpower Image: After the Soviet collapse, many Russian politicians viewed the divorce from Ukraine as a mistake in history and a threat to Russia's standing as a great power. Losing a permanent hold on Ukraine, and letting it fall into the Western orbit, would be seen by many as a major blow to Russia's international prestige.

*Crimea:* Crimea was ceded from Russia to Ukraine by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1954 to establish "brotherly links between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples." However, since the union's demise, many Russian nationalists in both Russia and Crimea have wished for the peninsula's restoration. Sevastopol is the home port of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, the region's dominating marine force (Petersen, 2019).

*Trade:* Russia was Ukraine's major commercial partner for a long period, but that relationship has deteriorated considerably in recent years. China overtook Russia in Ukraine trade (Liu, 2022). Before it invaded Crimea, Russia hoped to entice Ukraine into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which now comprises Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

*Energy:* For decades, Russia has relied on Ukrainian pipelines to provide gas to clients in Central and Eastern Europe, and it pays billions of dollars in transit costs to Kyiv each year. Despite the commencement of larger hostilities between the two nations, the flow of Russian gas through Ukraine continued in early 2022 (Wallace, Osipovich, and Orru, 2022). Russia intended to send more gas to Europe via its new Nord Stream 2 pipeline (McBride, 2018), which runs beneath the Baltic Sea to Germany, but Berlin halted regulatory clearance of the project following Russia's invasion.

*Political sway:* Russia has been determined to maintain its political influence in Ukraine and throughout the former Soviet Union, particularly after its favoured candidate for Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, was defeated by a reformist rival as part of the Orange Revolution popular movement in 2004. This setback for Russia's interests in Ukraine came on the heels of a similar electoral defeat for the Kremlin in Georgia in 2003, known as the Rose Revolution, and another in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, known as the Tulip Revolution. Yanukovich was elected president of Ukraine in 2010, following voter dissatisfaction with the orange government (Masters, 2021).

## **Theoretical Framework**

This argument of this paper is based on offensive realism. Mearsheimer, a famous Realist theorist, believes that large powers are opportunistic and revisionist and that survival needs hegemony. Due to continual security rivalry in an anarchic international system, major countries must attempt to grow their relative strength vis-à-vis other nations, according to this argument. Despite the assumption that unipolarity had come with the conclusion of the Cold War (Wohlfort, 1999), subsequent events appear to suggest a somewhat different reality. Russia's actions appear to reflect, more than anything else, a realism attitude to world relations. President Putin's speech appears to evoke realist-specific concepts like "security," "survival," and "existential danger" (AFP, 2022). The battle also exemplifies another basic realism notion: the concept of a "security dilemma" (Walt, 2022), to which Putin appears to have responded by threatening sanctions, military action, and nuclear weapons. Beyond Putin's stance, there is more evidence of the emergence of a realist dynamic. As previously stated, the international community has been particularly outspoken in denouncing Russia's activities, as well as in implementing countermeasures. Furthermore, the gravity of the issue, as well as the claimed realism trend, may acquire momentum in certain nations' shattered neutrality. Switzerland is a good example because it violated its long-standing neutrality and joined the EU in its sanction-imposing procedure (Drezner, 2022).

These troubling events, it is clear to me, have reaffirmed the enduring relevance of the realist perspective on international politics. At the most general level, all realist theories show a world in which there is no agency or organisation to safeguard states against one another, and states must worry about whether a hazardous aggressor would attack them in the future. This condition leads governments, particularly large powers, to be concerned about their security and struggle for dominance. Unfortunately, these worries can occasionally drive regimes to commit atrocities. For realists, Russia's invasion of Ukraine (as well as the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003) serves as a reminder that big powers may behave in awful and dumb ways when they perceive

their essential security interests are at issue. That lesson does not condone such behaviour, but realists understand that moral censure alone will not stop it. It's difficult to imagine a more compelling proof of the need for physical power, particularly military force. Even postmodern Germany appears to have received the message.

### **Analysing Russia invasion of Ukraine**

Russia and Ukraine share a similar or tangled heritage that extends back a thousand years, according to either side. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, Ukraine, known as the breadbasket of Europe, was one of the most populous and powerful republics in the former USSR as well as an agricultural mainstay until it proclaimed independence in 1991. (2022). According to Elliot (2022b), one of Russia's main demands is that Ukraine not join NATO, a military alliance comprised of 28 European nations and two North American countries intended to preserve peace and security in the North Atlantic region. Russia is one of just a few Eastern European nations that are not a member of the alliance. NATO expansion is viewed as a "fundamental issue" by the Kremlin in general (Elliot, 2022b).

Tensions reached a boiling point in 2014 when Ukrainians deposed a Russia-aligned president. Under the questionable guise of defending ethnic Russians and Russian speakers from Ukrainian persecution, Russia seized Ukraine's Crimea peninsula, a move highly denounced by the international world.

At around the same time, Russia fomented discord in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region, supporting a separatist movement in the Donetsk and Luhansk areas that ended in a military war. As both sides dug in for a lengthy conflict, the regions proclaimed independence. According to the council, the struggle between the two nations has lasted since, with at least 14,000 people killed. However, Russia has maintained a close watch on its western neighbour, while Ukrainians have found their freedom to be stormy at times, with demonstrations and government corruption. Ukraine's intentions to associate itself more with Western countries, particularly its openly declared interest in joining NATO, which was formed in part to resist Soviet expansion, have been greeted by Russian hostility (CFR, 2022).

According to William Pomeranz, the interim director of the Kennan Institute at the Wilson Center, a nonpartisan policy forum for global issues, NATO has "no intention right now" of admitting Ukraine to the organisation. He observes:

I think NATO, and the invitation for Ukraine to join NATO at some point in the future, is simply just a pretext to potentially invade Ukraine," he says, referring to Russia. "Ukraine is not a member of NATO, it doesn't have any of the NATO guarantees, and so there is no hint that Ukraine will become a member of NATO soon" (quoted in Elliot, 2022a).

By launching a full-fledged war against its ethnic neighbour, Ukraine, it revealed that it views collective coercive physical strength, expressed by its army, as the preferred weapon for extending its power, control, and exploitation. As one of the two leading countries with well-developed police and military structure controlling the exploitation mechanisms of so-called state capitalism, it astounded many observers with its ruthless direct aggression, ignoring all possible alternative means of international conflict resolution (Hanappi, 2022).

According to some Western commentators, Russia's 2022 invasion will be the climax of the Kremlin's rising dissatisfaction with NATO's post-Cold War expansion into the former Soviet sphere of influence. Russian authorities, notably Putin, have claimed that the US and NATO regularly breached agreements made in the early 1990s not to extend the alliance into the former Soviet bloc (Masters, 2022b). They see NATO's growth during this difficult time for Russia as a humiliating imposition over which they have no control.

In the weeks preceding up to NATO's 2008 summit, President Vladimir Putin warned US diplomats that bringing Ukraine into the alliance would be a "hostile gesture toward Russia" (Burns, 2019). Months later, Russia declared war on Georgia, demonstrating Putin's determination to use force to protect his country's interests. (Some impartial observers criticised Georgia for starting the so-called August War but accused Russia of intensifying hostilities (Heritage, 2009).



Despite remaining a non-member, Ukraine strengthened connections with NATO in the years preceding the 2022 invasion. Ukraine participated in yearly military exercises with the alliance and was named one of only six enhanced opportunity partners in 2020, a privileged designation reserved for the bloc's closest non-member countries. Furthermore, Kyiv reiterated its ambition of ultimately gaining full NATO membership.

Russia made many important security demands of the United States and NATO, including that they stop growing the alliance, obtain Russian approval for particular NATO deployments and remove US nuclear weapons from Europe in the weeks preceding up to its invasion (Masters, 2022b). Alliance officials stated that they were open to fresh diplomacy but were hesitant to contemplate closing NATO's doors to new members. According to Bradley, the senior director of the Center on Military and Political Power at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, cited in Elliot (2022b), Putin, in particular, does not want Ukraine to join NATO "not because he has some principled disagreement related to the rule of law or something, but because he has a might makes a right model."

Aside from NATO concerns and other demands for weaponry and openness, Russia's expansionary tendency is also at work in Ukraine. Some Russians, including Putin, are still resentful of the USSR's demise and believe Russia has a claim on the former Soviet republic. The Russian government's demands are inextricably linked to those of its autocratic leader. While observers are quick to point out that they cannot read Putin's thoughts – as Biden recognised during his speech on Feb. 18 – they do notice his broad objectives, particularly those connected to his yearning for the geographical integrity of the USSR, which has been made obvious by his actions (Miligan, 2022).

Bowman (2022) observes that Putin regards the demise of the Soviet Union as a calamity and resents NATO's achievement. Putin vehemently opposes NATO's eastward expansion. He also has an eye on history; as he grows older, he is concerned about how he will appear in history books, and he views himself as a type of neoczar who wants to recreate as much of the Soviet Union as possible. Bowman (2022) adds that Ukraine, in particular, is a "key component" of this objective since Putin has a history of invading and conquering nations on the verge of joining NATO. In 2008, Russian soldiers invaded Georgia, a former Soviet state that was attempting to join the alliance. They put pressure on the capital, Tbilisi, for a short time before retreating to separatist territories that they still control today. Bowman cites the 2014 Crimea takeover as another example, and Putin stated on February 22, 2014, that he wants the world to acknowledge that area as genuinely Russian. In a 2021 article, he argued that shared history and culture – which Ukrainians deny – allowed Russia to exercise influence there (Elliot, 2022b).

Pomeranz observes that Ukraine has long been a source of contention for Vladimir Putin (Elliot, 2022a). He does not acknowledge its independence or right to exist as a country, as he stated in his lengthy post on Ukraine, where he stated that Ukraine and Russia are essentially one people in one country. There has long been hostility toward Ukrainian independence and the fact that the Soviet Union essentially abandoned Ukraine. Putin appears to wish to end such independence.

While launching military action against Ukraine, President Putin's address aired his complaints against the West and, like other speeches by politicians in this genre, was a mash-up of different rationales. First, Putin establishes his stance as a form of response to Western powers' track record of earlier violations of international law, aiming to pre-empt criticism from these governments that he is breaching international law: Claiming that the West carried out a brutal war assault against Belgrade, Iraq, Libya, and Syria without the approval of the UN Security Council.

Milanovic (2022) contends that even if all of Putin's examples are recognised as violations of international law by Western governments, they cannot be used to excuse future violations of international law by Russia. If A murders B and goes unpunished, it does not excuse C from killing D. If NATO member states violated Article 2(4) of the Charter when they invaded Serbia in 1999 (which they did), Russia bombing Ukraine in 2022 cannot be justified. And so on – but once again, it is noteworthy how Putin rhetorically weaponizes earlier transgressions of international law.

So, what is Russia's statutory rationale for employing force? Based on the above study, there are three viable

arguments. First, Russia is employing force in self-defence, following Article 51 of the Charter, to defend itself against (some type of) danger originating from Ukraine. In the fact, this appears to be a philosophy of pre-emptive or preventative self-defence — an 'armed strike' on Russia is not 'imminent' in any sense, but there is an existential threat so severe that immediate action is required to avoid it (echoes of George W. Bush...). Needless to add, 99.9% of international attorneys believe that any such pre-emption doctrine is fundamentally incompatible with Article 51. (as distinguished from anticipatory self-defence in response to imminent attacks). Second, as a basis for collective self-defence of the (ostensibly autonomous) republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (Milanovic, 2022).

The veracity of that argument would, of course, be contingent on whether these two entities are, in fact, states (they are not, and they did not become such this week just because President Putin signed a piece of paper), and whether Ukraine invaded these two new alleged nations. Even if this argument is taken at face value, the scope of Russia's military operation – and the ostensible objective of demilitarising Ukraine, which very certainly involves regime change – looks incompatible with the traditional requirements of necessity and proportionality (Milanovic, 2022). Finally, there is an argument that Russia is trying to stop/prevent a "genocide" of Russians in Eastern Ukraine. However, regardless of the disputed facts, the great majority of international lawyers reject humanitarian intervention as a justifiable exemption to the ban on the use of force. And, in any case, President Putin's address makes no mention of this, nor does he use the phrases "humanitarian intervention" or anything close. His case appears to be essentially or completely one of self-defence, whether individual or collective and should be weighed accordingly.

Graham contends in the ACT (2022) that, although the United States is talking about a Ukraine crisis, Russia sees it as a crisis in European security architecture. The primary issue they want to address, according to him, is the modification of European security architecture as it currently exists to something more favourable to Russian interests. According to some analysts, Putin's greatest motivator was his concern that Ukraine would continue to grow into a modern, Western-style democracy, undermining his authoritarian rule in Russia and shattering his aspirations of creating a Russia-led sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. According to Applebaum (2022), Putin's goal is to destabilise and terrify Ukraine. He stated:

He wants Ukrainian democracy to fail. He wants the Ukrainian economy to collapse. He wants foreign investors to flee. He wants his neighbours—in Belarus, Kazakhstan, even Poland and Hungary—to doubt whether democracy will ever be viable, in the longer term, in their countries too (Applebaum, 2022).

The Russian president, however, might not have predicted the type of strong response from the international community he has seen to the build- b up on the Ukraine border.

According to Toal (2019), Putin's Russia is a revanchist country eager to reclaim its past strength and glory. He claims that Putin's ambition has always been to restore Russia to the stature of a major state in northern Eurasia. According to Toal (2019), the ultimate objective was not to recreate the Soviet Union but to restore Russia's greatness. Russia reinforced its possession of a key foothold on the Black Sea by conquering Crimea in 2014. Russia can project power farther into the Mediterranean, Middle East, and North Africa, where it has historically had little impact, with a stronger and more advanced military presence there. Some commentators claim that the West failed to impose substantial consequences on Russia in reaction to its annexation of Crimea, which they say only strengthened Putin's readiness to employ military force to achieve his foreign policy goals. Russia's strategic advances in the Donbas were more precarious until its invasion in 2022. Supporting the separatists has enhanced its negotiating leverage with Ukraine, at least momentarily.

In July 2021, Putin published what many Western foreign policy experts saw as an alarming piece clarifying his contentious views on Russia and Ukraine's common past. Among other things, Putin referred to Russians and Ukrainians as "one people" who share "the same historical and spiritual area" (Putin, 2021). Under the guise of military drills, Russia gathered tens of thousands of troops around the border with Ukraine and then into friendly Belarus in 2021. In February 2022, Putin launched a full-scale invasion, crossing into Ukrainian territory from the south (Crimea), east (Russia), and north (Belarus), in an attempt to conquer key towns, including the capital Kyiv, and topple the government. Putin stated that the overarching aims were to "de-Nazify" and "de-militarize" Ukraine.

However, in the early weeks of the invasion, Ukrainian forces mounted a tenacious struggle that slowed the Russian military in several regions, including Kyiv (Berkowitz and Galocha, 2022). According to several defence analysts, Russian soldiers have suffered from low morale, inadequate logistics, and an ill-conceived military plan based on the assumption that Ukraine would fall fast and easily. By March, some Western analysts speculated that, given unanticipated defeats on the battlefield, Moscow may scale back its ambitions and try to carve out sections of southern Ukraine, such as the Kherson region, as it did in the Donbas in 2014. (Lohsen, 2022). Russia might try to use these newly captured lands as a negotiating point in peace talks with Ukraine, which could contain conditions concerning Kyiv's prospects for EU and NATO membership. Others cautioned that Moscow's assertions of a shift in military activities away from the city were debunked (Spicer and Garanich, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

Russia's invasions into Ukraine broke any last illusions about post-Cold War Europe's order, leaving Ukraine and the West trying to respond while Russia revelled in its *fait accompli* and began to accept its isolation. What triggered the conflict? The summary emphasises the interaction of various components. The characters' interests were irreconcilable from the start, even though this was hidden by the euphoria that greeted communism's demise. Viewing the scenario as one of the competing aims in a typical security quandary not only revises our perspective of what occurred but also alters our outlook on what the future could hold. While many decisions might have been taken differently, the causes of the war were deeply ingrained, and the actors were far more limited, both globally and domestically, than blame-focused literature would have us think. The upshot is that neither attempts to neutralise Ukraine nor waiting for Vladimir Putin to leave the scene are likely to end the crisis. Right now, it is up to those nations that wish to prevent a future made safe for aggressors to show solidarity and brace themselves for the difficulties that lie ahead with caution and determination.

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