

# ***Putin, Ukraine, and Security Dilemma: Analysis of Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Its Consequence***

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the factors that led Russia to invade Ukraine and draw important lessons from this war. The major findings of this are that the causes of the war are more varied and run deeper than just the personality of Putin. The domestic factors and structural conditions suggest that this war was not simply the outcome of a deeply personal reaction of an authoritarian leader. Putin started the special military operation and invaded Ukraine. Putin overestimated the military power of Russia's army and underestimated the Ukrainian people's loyalty and affiliation to their government. The West also misjudged the severity of bringing former Soviet satellites into North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russia's geopolitical environment has also deteriorated. Russia's image as a major power collapsed after the slogging military operation. And the sanctions followed by the Russian army's invasion have affected Russia's economy, which made Russia the most-sanctioned country in the world.

**Keywords:** Russia-Ukraine conflict, Putin, ethnic connections, security dilemma

## **1. Introduction**

Tanks roared, and missiles flew while soldiers from Russia and Ukraine fought to their deaths in trenches in Bachmut, Mariupol, and Krasny Liman, strategic sites in the eastern regions of Ukraine. Such was the state of affairs in the region as a result of Vladimir Putin's decision to start the war. While the special military operation has become a stalemate, the huge cost of the war in Russia and Ukraine, including casualties of more than a hundred thousand soldiers and civilians alike, has made people curious about Putin's decision to invade Ukraine.

This paper analyzes the factors leading to the Russia-Ukraine War and then suggest important lessons that can be gleaned from it. The paper is divided into two sections. First, it will analyze what the author considers to be the principal factors that caused the war by using three levels of analysis: the decision-making level, which considers the character and personality of Vladimir Putin; the domestic level, which looks at Eurasianism and the ethnic connection between Russia and Ukraine, and finally the international level which involves the value of Ukraine to Russia in terms of economics, geopolitics, and security. In the second section, the paper will discuss the consequences of the war and suggest lessons that can be gleaned from this war.

The major findings of this paper are that the causes of the war are more varied and run deeper than just the personal pathology of Putin. The domestic factors and structural conditions suggest that this war was not simply the outcome of an impulse of an authoritarian leader. Russia's security

dilemma with Ukraine and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its interdependent relationship with Ukraine in trade, energy, and military industry were also reasons that triggered the unnecessary war between Russia and Ukraine.

## 2. Decision-making Level

According to political psychologists, a leader's personality and experience will strongly influence their decisions. The decision-making analysis of the causes of the war centers on the person of Vladimir Putin, where his family background, childhood experience, and previous experience in the intelligence system of the USSR exerted influence over his decisions in making foreign policies.

Born in a family of four, Putin grew up in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg). His parents witnessed and survived the siege of Leningrad, the deadliest battle fought in WWII and the darkest episode of modern Russian history. The siege of Leningrad, which caused the death of 670,000 people and Putin's older brother, left a deep impression on Vladimir Putin and turned him into a survivalist, fighting for security in a hostile world. The experience in Leningrad also cultivated Putin's character and made him a determined and unyielding person [1]. In his days in college, Putin was greatly enamored with studying history and remained an avid reader of history after college. Dmitry Peskov, who was press secretary of Putin, stressed that 'Putin still reads all the time, mostly about the history of Russia. He reads memoirs, the memoirs of Russian historical state figures'. Putin also joined the KGB when he was in college. The unique experience of Putin at the KGB, the intelligence organ of the dissolved Soviet Union, has also instilled in him an inclination to behave not only decisively, but also aggressively when he believes that national interests are at stake. As a KGB officer, he tended to preserve the current state apparatus and keep elites in power, not to conduct a revolution to destroy or overthrow them [2]. Putin's tendency to preserve the current status of Russia was also reflected in his speech when he became the president, "Russia has reached its limits of political, and socio-economic earthquakes, cataclysms, radical transformations. Only fanatics or those political forces who are deeply disinterested in the fate of Russia or the people are calling for another revolution. " He was also protective of the KGB even when the Russian public was deeply skeptical of its' reputation, saying that only traitors would smear the KGB, an institution that protected the country [3].

In Putin's career as president and premier of Russia, history was always a useful tool for Putin to reinforce his political position or rationalize his policies: often citing historical events and the similarities between himself and venerated Russian heroes. A glaring example was defending those leaders that fought off radical revolutions and preserving traditions and restoring the glory of Russia. One of Putin's favorite quotes in 2011 was a paraphrase of Stolypin, prime minister of Nicholas II: "We do not need great upheavals. We need a great Russia" [4]. He also referred to the Uvarov doctrine of Russia's "Official Nationality, which includes "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality," but avoiding the exclusionary elements [4]. Putin's venerating of tradition and Russia's past was certainly one of the reasons why Putin was provoked so much by Ukraine's color revolution and its decision to join NATO, a key part of the past Russian empire segregated from Russia's sphere of influence [2]. Putin's familiarity with the history of the Russian empire cultivated a personal obsession to reclaim the lands that once belonged to Tsarist Russia or bring them under Russia's influence, such as Ukraine. Being a survivalist, according to his childhood experience, Putin also tended to be much more sensitive to Russia's security than other Russian leaders might have been and saw Ukraine as one of the core interests of Russia [4].

### **3. Domestic Level: Domestic Support, Popular Mood, Russian Elites, and Eurasianism**

#### **3.1. Russian Conservatives**

Aside from popular support, the conservative elites from Russia that have an obsession with Russia's status as a great power also support Russia invading Ukraine since Ukraine was an important part of Russia's great power identity. In the modern history of Russia, the quest for great power status is a central element in building Russia's international identity, also the core of its strategic culture and the root of its expansionist policy [5]. The foundations of the idea of a strong Russian state came from the distinctive Orthodox-Slavic civilization, which was shaped by the Byzantine Orthodox Church and the rule of the Mongolians. The Russian Orthodox Church inherited the Byzantine concept of 'imperial worship' and developed from its development the so-called Moscow-Third Rome theory and the messianic idea of salvation, which became the source of Russia's impetus for pursuing a great power status [5]. While the impetus had been strengthened through the continuous expansion of the Russian empire, the idea to become a powerful nation has been perpetuated through generations of Russian elites and has become a part of their self-perception ever since the time of Peter the Great and Empress Jekaterina. In the perception of Russian elites, the identity of great power refers to having immense physical strength and acknowledgment from neighboring countries and other big powers of its status and its sphere of influence.

While Russia's identity as a great power was maintained by acknowledgment of Russia's great power status and sphere of influence, the color revolution in Ukraine and the efforts of pro-western elites in Ukraine such as Zelensky and Tymoshenko to break away from Russia's control were seen by Russia as a source of the West's attempt to weaken its status in the region, which threatens its dominating position in the area. For Russia, the status of a great power became more important than the partner of the West. Aside from the pressure of the West, Ukraine as a region was of importance to Russia's status as a great power. Being both the descendants of Kievan Rus and having stayed under one authoritarian state during Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, Ukraine, and Russia were two countries sharing identical historical experiences, with Ukraine becoming an inseparable part of Russia's cultural memory. For example, Crimea was a sacred place for the Orthodox church and Sevastopol was a heroic city for Russia in the Crimean War and WWII. In a speech to the Federal Council and the State Duma in 2014, Putin referred to Crimea as "the peninsula of strategic importance for Russia" for it is the place where the Grand Prince Vladimir was baptized in the tenth century and united the Eastern Slavic tribes and lands around Christianity [6]. Other Russian elites also had a special attachment to Ukraine. Russian novelist and philosopher Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, one of the Nobel prizes winners, acknowledged himself as "well-nigh half Ukrainian by birth." He also emphasized that Russia and Ukraine were inseparable, "talk of separate Ukrainian people existing since something like the ninth century... is a recently invented falsehood [7]."

#### **3.2. Ethnic and Cultural Connections**

While Putin's supreme political position and the attachment the Russian elites had towards Ukraine were the reasons for Russia to start the special military operation, the ethnic composition of Ukraine and the ethnic policies of its government caused the division of Ukraine and gave Russian government the excuse to support dissidents of eastern Ukraine and start the special military operation. Being a country with a population of 44 million people and 130 ethnicity, Ukraine was a multinational country where its' ethnic policies would greatly influence Ukraine's stability and unity. Among the 44 million people living in Ukraine, 17% of them were ethnic Russians, and most of the ethnic Russians were living in the eastern parts of Ukraine, which was once a part of the

Russian empire in the 19th century. While eastern Ukraine was several industrialized states that rely on Russia's market to sell its industrial products, the economic independence alongside ethnic and cultural similarities made the Russian ethnic natural pro-Russian forces in Ukraine. In comparison, the agricultural states in Western Ukraine were mostly Ukrainians and were more exposed to Western influence in culture and religion [8]. The distribution of ethnic Russians in Ukraine (most in eastern Ukraine) further encumbered the tension between the eastern Ukraine people and Western Ukraine. When pro-Russian leader Yanukovich was removed from office, and the new government sought to distance itself from Russia, the ethnic Russians in Crimea and eastern Ukraine were displeased. They sought means to gain autonomy or complete independence from Ukraine.

In addition, the internal division of Ukraine was fueled by the policy of exclusionary nationalism from the Ukraine government. In 2004, after Yushchenko became president after a color revolution, the pro-western politician began to combine education for citizenship with hostility towards Russia, requiring Ukrainian people to use only Ukrainian in public places [9]. In 2010, Yushchenko awarded the title "National Hero of Ukraine" to Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian nationalist who worked with the Nazis in the Second War, causing opposition from the ethnic Russians in eastern and southern parts of Ukraine [10]. When Yanukovich became elected as president in 2010, his pro-Russian attitude caused him to enhance the position of the ethnic Russians in domestic politics, which further increased the cracks between the ethnic Ukrainians and the ethnic Russians. In 2014, after Ukraine underwent another color revolution advocated by the West and Russia seized control of the Crimean Peninsula, the new Ukraine government led by Poroshenko imposed new measures targeting the ethnic Russians in Ukraine, while Ukraine's relationship with Russia dropped to the freezing point. In 2019, President Poroshenko signed a decree to expand the scope of Ukraine's use in public life, stipulating that the state and local governments, education institutions, and service departments must use Ukraine. Subsequently, Ukraine passed a law ensuring Ukraine as the official language status, stipulating that the billboards and shop signs containing Russian should be removed in public places, the attendants in restaurants could not use Russian, and closed the Russian language schools [5]. The exclusionary nationalism policy by the Ukraine government has fueled the tension between Western Ukraine and Eastern Ukraine, also causing the ethnic Russians in Donbas and other regions of Eastern Ukraine to find ways to gain independence from the Ukraine government.

The ethnic connections and the exclusionary policies of the Ukraine government were also the excuse for the Russian government to interfere in Ukraine's internal affairs and a reason for the Russian public to support their government's military operation. The ethnic connection between Russia and Ukraine also influenced Vladimir Putin in his decision to provide assistance to separatists in eastern Ukraine and starting the special military operation, since Putin himself believed that Russians and Ukrainians were from one ancestor, and they would be better off together. In his article in 2021, Putin wrote 'people found themselves abroad overnight, taken away, this time indeed, from their historical motherland' to criticize the collapse of the Soviet Union that let 25 million Russians found themselves outside of Russia, and he particularly lamented on the fact that 12 million Russians found themselves in Ukraine. When addressing the Russian citizens after the special military operation started on Feb 24th, one reason for using armed forces to solve the Ukraine issue was to save the ethnic Russians in Ukraine from the massacre of the Ukraine government. "We had to stop that atrocity, that genocide of the millions of people who live there and who pinned their hopes on Russia, on all of us. It is their aspirations, the feelings, and pain of these people that were the main motivating force behind our decision to recognize the independence of the Donbas people's republics." [6]

### 3.3. Structural Level Analysis

While the individual and domestic levels of analysis have revealed the internal reason for Russia and its leader to invade Ukraine, the analysis of Putin's war would be incomplete without the international systematic level of analysis which would reveal the structural environment among Russia, Ukraine, and the West. From a theoretical perspective, the war can be construed as an outcome of the security dilemma: Ukraine's quest for security through the NATO association made Russia insecure.

Russia continued its Cold War angst with its continued fear of NATO. Even in the early 1990s with rapprochement rising and the country seeing itself as one of the West's allies, the Kremlin had begun to voice its dissatisfaction with NATO's expansion in eastern Europe. However, Russia's reaction towards NATO's expansion didn't become extreme until NATO, under the proposal of US., began to consider admitting Georgia and Ukraine as its member states [11]. Georgia and Ukraine were neighboring countries of Russia and were of course of immense geopolitical value to Russia's safety, especially Ukraine. In Russia's history, Ukraine has always served as a buffer zone to protect the economic and political centers of Russia from foreign invaders from the West since the vast fields of Ukraine were a perfect trap to slow down and weary the enemy in the rainy seasons such as the invincible armies of Napoleon and armored battalions of Nazi Germany. In the past, Ukraine has also been the place where important battles happen between Russia and great powers from the West contending for control over eastern Europe, such as the Crimean War, the Russo-Swedish War, and Russo-Turkish War [12]. During the Cold War, Ukraine was the Soviet Union's southwestern gateway and a strategic channel connecting Europe, as well as the Soviet Union's land fortress and strategic front against NATO, with one-third of the Soviet's army positioned in the Soviet Republic. According to Mackinder, one of the founders of geopolitics, gaining control of the heartland means gaining control of the Eurasian continent, and Ukraine was the center of the heartland which was surrounded by impassable mountains [13]. Ukraine's history and Mackinder's theory have further emphasized the value of Ukraine towards both the Soviet Union and Russia.

The fragile balance between Russia and the West began to reach its limit after the color revolution in former Soviet satellite countries at the beginning of the 21st century. Russia, the only regional power that could possibly threaten US.'s hegemony in Eastern Europe, could allow NATO to absorb former allies of the Soviet Union in eastern Europe into the alliance. However, Kremlin would never tolerate its' neighboring countries being absorbed into the organization which has treated Russia as its' adversary ever since its' creation in 1949 [11]. The strategic importance of Ukraine and the fact that Ukraine was once an inseparable part of Russia's sphere of influence has further enhanced Ukraine's importance to the Russian leaders. While Russia's war towards Georgia was a warning to NATO to stop its attempts to lure Russia's neighboring countries into its' group, Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 and assisting separatists in Donbas and other regions of Eastern Ukraine was Russia's emergency actions to reduce the loss caused by Ukraine turning to the West and a warning to Ukraine not to join NATO.

The tension between Russia and Ukraine can be explained by the theory of security dilemma. After Ukraine gained independence from Russia, its' entanglement with Russia in the past centuries caused it to make coalitions with the West who were also finding ways to contain Russia and expand its spheres of influence, which aggravated Russia since Ukraine became a hostile country with powerful allies and advanced weaponry would mean a severe threat to Russia's national safety.

## 4. Conclusions

Several important lessons can be gleaned from the war. In general, the war is proving self-destructive for Russia in terms of its domestic and foreign interests. Firstly, Russia's geopolitical environment has also deteriorated, as its neighboring countries, such as Finland and Sweden,



decided to join NATO, fearing an aggressive Russia under an expansionist leader would also threaten them. By starting this war, Putin has also made an eternal enemy of Ukrainian, thus compromising its relations with its historical buffer and ally. Secondly, Russia's image as a major power collapsed after the slogging military operation. Though it suffered greatly from domestic turbulence in the 90s, the Russian army was still considered by many experts and ordinary people as the third most powerful army in the world and has been feared by the West and Russia's neighboring countries. However, the fact that the Russian army could not quickly overcome Ukraine's defense showed that Russia's in conventional military capability is deficient on many levels. Thirdly, the sanctions followed by the Russian army's invasion have affected Russia's economy, which made Russia the most-sanctioned country in the world. As of May 9, 2023, 521 foreign companies were reported to have completely withdrawn from Russia, with more than 500 businesses temporarily suspended most or almost all operations in the country [14]. The Russian economy is foundering. Fourth, in terms of Putin himself, the war has caused political fallout in Russia, thus compromising Putin's hold on power. Above and beyond a phalanx of popular uprising against Putin and a general malaise in his elites, the owner of the Wagner Group Yevgeny Prigozhin has rattled the hierarchy of his dictatorship by threatening to turn the Wagner machine against Russia itself. It took the Belarusians to broker a compromise between the two strong men to avert a civil war in Russia. It is clear that Putin's all encompassing power does not extend to the most successful unite in the Russian arsenal. The political future appears bleak.

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