

PONARS ● NEW APPROACHES
EURASIA ● TO RESEARCH AND
● SECURITY IN EURASIA



Perspectives on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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**Russia's Decision to Invade
and Military Conduct**

President Putin's Rationality and Escalation in Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 756

March 2022

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Prominent Western policy figures, including British Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#), Canada's United Nations Ambassador [Bob Rae](#), and retired U.S. National Security Advisor General [H. R. McMaster](#), have recently questioned whether Russian President Vladimir Putin has become "irrational." (In contrast, Israeli Prime Minister [Naftali Bennett](#) said he found Putin to be "not conspiracy theorizing or irrational" in his meeting with him on March 5.) Some have questioned whether Putin is so mentally unbalanced that he might escalate his invasion of Ukraine into a third world war or even a nuclear holocaust.

But "rationality" is a word that gets stretched for rhetorical effect. To understand whether Putin is likely to attack a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member-state or use nuclear weapons, it is helpful to consider a standard social science definition of rationality. Doing so provides confidence that Putin is unlikely to escalate the war horizontally into NATO territory or vertically beyond conventional weaponry unless some kind of miscalculation occurs. The problem for the United States and NATO is to concentrate on crisis management and avoid inadvertent escalation.

Understanding Rationality

Social scientists never fully agree on anything, and it is not surprising that they have written dozens of books and journal articles on how to define rationality. All human brains have computational limits and built-in biases that make "[bounded rationality](#)" (a term coined by the late Herbert A. Simon) a better real-world description in any case.

What many of these social science definitions have in common are three basic tenets: (1) a rational actor has a set of goals and acts on them; (2) the actor's goals are more or less consistently prioritized over time; and (3) the actor does a fairly complete search for information before taking action.

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Vladimir Putin's Goals

For a very long time, Putin has had two overwhelming high-priority goals.

First, like any authoritarian leader, Putin's primary goal must be to stay in control of Russia for as long as possible. His power is based on his ability to act as a patron to his many clients: to dole out opportunities for wealth, provide protection to his allies, and punish those who threaten his inner circle. All leaders in personalistic systems like Russia's inevitably provoke jealousy and hatred among those who are excluded from rising, and Putin's own protection would vanish as soon as he lost the ability to protect and reward others.

Second, Putin aspires to go down in history as the man who made [Russia great again](#), after what he perceives as Russia's humiliation by the United States and the West following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. This broad achievement-oriented goal encompasses most explanations for Putin's decision to invade Ukraine, even if analysts disagree about which one is correct: that he truly believes Russia and Ukraine are [one country](#) that should be reunited, or that he wants to reestablish the [Russian Empire](#) or the [Soviet Union](#), or that he simply wants to [stop further NATO enlargement](#) in its tracks.

The desire for great power status also explains Putin's actions beyond Ukraine. It explains why Putin directly intervened on Bashar al-Assad's behalf in the Syrian civil war, making Russia a [necessary player](#) in Syria's future while gaining new air and naval bases for Russian power projection elsewhere. It similarly explains Putin's use of the [Wagner Group](#) in a variety of African countries, again to become a necessary player in supporting authoritarian regimes while picking up new military bases along the way. Beyond feeding Putin's ego, great power restoration would also help him attain his first goal by solidifying his reputation as a uniquely powerful, popular, and indispensable leader.

A Poor Pre-Invasion Search for Information

Despite these well-prioritized goals, Putin seems to have had astonishingly poor intelligence in the leadup to his decision to invade Ukraine. It is here, then, that his actions do not fit the definition of rationality outlined above. We have no way of knowing, of course, whether various Russian defense and intelligence agencies failed Putin by feeding him false or inadequate information that he believed to be true and complete, or whether Putin himself chose not to ask the right questions, or to ignore facts presented to him because they didn't fit his preexisting beliefs. Perhaps, then, rather than labeling Putin an irrational individual, it would be better to call the black box of the Kremlin's information system irrational.

Putin did not understand how strong the [Ukrainian resistance](#) would be, nor that his own forces were [undermotivated](#) with inadequate [logistic support](#). We know this because the state-run Novosti news agency [accidentally published](#) an article on February 26, two days into the invasion, falsely declaring that the Ukrainian government had fallen and that Russian forces had successfully reestablished Russian unity with Ukraine. In other words, Putin apparently believed that he would have a quick and easy victory, not the hard slog his forces, in fact, faced. Putin also seems to have seriously underestimated the unity of global economic actors, led by the United States, in condemning his actions and imposing extraordinarily harsh sanctions on Russia.

There are a variety of reasons why these intelligence failures might have happened. All authoritarian states suffer from information dysfunction because messengers everywhere (including in Saddam Hussein's Iraq [before](#) the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that ended his regime) fear the personal consequences of telling leaders uncomfortable truths. While there is little public knowledge about Putin's relations with his own intelligence agencies, in Soviet times, the KGB told leaders what they [wanted to hear](#) about the politics and policies of the United States and its allies, and Soviet leaders [tended to discredit](#) KGB reports anyway and believe what they wished. Throughout his own reign, Putin has increasingly isolated himself. He appears to have consulted only a [very small group](#) of security advisors before his seizure of Crimea in 2014, excluding even the Finance Ministry. His isolation [increased](#) with the COVID-19 pandemic, and at one point, he required all visitors to undergo a [two-week quarantine](#) before meeting with him.

Rationality about Escalation

This distinction between goal-seeking and information-seeking in the definition of rationality is important in determining whether Putin is likely to intentionally escalate the war in Ukraine. There is no indication that Putin is suicidal; the only way to go down in history as the man who made Russia great again is for that future history to occur. This means that his recent statements, which some have interpreted as crazy talk, [might be](#) just that: an attempt to instill fear in his opponents by using what U.S. President Richard Nixon called in 1972 the "[madman theory](#)" of signaling, to bluff about how far he will escalate to ensure that he wins.

Putin came of age and began his KGB career in East Germany in the mid-1970s, just as U.S.-Soviet arms control efforts were stagnating and Cold War crises were heating up around the globe. He would have learned some basic understanding of the principle of mutual assured destruction, which prevents nuclear-armed superpowers from going to war with each other out of fear of the horrific consequences for both sides. He also would have been familiar from that early age with NATO's Article 5 collective security guarantee for members. Crucially, this means that Putin does not need good current information to understand the potential consequences of escalation.

The danger of the current situation is not that Putin will wantonly cross over NATO borders or climb the nuclear escalation ladder, even if he is living in a bubble. Instead, it is the possibility of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation between two rational but nuclear-armed adversaries.

What makes the danger worse is Putin's own appetite for risk-taking, something he [boasted about](#) in his autobiography. That risk-acceptance was on full display with the Russian [military shelling](#) of Europe's largest nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia. The apparent goal of the attack was to take control of the facility that provides electricity to a quarter of Ukraine, not to cause a Chernobyl-like release of nuclear materials. The operation succeeded, even as it caused a fire in an associated administrative building, and with a level of risk that had the International Atomic Energy Agency [worried](#).

Policy Implications for the United States and NATO

The more the United States and other NATO member states insert themselves directly into the conflict on Ukrainian soil, the higher the risk of miscalculation becomes. This does not mean that no risks should be taken. Indeed the crippling sanctions already imposed on Russia are very risky, as Putin [noted](#) when he said that they "are akin to a declaration of war but thank God it has not come to that." The [supply of weapons](#) to Ukraine across the borders of Poland and other NATO members will also become progressively riskier if Russian forces continue to move west. At some point, Russia may be tempted to interdict those supply lines, and an inadvertent crisis might occur if a stray Russian mortar or missile landed beyond the Ukrainian border on NATO territory.

This means that the risks of every new policy move by the West must be extraordinarily carefully thought-out, calibrated, and red-teamed in advance. It helps that a new hotline for Ukraine was established between the Pentagon and the Russian Defense Ministry, designed to [prevent](#) just such inadvertent miscalculation from happening. But the proposal by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, supported by a [number of prominent Western actors](#), to create some kind of a no-fly zone over Ukraine would dramatically increase the chances of direct confrontation between Western and Russian aircraft and air defense systems, and hence the chance of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation. It would do Ukraine no good whatsoever to have this war expand into a new European world war or nuclear war.

Instead, Ukraine has the best chance of surviving if the West stays strong and united and focuses on helping Ukrainian fighters and civilians with as much creativity and foresight as possible. The fact that Ukraine has accomplished so much up until now with Western support has infuriated Putin, but his fury is not likely to lead to intentional self-immolation. It is a miscalculation, not madness that the United States and NATO must guard against.

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A New Stage in Russian Foreign Policy: War and Isolation

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 743

February 2022

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President Vladimir Putin's full-scale war against Ukraine, which began in the early hours of February 24, has become a turning point in the world order. The European security architecture has cracked, and post-Cold War diplomacy has failed. Humankind has entered an extremely volatile period with an increased risk of new regional conflicts and a global nuclear Armageddon. These dangerous events have also opened a new chapter in the outgoing drama of post-Soviet transitions. This war now, in the center of Europe, has become a shock to most countries, and sadly Moscow has not lost its ability to fully surprise. Ironically, until recently, Russia was not on the list of [top threats](#) to Western concerns, which had been dominated by a growing United States-China rivalry.

For almost a year prior to the full-scale war itself, however, a sharp spike in Moscow's international activities took place, mostly a double-edged mix of extensive military maneuvers and troop buildups along the Ukrainian border, combined with tough language demanding the return to a 1997 "status quo" in Europe and the drawing of new red lines with long-term legal guarantees. Putin has laconically [defined](#) this strategy toward the West as a way of building tensions and keeping them in such a state for as long as possible. There are several factors behind this breakthrough in Putin's international activities, among them: recent trends in domestic politics, confidence in national macroeconomic stability, a personally biased approach toward international affairs, and a very specific set of views on Russia's development and its role in the world, which some researchers have [called](#) a Putin doctrine that incorporates resentment and imperial nostalgia. Overall, it has not been a coincidence of random events but a "natural" transformation of Russian foreign policy, determined by the internal logic of an authoritarian regime. The resulting Ukrainian crisis has suddenly accelerated dramatic changes in European security expectations, which will have far-reaching political and economic consequences for Russia as well.

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Domestic Variables

All major shifts in the Kremlin's foreign policy in the past 20 years have been synchronized with domestic variables, primarily the emergence and development of Putin's power vertical. The current stage of Russia's foreign policy is no exception – it has seen a further transition of an existing system that has evolved into more autocratic forms of governmental regulation that emerged in 2020 and 2021. As a result of constitutional reforms, the country's political system has become even more centralized through the further strengthening of presidential powers concentrated around one person.

In practical terms, coercive pressure has been significantly increased on society in general, and particularly on “non-systemic” opposition that has been almost completely deflated and removed from the legal field through the criminalization of its activities. New rules extending the voting process by several days and introducing a new online voting system totally controlled by the authorities have guaranteed “desirable” results regardless of the real attitudes and preferences of the population. During the State Duma elections in the fall of 2021, “systemic opposition” activity was severely restricted, and serious political debates were practically withdrawn from the electorate process and replaced by artificial and false choices. Many independent media outlets and journalists were labeled “foreign agents.” Despite these efforts, Putin's electorate has continued to shrink, and the effectiveness of official channels of propaganda has declined.

The initial COVID-19 economic outbreak in Russia, which crashed energy prices and [decreased](#) annual GDP by 3 percent in 2020, has been relatively short. The OPEC+ agreement, where Moscow played a significant role, reduced a record crude production from the market in 2020 and 2021, and added to an oil price recovery and to a 4.3 percent GDP [growth](#) to Russia's economy last year. Economic data show that Russia is currently “swimming in money,” and its exports are growing at a 58.5 percent annual rate, [bringing](#) in \$1.2 billion daily. The country's current account surplus has been exceptionally strong, permitting authorities to raise gold and foreign exchange reserves to a [record](#) \$639.6 billion.

Yet it has been a short macroeconomic respite. Under the pretext of growing foreign threats, the government has continued to militarize, and under the pressure of geopolitical factors, even prior to the war, the [Russian market](#) wiped out \$230 billion in capitalization, and the ruble lost about a third of its value. As it begins to experience the consequences of new Western sanctions, it is clear enough that Russia will be gradually going into recession despite high oil prices. The situation will also worsen because Moscow has clearly failed to address the country's coronavirus pandemic challenges, which prompted the largest peacetime population decline in its history – [registering](#) more than 1 million excess deaths since the start of 2020.

Overall, however, the authoritarian “stabilization” of the country’s domestic political posture and its strong macroeconomic performance have opened a narrow window of opportunity for Putin’s foreign policy hawkishness. The Kremlin is in a hurry since the next phase of Russia’s domestic political cycle—the presidential election of 2024—is just around the corner. The goal is to reach significant foreign policy “achievements” that could help contain Putin’s declining popularity. In the absence of successes in the fight against a deteriorating social environment, foreign political adventures may be tempting—in the past, the ratings of top officials were strengthened by conflicts with the West over Kosovo and Iraq, the “peace enforcement” in Georgia, and the annexation of Crimea. This is one of the present reasons for Putin’s apparent impatience and rush. The other motivation, most likely, is related to Moscow’s evaluation of the political and economic situation in the West.

International Context

Recent Western publications have once again raised a perplexing question about how a country with an economy of [less than](#) 2 percent of global GDP and military defense spending [11 times less](#) than the U.S. defense budget can threaten the West with military-technical measures and even open military confrontation.

Since Putin’s [speech](#) on security policy at the Munich Conference in 2007, Moscow never tires of strongly criticizing the global liberal order and the hazards of a unipolar world. The global financial crisis of 2008-2009 led the Kremlin to believe in the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of Western economic models and a Western version of globalization. The further events of Brexit in Europe, and the election of Donald Trump in the United States, became arguments that favored an idea that the West continues to decline, generating internal instability in leading countries and growing contradictions between them. These included the belief that limited U.S. resources pushed Washington to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and led to its decreased engagements in Europe and the Middle East, seeking to concentrate efforts as much as possible on America’s rivalry with China and on its emergent domestic agenda.

This has also prompted the Kremlin to assume that a Biden administration would [not be interested](#) in escalating confrontations with Moscow or even less in the idea of greater rapprochement between Russia and China. President Joe Biden is viewed in Moscow as a politician with Cold War experience who understands better than others the need to maintain a balance of power strategy and, under such conditions, wouldn’t avoid respecting Russian “red lines.” Biden and Putin’s one-on-one meeting in Geneva in June 2021 and their virtual summit in December 2021 seemed to confirm the effectiveness of such an approach, where Putin, having gained the status of a “[worthy adversary](#),” has managed to sit Biden down at the negotiating table by increasing military and political pressure around Ukraine.

In considering the existing international dynamic, Moscow has also taken into account Europe's weak spots, such as the changing political leadership in Germany and the upcoming presidential elections in France in April 2022 (which make it unclear who will set the tone for Europe in the post-Merkel era), the more cautious approach of European capitals toward China's containment, and the lack of unity among them regarding sanctions against Russia or dealings with the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. In addition, Europe has become fearful of Russia's expanding military footing near the Ukraine border and its manipulative energy diplomacy that adds to the instability of regional energy markets, following unprecedented natural gas price spikes and energy supply shortages in the fall of 2021.

Above all, the relationship with Kyiv has become a growing irritant for Moscow, as Ukraine has continued its transition from a country that "was not Russia" (which was the title of Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma's [book](#) in the early 2000s) to an "anti-Russia" (as Putin [describes](#) it). Moscow's initial expectation that it would be possible to reach a deal with President Volodymyr Zelensky [did not](#) materialize. The Kremlin also realized that the Ukrainian army could be modernized, having substantially increased its lethal weapon arsenals through channels of bilateral cooperation without formal accession to NATO. The use of Turkish combat drones in the armed conflict zone of eastern Ukraine has confirmed these concerns. This means that for the mid-term period, the military balance between Russia and Ukraine could change and complicate military pressures on Kyiv, particularly from the territory of the unrecognized separatist entities in the Donbas and Luhansk regions.

Finally, in a broader sense, Russia's leadership believes that Moscow has a [military-technological advantage](#) that could soon vanish. What looks possible now might well be impossible in the near future. Current Russian tactics have appeared as a result of extensive collective planning, which does not mean that those involved in elaborating the plans have been privy to all the details.

From High-Stake Diplomacy to War

The new shift in Russia's relations with the West was publicly announced by Putin for the first time during his [speech](#) to an expanded Foreign Ministry board on November 18, 2021. It took less than one month for Russia's MFA to submit two [draft treaties](#) with the United States and NATO outlining security arrangements. That was done with uncharacteristic speed, as it usually takes several months if not years to coordinate interdepartmental approvals for texts of international agreements. These drafts switched the register of Russia's interaction with the West to a new, extremely conflictive level. Moscow's proposals (de facto ultimatums), as several sets of extensive consultations in January 2022 have shown, contain a mix of unilateral provisions that are not acceptable to the West (such as slamming NATO's open-door policy and turning back the clock to 1997) along

with some pragmatic articles that address mutual concerns and could be discussed as security risk mitigation measures.

However, diplomatic efforts, including shuttle diplomacy by President Macron and Chancellor Olaf Scholz, [did not bring](#) any results: Moscow's military muscle-flexing policy continued, while the West replied with threats of heavy sanctions and an increase of lethal weapon [shipments](#) and military training in Ukraine. In the meantime, Putin had concentrated Russia's military forces for a major offensive. The Kremlin's goal was not to negotiate but to "pump up resentment" as a cover operation for upcoming military action.

An evident flaw of Moscow's diplomacy is that Russian envoys are not aware of Putin's strategic plans, and the negotiators can only guess what they might be. The MFA seems to be mostly playing a technical role—implementing decisions already made by the Kremlin that create inconsistencies in the words and deeds of Russian diplomats. On the one hand, uncertainty and unpredictability are core pieces of Putin's strategy. On the other hand, they are a symptom of the growing de-institutionalization and fragmentation of Russia's activities abroad. The reasons are many: under a strictly vertical power structure, there is a lack of horizontal coordination, a hidden presence of competing interests among Russian elites, including security agencies, and significant influence-peddling on the part of lobbyists.

Russian military escalation had three stages—in the spring of 2021, in the autumn of that year, and in February of 2022, when a transition to open warfare occurred after the two separatist enclaves in eastern Ukraine were recognized as independent. Such rapid evolutions indicated that a military scenario designed to inflict maximum damage on Ukraine's armed forces, followed by a regime change, had been carefully prepared. Putin has justified the war [by calling](#) for "de-Nazification" and "demilitarization" of Ukraine and has [portrayed](#) this military invasion as a preemptive strike against Western aggression. The West, in turn, has [imposed](#) new harsh sanctions that include Russia's central bank, after accusing Moscow of violating international law and infringing on the sovereignty of a neighboring country. In the process, informational warfare against Russia through interpretation of ongoing events and by highlighting war atrocities in Ukraine has continued. Despite the present military conflict, a diplomatic track with Russia [might still emerge](#) since even mediocre diplomacy is better than hardcore war.

Outlines of a new European security architecture have also gained impetus in the opposite direction to Putin's efforts toward recreating Russia's spheres of influence by dividing NATO and weakening trans-Atlantic solidarity. Many Western experts and policymakers believe that Moscow, after a major arms test in Ukraine, will try to [further redraw](#) the map of Europe. They are concerned that Russia could be the frontrunner of a group of well-armed rogue states seeking to subvert the international order, attack neighboring states, annex conquered territories, as well as support insurgent separatist forces and authoritarian rulers around the world. As part of this international agenda, Kremlin is

asserting unilateral military-technical measures that could actually mean the deployment of new offensive weapon systems in such sensitive regions as Kaliningrad, Belarus, or Crimea, and strengthening military cooperation with China. Moscow has also tried to resurrect tensions over the replication of the Cuban missile crisis, tossing around the idea of manufacturing [vertical](#) and [horizontal](#) escalations.

Conclusion

The main features of Russia's foreign policy that accelerated a year ago—increasing hostility towards the “Historical West” that has finally been transitioned into a full-scale war against Ukraine along with diplomacy from a position of strength—have already demonstrated their limits and the high costs the country may have to pay. No less important than the present conflict with Ukraine, there has been a significant revision of Russia's relations with “near abroad” countries, starting with: Moscow's involvement in halting the Karabakh conflict; its assistance to Lukashenko's dictatorship, which was on the verge of collapse; and recently the rotation in and out of Russian troops into Kazakhstan under the umbrella of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which in essence has erased lines between external and internal circumstances as to when the CSTO (mostly Russian) military forces can be used in the territory of the former Soviet Union. Overall, the strengthening of the military power component in Kremlin policy has become a marker of the increasing involvement in the decision-making process of Russia's security agencies.

At the end of the day, such policies are pushing Russia toward geopolitical isolation, which cannot be offset by strategic partnership announcements with China and India. Currently, Moscow's activities haven't become a genuine item on the agenda of those two countries, while Beijing and Delhi are also trying to minimize the impact of that cooperation with Russia in a way that could affect their relationships with the West. However, those new measures of geopolitical pressure, threats, and uncertainty against the West and Russia's neighboring countries, which have been recently tested, have turned out to be an important part of the Kremlin's formidable toolkit. Since they have become available, they will certainly continue to be used in the foreseeable future.

Putin's Occupation Options for Ukraine: Keep or Trade?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 763

April 2022

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In his speech declaring the launch of the so-called “limited military operation,” President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia had no plans to occupy Ukraine: “We are not planning to impose anything on anyone through the use of force.” In the following three weeks, however, Russian troops did exactly the opposite. They seized Ukrainian towns, bombed civilian infrastructure, captured nuclear power stations, engaged in indiscriminate shelling of residential areas, sieged cities, and abducted local elected officials. On March 15, the Russian military declared that it had the entire Kherson oblast under its control – the largest administrative unit occupied by Russian forces since the capture of ~~Q11~~ Q11 in

The popular response that Russian invaders face in Ukraine now, however, is starkly different from what they encountered in Donbas eight years ago. There has been a mounting non-violent resistance in most towns captured by the Russian forces, while local officials refuse to recognize the authority of the Russian military and pledge their loyalty to Ukraine. This widespread defiance of the Russian presence across Ukraine indicates that the Crimean or Donbas scenarios of long-term occupation will be untenable for Russia. Instead, as this memo argues, Russia is now more likely to use newly seized territories as collateral to press Ukrainian leaders to recognize their earlier territorial losses and add a neutrality pledge to Ukraine's Constitution.

2022 is No 2014

The swift takeover of cities in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts by local separatists and undercover Russian agents in spring 2014 occurred mostly without significant local resistance. In those rare instances where separatists received pushback from within, they either decided to withdraw, like in Svatove and Dobropillia, or engaged in violent retaliation, like in Mariupol. The success of quick separatist takeovers of most towns in

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Donbas was possible for three main reasons: 1) the receptivity of a sizeable share of local residents to separatist demands; 2) the defection or passivity of law-enforcement; 3) the cooperative response of the local authorities. Separatists and Russian agents also relied on pre-existing civil society and political structures, such as Afghan war veteran organizations and the Communist Party of Ukraine, which provided organizational resources and technical expertise to stage separatist referendums and mobilize the public behind their goals.

From the first days of the Russian multi-front assault on Ukraine in 2022, the response of local authorities and the public to the Russian military presence was markedly different. In Henichesk, a sea port town on the Azov Sea and one of the first towns captured by Russian troops, local authorities continued operating under Ukrainian state symbols. On March 6, thousands of Henichesk residents marched under Ukrainian flags in defiance of the Russian occupation. Similar repeated mass protests happened in almost all occupied towns in different regions, including oblast center Kherson. They were accompanied by the singing of the Ukrainian anthem and defiant chants in the face of the Russian military: “Go home!” City administrators often encouraged these protest rallies through their public expressions of loyalty to Ukraine and calls on local residents to defy the Russian presence. Importantly, there have been no counter-rallies in support of the Russian troops or of a union with Russia, which were widely held across Donbas in spring of 2014.

The Russian approach to administering the seized towns also differed from the approach used in 2014. First, Russians, initially, avoided removing state symbols from municipal buildings and tolerated public expressions of disagreement by city officials. This stood in contrast to the way Ukrainian symbols were publicly desecrated in Donbas, while local authorities were asked to pledge loyalty to the separatists or resign. For the most part, there were also no attempts to elevate local figures as replacements for incumbent administrators. Rather, Russian occupying forces established military commandant offices, which started functioning as parallel governance structures. Apart from overseeing the public order, they issued orders to restrict public gatherings and introduced curfews. The appeal of the Russian military commandant of Nova Kakhovka, for example, contained an “order” to stop any exchange or sale of arms or explosives, and to cease any “unauthorized” marches or pickets, the gathering of any military-related information, and any “illegal” actions against public property. Some towns, like Kherson and Kakhovka, also witnessed the deployment of Russian National Guard units, which started performing policing functions.

The local city governments recognized the need to co-exist with the Russian military but insisted that by remaining in their positions they helped to preserve Ukraine’s claim on the territory. As Kherson mayor Ihor Kolyhaev [explained](#) ten days after Russian troops seized the city, “Kherson is de jure part of Ukraine, but de facto it is occupied.” He stressed that the municipal authorities were still working in the city council under the Ukrainian flag and called on all local businesses to continue their operations and pay taxes into the Ukrainian budget to sustain the national economy. He even initiated the formation of the

“municipal guard,” which was aimed at maintaining public order in the absence of a fully functioning Ukrainian police force. In response to the rumors of plans to create the Kherson People’s Republic, city and oblast council deputies issued joint appeals affirming their commitment to Ukraine.

Similarly, when Halyna Danylchenko, a city council deputy of Melitopol, [proclaimed](#) herself an acting mayor willing to work under the Russian command, city council deputies [voted](#) to condemn her actions and open a criminal case against her. Even members of traditionally pro-Russian parties sided with their former political rivals in rejecting the Russian role. The mayor of Kryvyi Rih Oleksandr Vilkul, once a prominent leader of the pro-Russian Opposition Bloc, called his former colleague Oleg Tsariov a traitor for his appeal to start collaborating with the Russian army. The faction of another pro-Russian party Opposition Bloc – For Life! in the Kherson city council [voted](#) for its dissolution, while its leader declared that “the time for such parties has passed.” The experience of 2014, when many city council deputies across Donbas voted to hold separatist referenda in their towns, can no longer be replicated in the rest of Ukraine.

The dual governance of occupied territories, however, is likely to be temporary. The first abductions of city mayors known for their pro-Ukrainian stance, such as the mayor of Melitopol Ivan Fedorov and the mayor of Skadovs’k Oleksandr Yakovlev, already indicate that the Russian military recognizes their vital role in mobilizing anti-Russian dissent. After his release, Fedorov [confirmed](#) that the Russians asked him to ban anti-Russian rallies in the town and pledge loyalty to them. The use of threats and coercion, however, may only force some municipal leaders to resign or flee and is unlikely to trigger widespread collaboration. The examples of voluntary collaboration by local officials, like Danylchenko, so far remain rare. Unless there is more defection within the local administrative structures, Russian forces would have to choose between imposing order on restive local communities and ensuring the relatively smooth functioning of the basic city services. The prolonged occupation of these regions without internal acquiescence, however, is not a feasible strategy.

Obstacles for Sustained Occupation

Various studies of foreign occupation suggest that it regularly imposes significant costs on the occupying force due to the [rise](#) in terrorist attacks and the outbreak of insurgencies and [nonviolent](#) resistance campaigns. One [study](#) of successful occupations differentiated between security occupations, meant to prevent the occupied territory from becoming a threat, and comprehensive occupations, that add attempts to shape the political and economic system of the occupied area. While the extent of Russia’s occupation goals in Ukraine remains unclear, President Putin’s stated intention to “demilitarize” Ukraine suggests that he will, at minimum, seek to impose his security preferences on the occupied territories. Hence, a successful occupation should ultimately allow Russia to advance its security interests in the region over the longer term.

Based on a review of the historical record of foreign occupations, the study points to three conditions that could allow an occupying power to achieve its goals: 1) a recognition that occupation is necessary and potentially beneficial (to rebuild the political or economic system of the country); 2) a perception that an occupier can provide protection from a third-party threat; 3) a credible deadline for ending the occupation set by an occupying power. All of these conditions presume a degree of acceptance of the foreign occupation by the local communities and a belief in its beneficial effects. By contrast, as Edelstein [observes](#), the greatest impediment to successful occupation is “the nationalism of the occupied population.”

Surveys conducted in the weeks preceding the Russian invasion already [indicated](#) a rising willingness to repel Russian “military intervention” across almost all regions of Ukraine. Between December 2021 and February 2022, the share of Ukrainians willing to participate in armed resistance to Russia grew from 33.3% to 37.3%.² Strikingly, in all regions more people expressed a commitment to an armed response than to participation in a non-violent resistance. Overall, in early February 2022 more than half of respondents across Ukraine (57%) suggested that they would be contributing to some type of resistance against Russia. This resolve strengthened even further after the first week of the Russian invasion. In a March 1 survey, 59% of Ukrainians said they were certain to take up arms to defend Ukraine and another 21% said they were likely to do so. In southern Ukraine, which came under direct Russian attack early on, a majority (53%) said they were fully ready to fight back militarily.

This readiness for armed resistance among Ukrainians in the southern and eastern regions now is far greater than it was in spring of 2014. In an April 2014 [survey](#), the highest share of respondents ready to fight a Russian military invasion was in Khersons’ka oblast (36.9%). In two oblasts in Donbas, which had already witnessed its first violent clashes, only 11.9% (Donets’ka) and 10.7% (Luhans’ka) indicated a willingness to fight Russian aggression through the use of force, while slightly more respondents in each said they would welcome the appearance of Russian troops.

One of the reasons for a starkly different reaction to the possibility of a Russian invasion in 2014 and 2022 may be a different view of the motives attributed to Russian leadership. In 2014 almost half of respondents in Donets’ka (47%) and Luhans’ka (44%) oblasts and a third of respondents (32.6%) in all southeastern regions said that Russia was justly protecting the interests of Russian-speakers in Ukraine. By contrast, in a March 2022 [poll](#), only 6% of respondents in the east and 1% in all other regions interpreted the military invasion as an attempt to protect the Russian-speaking population. The majority of

² In all regions except three Eastern Ukrainian oblasts (Kharkivs’ka, Donets’ka, Luhans’ka) the share of respondents willing to join armed resistance was above 30 percent based on the KIIS poll conducted in February 5 – 22, 2022.

respondents in all regions of Ukraine view the goal of the Russian invasion in starkly existential terms as a “full destruction of the Ukrainian people.”³

The brutality of the Russian military campaign, the siege tactics of major cities that increase human suffering, and the indiscriminate killing of civilians in different parts of the country using cluster munitions and other powerful explosives are only likely to reinforce this view. Any attempts to occupy new areas of the country, then, will produce not only broader non-violent resistance and sabotage Russia-backed authorities, but also give rise to an [insurgency](#) campaign likely to be sustained through [external](#) backing. The failure to coopt local groups into governance structures and the need to administer towns using Russian personnel could further [strengthen](#) resistance activity. This will impose additional costs on the Russian state and undermine its capacity to effectively govern the territories it captured. It will also create a permanent instability on Russia’s western borders and raise the risks of violence spilling over into Russia and of a direct clash with NATO member-states. Hence, any initial plans to divide Ukraine along the German model or to replicate the DNR/LNR in other oblasts need to be adjusted to the new reality of widespread Ukrainian defiance of Russia’s rule.

Collateral Occupation as an Alternative

The only feasible alternative for Russia is now to use the newly seized territories as collateral in ongoing talks with Ukrainian leadership. Moscow could then offer to cede them back to Ukraine in return for Ukraine’s fulfillment of key terms. This approach allows Russia to avoid the costs of establishing its own governance structures and, instead, rely on local elected officials to ensure the continued provision of basic services. Without necessarily coopting local authorities, Russia could still dampen internal backlash by allowing municipal officials to continue working for their communities.

Russia could expect collateral occupation to incentivize Ukrainian leaders to make costly concessions once they realize that Ukraine lacks capacity in the short-term to reclaim these territories militarily. In some ways, however, collateral occupation may also complicate the bargaining process. First, Putin already articulated his claim that the entire Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts should be part of the LNR/DNR. This would mean that the parties could not simply agree to return to pre-war borders as part of the settlement. Secondly, Russia’s capture of the southern parts of Ukraine fueled discussion of establishing a “land bridge” between Crimea and the rest of the Russian state. In the absence of other tangible territorial gains, this may strengthen those within the ruling elite who advocate against any settlement with Ukraine that would require Russia to give up its land connection to the peninsula. Thirdly, ongoing occupation has already been accompanied by coercion of local officials, journalists, and civic activists. The only oblast that Russia managed to

³ According to Rating survey conducted in March 12 – 13, 2022 this view is shared by 65% of respondents in the West, 54% in the Center, 51% in the South and 54% in the East.

occupy fully, Khersons'ka, also [displayed](#) the strongest will to fight Russian occupation and the [greatest](#) skepticism about the Novorossiia narrative as the basis for Russia's territorial claims compared to the rest of southeast Ukraine.

This suggests that a prolonged collateral occupation would require increasingly greater repressiveness on the Russian side. If such repressions would particularly entail widespread civilian abuse, as documented in Bucha, the prospects for a diplomatic settlement would dim further. Russia can then use collateral occupation for bargaining purposes only if the talks with Ukraine are finalized rapidly. If negotiations are stalled, Russia would have to shift its occupation strategy and face the uncertainty of rising costs from civil resistance and administrative hurdles to keep the territories it seized.

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The Changing “De facto State Playbook” FROM OPPORTUNISM TO STRATEGIC CALCULATION

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We see clear signs that Russia has been applying a “de facto state playbook” in the Ukrainian territories it has seized since the beginning of its war on Ukraine. This is notable, not least of which is Moscow’s current goal of [expanding](#) its occupation zone to Transnistria to include Ukraine’s entire Black Sea region. Russia has generally changed its objective from having political leverage over Ukraine to enlarging its territorial control based on the geostrategic and geoeconomic value of the land (and waterways). Despite the relative military parity between Russia and Ukraine, which makes for the slow beginning of a war of attrition, both sides are holding on to the idea of “winning.”

Consequently, a peace agreement between Ukraine and Russia is not a realistic prospect. Kyiv has said it will not accept the loss of territories occupied by Russia since 2014, while Moscow is entrenching and trying to expand its occupation militarily, politically, and economically. Ukraine can writhe toward deadlock, win back occupied territories at the cost of many human lives, or agree to the loss of land and the establishment of a new line of demarcation. Certainly, any agreement that consolidates Russian control over the already occupied territories while pressure points are still changing is a worst-case scenario for Kyiv and its Western allies. The remaining option is to buttress resolve and assistance, and make no territorial concessions.

Plans and Playbooks

The emergence of de facto states in the context of the dissolution of the Soviet Union created opportunities for Moscow to maintain a degree of influence over several former

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republics. The idea was to leverage this influence to shape their foreign and domestic policies, with the main cases being Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (Belarus aside). In Moldova and Georgia, Russia managed to establish a military presence on the ground in the form of so-called CIS peacekeeping troops written into ceasefire agreements mediated in the early 1990s. In the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, such a presence was only established in the aftermath of the 2020 war and involved a Turkish contingent, given the role that Turkey played in the conflict. The usefulness of this leverage, however, is debatable. It is perhaps greatest in the case of Armenia, which is highly dependent on Russia as a guarantor of its security, something that was further underlined by the 2020 war.

In Georgia, the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and the subsequent recognition by Russia of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia indicate some of the limits of the leverage attainable through Moscow-controlled de facto states. While South Ossetia was the more “loyal” partner to Russia, it was militarily more vulnerable. On the other hand, Abkhazia had always tried to chart a course of exploiting as much of its situational autonomy from Russia as possible and was less reliable from the Kremlin’s perspective. Therefore, part of the rationale for the recognition of Abkhazia is also likely to have been a desire to limit Sukhumi’s ability to offset Russian influence through engagement with Tbilisi or the EU.

In Moldova and its Transnistrian region, Russian influence also has gradually diminished. A pro-Western majority has become well-entrenched in Moldovan politics with the 2020 presidential and 2021 parliamentary elections. The region’s growing economic integration has slowly offset Russian leverage over Transnistria into the European/EU market as a result of the extension of Moldova’s DCFTA since 2016. While the competitiveness of the Transnistrian economy still depends significantly on Russian gas deliveries and living standards in the region remain, at least partially, tied to Russian pension supplements and remittances from Transnistrian labor migrants in Russia, the fact that approximately 70 percent of Transnistrian [exports](#) go to Moldova, Ukraine, and the EU creates important “counter-dependencies” that put limits on how far Russia can push the Transnistrian card short of a significant escalation. Such escalation now appears more likely to be among Moscow’s current strategic plans—despite a clear lack of enthusiasm among the Transnistrian population and leadership.

Planting Flags in Ukraine

Russia’s de facto state playbook in the Ukrainian territories is similar to, but not the same as, the one it used there in 2014. What appears to have changed is that 1) Russia now no longer seeks to maximize its security by using de facto states as a political lever, and 2) it is increasingly focused on expanding territorial control for the value of the territory. In 2014, rather than taking advantage of local conflicts, the Kremlin (as it did in the early 1990s elsewhere) actively created opportunities for establishing de facto states. However, the usefulness of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk

People's Republic (LPR) to influence the domestic and foreign policy of Kyiv was limited and diminished over time. Ukraine's refusal to bow to Russian pressure to reintegrate the DPR and LPR into Ukraine on Moscow's terms through the implementation of the Minsk agreements created a dead end. It led to a low-intensity conflict along the line of contact in the Donbas that yielded ever-diminishing returns compared to the economic and political cost Russia incurred from propping up the puppet regimes there.

From the start, the creation and maintenance of the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR were seen as a second-best option from Moscow's perspective, compared to regaining control over all of Ukraine through a pro-Russian government in Kyiv after the Euromaidan revolution of 2013-14. And even this second-best option was a scaled-down version of Russian attempts at creating "Novorossiya" on nine Ukrainian regions.

The other important difference relates to how Russia has used the de facto states it established in the occupied areas of Donbas. Following their establishment through societal destabilization and entrenched occupation by Russian and Russian proxy forces, Moscow recognized the independence of the occupied territories and the whole of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and then used them in its war of aggression against Ukraine since February 24, 2022.

Geostrategic Shifts in the Azov and Black Sea Regions

Moscow's "forced" playbook is being applied again in territories it has seized so far in the 2022 war, particularly in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. Russian tactics of establishing control have barely changed: new pro-Moscow elites are imposed at the beginning of a process to "legitimize" new de facto states. This is then followed by economic measures, such as the introduction of the ruble and talk of local referenda based on the establishment of "people's republics." Russian special forces deployed to these regions, and their local proxies push the pro-Ukrainian populations out of the temporarily occupied territories, killing and torturing pro-Ukrainian opinion leaders, intimidating the remaining population, and radically restricting their rights. More recently, this has also included abductions and forced population [transfers](#) to Russia, and attempts to [re-route](#) internet traffic to Russian servers.

Given the change in policy regarding the use of the DPR and LPR—from presumed leverage over Ukrainian domestic and foreign policy to launchpads of the invasion of Ukraine—the trajectory of any new de facto states is likely to be a fast-track to Russian recognition of their independence and subsequent annexation (as with Crimea) or de facto integration into the Russian Federation (as with Abkhazia and South Ossetia). This indicates a shift in Russian thinking about the value of these territories. They are now less considered as a tool of political leverage over Kyiv and rather as a military-strategic pressure point, with the value of territory per se that counts as a geostrategic resource. This also implies that Russia's whole approach to the use of de facto states has changed. The

Kremlin is no longer trying to maximize its security by using de facto states as levers of influence over domestic and foreign policy choices in the respective neighboring states. Rather, it is one of maximizing power by increasing direct or proxy control over geostrategically valuable territories.

The territories occupied by Russia as of the end of May 2022 stretch along the coast of the Sea of Azov from Novoazovsk to Kherson, including most of Kherson and part of the Zaporizhzhia region. They constitute a highly valuable land corridor from the internationally recognized Russian-Ukrainian border to Crimea. In addition, they could serve as a base for the occupation of neighboring territories (and the creation of other de facto states according to the playbook) and the projection of power into other parts of Ukraine.

Russian progress in this regard has been very limited, but this has not stopped Moscow from pursuing its ambitious and worrying [goals](#) for “stage two” of the war: the [conquest](#) of all of Ukraine’s Black Sea coast and extending the existing land corridor all the way to Ukraine’s borders with Moldova, a country in the sights of the Kremlin. Moreover, as demonstrated by the forcible mobilization of the male population aged 18-65 into the armed forces of the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR, these de facto states in the making are also a source of “cannon fodder” for Russia’s own depleted invasion force.

Suppose Russia succeeds in establishing further such territories that it occupies directly or by proxy. In that case, it also creates a potential opportunity for Moscow to hold on to them as part of a ceasefire agreement. Such a Korean scenario, with the equivalent of the 49th parallel potentially running along the banks of the Dnipro river, would be highly disadvantageous for Ukraine as it would entrench – although in theory not permanently – Russia’s illegal land grab. Add to that the significantly higher degree of violence [against](#) the civilian population in the current war, compared to that in 2014-15, and the more brutal tactics of societal destabilization applied by Russia and its proxy forces, the likelihood of Russia cementing its control of these expanding territories further increases if Kyiv is forced to trade any “temporary” recognitions of Russian-occupied territories for a ceasefire and the subsequent slim prospect of a peace agreement.

Yet, the longer the current war continues, there is also a danger that the Kremlin will regain the military initiative in areas that it considers strategically more important and more feasible for territorial expansion. From this perspective, the outright destruction of cities, civilian and industrial infrastructure, and the unmitigated terrorizing of civilian populations are aimed at forcing Kyiv to surrender on President Vladimir Putin’s terms in order to avoid a complete economic, infrastructural, and humanitarian catastrophe. This would enable Moscow to establish control of territories east of the Dnipro and potentially also of the remainder of the Ukrainian Black Sea coast, [connecting](#) Russia, the DPR, and LPR with Transnistria and turning Ukraine into a land-locked country.

The success of such a Russian strategy would immediately also raise the specter of an extension of Moscow’s playbook into Moldova proper, beyond Transnistria, in pursuing its tactics of societal destabilization and subsequent creation of de facto states, for example, in Gagauzia or around Balti. In fact, Putin might even feel emboldened to try and apply this playbook, perhaps in a scaled-down, “deniable” version, to ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking territories in Latvia and Estonia – if not with any realistic prospect of success but with the aim of creating further pressure points and instability.

Conclusions

The worst-case scenario is a ceasefire or peace agreement for Kyiv (and its Western partners) that consolidates Russian control over already occupied territories. It would mean shifting the original line of contact further west and additional losses of economic and human resources, access to the ports of the Azov and Black Seas, and natural resources for Kyiv. Moreover, in the occupied territories, it would further deepen the humanitarian catastrophe for the population, including economic deprivation and large-scale violations of human rights and political repression that have been common in the DPR and LPR in the newly occupied territories.

President Volodymyr Zelensky has so far ruled out concessions on Ukraine’s territorial integrity in negotiations with Russia, and recent statements from U.S. Defense Secretary [Lloyd Austin](#) (“even more security assistance for Ukraine”) and UK Foreign Secretary [Liz Truss](#) (“continuing to supply Ukraine with the weapons they need to win”) indicate that Kyiv’s Western partners share this view. As sanctions against Moscow begin to take a real toll on the ability of the Russian economy to sustain the war effort and as Western military support seemingly begins to shift the balance of power on the battlefield, a Ukrainian victory may appear possible. But neither Ukraine nor its partners should underestimate the short- and long-term human sacrifices that will be necessary to achieve it.

Vladimir Putin's Casus Belli for Invading Ukraine

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On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a “special military operation” in Ukraine. Although the scale of the invasion caught many analysts by surprise, this was not the first time Russia had invaded the sovereign territory of another state in the Putin era. The rationale for two earlier episodes – the 2008 war with Georgia and the 2014 assault on Crimea and Donbas – can help shed light on the motivations behind the war of 2022. Because the perceived national interests of states evolve, we may glean insights into how the Kremlin's, and in particular, Putin's, view of geopolitics has changed by asking the following questions about those events: How does Russia justify military aggression? What audiences are its leaders addressing? Finally, what does the rationale tell us about the Kremlin's beliefs and likely war aims?

The analysis reveals both continuities and radical breaks in Russia's casus belli. The Georgia War rested on President Dmitry Medvedev's claim to defend compatriots in South Ossetia against Georgian assault. Despite the geopolitical backdrop, he made little overt reference to countering the West or NATO enlargement. Putin justified the Crimea invasion using the same humanitarian rationale – protecting Russians – but also laid out a series of grievances about the West's neglect of Russian interests. Both leaders sought to appeal to audiences both in Russia and outside it.

Finally, in announcing his 2022 invasion, Putin invoked both prior rationales, but also warned of an existential threat to Russia itself. Oddly, though, given the supposed stakes, Putin promised his audience only a limited and restrained military response. Putin was also unable to point to any immediate provocation requiring urgent military action, let alone the full-scale invasion of a sovereign country. Given these contradictions and shaky pretexts, unlike in the two previous episodes, it appears that Putin was no longer concerned with international opinion.

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Real or Asserted Perils?

Any perpetrator invading a weaker sovereign state will face the challenge of justifying its actions to the world. As one might expect, Russia repeatedly sought to couch its actions in terms of [self-defense](#), a move intended to garner sympathy for its cause and pose as an enforcer of international law. To make this case, Putin-Medvedev offered rationales that shifted in emphasis along two dimensions. First is whether the purported threat that justifies war applies to the Russian state or to co-ethnics in the neighboring state in need of “protection.” The second is whether the threat is imminent or long-term. Aside from claims rooted in self-defense, Kremlin rhetoric at times relied on other pretenses, including the invocation of precedents, charges of Western hypocrisy, and historical claims, which were variously marshaled to appeal to distinct audiences.

The Georgia War in 2008

Although the 2008 war was ostensibly about Georgia, it came amid broader tensions with the West. At the NATO Bucharest Summit in April, Bush Administration officials worked behind the scenes to craft a statement declaring that both Georgia and Ukraine would one day become members. In the [larger scheme](#) of Russia’s grievances against the West (more below), Georgia’s pro-American government did not pose a direct threat to Russian territory but instead represented an outpost of American power. Russia used the August war against Georgia’s breakaway territories to signal its displeasure with the West’s disregard for Russian interests and the enlargement of NATO in particular.

Yet the Kremlin justified its attack more narrowly on the grounds of defending compatriots from attacks from Tbilisi. In the course of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili’s efforts to reintegrate Georgian territory, Georgian forces and South Ossetian separatists were engaged in sporadic skirmishes in the months [before](#) the war. The Russian government had also been distributing passports to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, making them citizens of the Russian Federation overnight. Thus, Russian President Medvedev appropriated the language of “responsibility to protect” to justify an invasion of the breakaway territories. He [blamed](#) Georgia for an “act of aggression” in violation of international law” and [asserted](#) that “civilians, women, children, and old people are dying today in South Ossetia, and the majority of them are citizens of the Russian Federation.” He [called](#) the invasion a “peace enforcement operation” to protect civilians and “force the Georgian side to (agree to) peace.” This justification self-consciously mirrored and parodied the rationale for NATO’s bombing of Serbia in defense of Kosovar Albanians in 1999 and Western states’ subsequent recognition of Kosovo’s independence in February 2008, both of which the Russian foreign policy establishment [decried](#). Russia followed its intervention with a “peacekeeping” operation through which troops continued to occupy the region.

Later comments continued to frame the war narrowly as a defense of vulnerable citizens consistent with international law. On August 26, Medvedev [accused](#) Saakashvili of violating international law by committing genocide. One month after the cease-fire, Prime Minister Putin, suspected by many of really deciding foreign policy, still [referred](#) only to the casus belli of quelling instability in South Ossetia without emphasizing the broader east-west confrontation. Despite the geopolitical backdrop, neither Medvedev nor Putin claimed that Georgia represented a threat to the Russian state via NATO.

The Annexation of Crimea in 2014

An overarching narrative in the Putin era has it that NATO and the West seek to encircle, dismantle, or humiliate Russia. Accompanying this is a long lineage of claims about how areas on Russia's borders serve as proxies for the West to reach Russia. In this conception, the United States, EU, or NATO controls or arms states or militant groups, which serve as staging points or ideological laboratories to weaken Russia through its soft underbelly. This narrative – post-Soviet regions as the tip of the spear – is then [used to build](#) public support and justify action against those proxies since Russia cannot attack NATO directly. This rationale, implicit in Russia's motivation for initiating the war with Georgia, was articulated more explicitly when it came to Ukraine.

The Euromaidan protests in opposition to President Viktor Yanukovich were about both corruption and foreign policy. In objecting to Yanukovich's last-minute decision not to sign the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU, the protests represented a pro-West, and therefore anti-Russian, geopolitical tilt. Once Yanukovich fled and leaders of the Euromaidan formed a government, Russia appeared to suffer a replay of its defeat after the 2004 Orange Revolution. Although the 2014 protests were a grassroots initiative, Putin presumably saw only the latest deceitful American salvo – overthrowing a legitimately elected president – aimed at undermining Russia's interests.

Putin gave his most comprehensive rationale for ordering the occupation and annexation of Crimea only after the operation had already concluded. His speech on March 18, 2014, which was ostensibly intended to celebrate the vote to join Crimea with Russia, had two parts: playing up the threat to Russian speakers in Ukraine and rehashing his litany of grievances against the West.

After recounting a politicized history emphasizing Crimea's ties to Russia, Putin argued that Russia was forced to intervene on humanitarian grounds. He [claimed](#) the new government "wanted to seize power and would stop short of nothing. They resorted to terror, murder, and riots. Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites executed this coup." In response, "the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol turned to Russia for help in defending their rights and lives."

After invoking the “well-known Kosovo precedent” to justify Crimea’s engineered referendum to join Russia, Putin then moved on to articulate his resentment toward the West for its hypocrisy and neglect of Russia’s interests. Whereas “Russia strived to engage in dialogue” with the West, “we saw no reciprocal steps. On the contrary, they have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before an accomplished fact. This happened with NATO’s expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders.”

In the most memorable line of the speech, Putin argued that “Russia found itself in a position it could not retreat from. If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard.” In other words, Russia would no longer stand by and accept the West’s arrogance and dismissiveness of Russia’s interests. “Snapping back” by forcing a change in the territory was, at the time, a drastic step, signaling the depth of Russia’s displeasure.

The annexation of Crimea was presented as a legal and humanitarian action that, incidentally, enabled Russia to demonstrate its hard power where NATO was impotent to stop it. Yet, despite the heated rhetoric, Putin made no claim that Russia itself was threatened.

Putin’s Unfinished Business in Ukraine

Following a historical screed that Putin published in July 2021, in which he denied the existence of Ukrainian statehood, he returned to his geopolitical grievances, but with unusual intensity, on February 24, 2022. He began by railing against NATO expansion and enumerating the same grievances as in 2014: Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, and accusations of Western hypocrisy and bad faith. Then, Putin went beyond previous rhetoric and [warned](#) of a direct threat to Russia: “As NATO expands to the east, with every passing year, the situation for our country is getting worse and more dangerous.”

If his position was not clear enough, he made clear that he viewed the stakes as existential:

And for our country, this is ultimately a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a people. And this is not an exaggeration – it is true. This is a real threat not just to our interests, but to the very existence of our state, its sovereignty. This is the very red line that has been talked about many times. They crossed it.

Putin then reverted to a familiar pretext, “genocide against the millions of people living [in the Donbas] who rely only on Russia, only on us.” The aggressors were the Ukrainian government comprised of “extreme nationalists and Neo-Nazis,” similar to “gangs of Ukrainian nationalists, Hitler’s accomplices” during World War II. Yet they were a threat not only to Russians in Ukraine: “Russia’s clash with these forces is inevitable. It is only a matter of time: they are getting ready, they are waiting for the right time. Now they also claim to acquire nuclear weapons.” This triumvirate of existential threats, alliterative in

English—NATO, Nazis, and nukes—paved the way for Putin’s pursuit of “demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine.”

Reading between the lines, Russia was targeting Ukraine to punish the West for its many transgressions because Ukraine, *not* in NATO, was the West’s Achilles Heel—similar to the rationale of previous invasions. This time, however, in pursuing regime change and demilitarization via a full-scale war, Putin also sought to punish Ukrainians for electing pro-Western leaders and striving to exit Russia’s geopolitical orbit.

Putin finally spoke directly to his archenemies: “Whoever tries to hinder us, or threaten our country or our people, should know that Russia’s response will be immediate and will lead you to consequences that you have never faced in your history.”

Conclusion: Contradictions and Overconfidence

In contrast to the rationale for the previous invasions, Putin pulled out all the rhetorical stops to paint a dire picture of the forces arrayed against Russia: a long-term buildup of forces in Eastern Europe and a short-term plot by Nazis to acquire nuclear weapons, backed by NATO. To an uninformed observer, Putin’s scowling demeanor and steely resolve would be understandable on the premise that time is working against Russia and war is inevitable.

However, two contradictions emerge from Putin’s latest *casus belli*. First, the timing of Russia’s invasion was arbitrary, as there was no imminent threat. The absence of anything on the order of a “Russian 9/11” led some analysts to speculate that Russia would manufacture a false flag attack, as Biden Administration explicitly warned. Yet, despite some disputed claims amid murky circumstances in the Donbas, there was [no provocation](#) that Putin could point to as the catalyst for urgent military action.

Second, given the scale and seriousness of the purported threat facing Russia, one might expect Putin to make a case for a large-scale war to roll back the Western advance. Yet he announced only a “special military operation” that explicitly excluded “the occupation of Ukrainian territories” and even promised, “We are not going to impose anything on anyone by force.” Instead of beating the war drums to prepare the public for a massive societal mobilization and potential geopolitical upheaval, the Kremlin had denied for months that Russia was planning any military action against Ukraine. By not acknowledging that Russia was about to fight a war, Putin could not expect to benefit from rallying effects.

The disconnect between the apocalyptic rhetoric of threats to Russia, the supposedly limited response, and the reality of a full-scale invasion implies that Putin expected a quick victory with minimal Russian casualties and assumed Russians would not obtain

information independent of official sources. After all, a short, victorious war would not require any sacrifice from the Russian population.

Putin's casus belli also indicated that he had moved beyond caring about public opinion outside Russia. In previous speeches, his broadsides against American hegemony and NATO expansion may have appealed to some Western audiences, while the claim to be upholding international law provided the semblance of an argument that Russia's supporters abroad could marshal in its defense. Now, however, Putin's war rationale rested on outlandish claims about Ukraine, including of a Nazi government headed by a Jewish president, and an imminent danger to Russia's continuing existence despite the absence of any observable changes on its western border. Putin's words signaled his willingness to break decisively with the West before the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine made that break irrevocable.

Similarities Stain the Kremlin's Warfare on Chechens and Ukrainians

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The Russian war in Ukraine continues with daily news reports from besieged cities documenting humanitarian disasters, growing civilian casualties, and fleeing refugees. Many commentators have compared this war in Ukraine initiated by President Vladimir Putin with the one that he waged in Chechnya at the start of his presidency in 1999, known as the second Chechen war. However, Moscow's current military campaign has more similarities with the first Russo-Chechen war, which was launched by President Boris Yeltsin in 1994, and which notably ended in disgrace for the Russian army in 1996. Even if their territorial and population sizes are vastly different, numerous similarities between the Russian wars in Chechnya and the current war in Ukraine can be pinpointed. Examples include blurred strategies and identity issues, demoralized and violent Russian troops, and indiscriminate bombing campaigns meant to destroy civilians and culture.

Prizing Local Government Loyalty

Out of six main similarities, the **first** is the driving force behind the resistance. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the population of both Chechnya and Ukraine experienced the strengthening of national identity,, a process accelerating in reaction to Russian aggressiveness. So grew peoples' willingness to fight and die for their nations and countries. This can be observed in particular with the Russian campaigns in Chechnya and Ukraine, both of which were/are two-part armed conflicts. There were two distinct wars in Chechnya, from 1994 to 1996 and 1999 to 2009. In Ukraine, the current military campaign followed the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, which has been going on since 2014. In both cases, in the "interim" period, nationalist sentiment and resolve grew stronger among the defenders. This applies not only to the people of Chechen and Ukrainian ethnicities, but also to the Russian population that lives in these

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places. Ukraine and Chechnya witnessed many cases when ethnic Russians volunteered to fight against the aggression coming from the Russian Federation.

The underestimation and inclusiveness of the Ukrainian national identity, as Russian opposition politician Ilia Yashin [observed](#), was a gross miscalculation by Putin, who counted on administrative collapses and warm welcomes. Regions that the Kremlin thought of as “Russian” in Ukraine’s south and east, and the cities of Mariupol, Kharkiv, Melitopol, and others, have resisted Putin’s aggression either peacefully or by actively joining the military defense. In sum, both peoples were very strongly committed to the sovereignty and defense of their nation against Russian hostility, and the trajectory of such sentiment increases.

The **second** similarity is the apparent lack of motivation of the Russian troops and the absence of clear enthusiasm for the aggression by a large part of Russian society. Before and during the first Chechen war, there were many cases when high-ranking Russian military officers and members of civil society publicly protested the war and even sacrificed their careers opposing the Yeltsin regime. This disagreement, to a large extent, was coming from the bonds that both nations still possessed after decades of living in the same country. People had good memories, shared work experiences, and mixed marriages, which made the war incomprehensible for many.

Arguably, there is no strong inter-ethnic hostility between Russians and Ukrainian. This may change rapidly for the worse depending on events during the war. One reason may be, as Paul Goode [documented](#), that media coverage shown in Russia of the war has been lacking consistent messaging: Ukrainians are depicted as kin of the Russian nation, but state propaganda also [shows](#) them as Nazis, all the while claiming mass support for Putin’s actions. The Kremlin has tried to dehumanize Ukrainians and label them as dangerous to Russia; it did not put as much effort in the Chechen case while preparing for the second war. [According](#) to Norwegian researcher Julie Wilhelmsen, it took years for Russian propaganda to make the second Chechen war acceptable to most Russians, even though societal xenophobia had already existed toward the Chechens back then. There was not obviously massive xenophobia toward the Ukrainians amongst Russians just two months ago.

Third, similar to the first campaign in Chechnya, Russia’s military goals in its war on Ukraine are muddled – and yet, the simplicity and immorality of an unprovoked invasion of a sovereign state make regional and global opposition to Russia’s actions very easy. When Chechnya first declared independence, Russia said it aimed to “restore the constitutional order.” Disarming of the “Chechen illegal gangs” and dismounting the “power-usurped government” were other often-named goals of the war. In an echo of today’s misplaced Russian confidence, Russian General Pavel Grachev in 1994 said he could take over Grozny in hours with two regiments and [overthrow](#) Chechnya’s leader Dzhokhar Dudayev. In Ukraine, Moscow has provided a variety of rationales and goals

for its “special military operation,” initially deciding to (only) recognize the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk in order to stop the “genocide” of ethnic Russians in those areas. However, the planned military operation was projected well beyond those regions, which necessitated more and different justifications. Hence, the Russian leadership [included](#) goals such as “denazification,” “demilitarization,” “stopping Ukraine from getting nuclear weapons,” “stopping a NATO attack,” and stopping it from [building](#) a “plutonium-based dirty bomb.” Denazification has no meaning in practical terms: it is not a problem in Ukraine (the president is Jewish), and there is no method for the Russian military to identify Nazis among Ukrainians. The lack of clarity on military goals undermines the morale of the Russian army, which was rather low even before the actual invasion, in both cases under focus.

The **fourth** similarity between the two wars can be drawn from Russia’s political strategy. Same as in Chechnya, Russia tried and did not manage to discredit the existing elected governments at the time of the invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, the decision to start these wars resulted in enormous popular support for the legitimate local authorities. In preparation for both wars, Russia used nearby territories to prepare for political transitions and mount attacks. In Chechnya in the 1990s, Russia set up a puppet government (a Chechen “Novorossiya”) in the northern districts where it trained and armed “opposition” forces, using the area also as a bridgehead and rear guard during the fighting. Similar to the “governments” in Luhansk and Donetsk, the Chechen opposition lacked popularity and could not claim leadership of the whole republic. The puppet government that Russia set up in Grozny was literally residing in the military airport, ready to be evacuated at any moment of danger.

The attempts to use local interlocutors to advance a Russian political agenda were more successful during the second Chechen campaign when Russia recruited Akhmat Kadyrov, father of Ramzan, and the mufti during the pre-war time of Chechen de facto independence in 1991-1994. The same plan might have worked for Ukraine if Russia had been able to find someone like him. However, every potential candidate to lead a pro-Russian government realized that they would exist in direct opposition to the people of Ukraine. For instance, Yuri Boiko, who [competed](#) in the presidential elections of 2019 and had, to some extent, a pro-Russian agenda, quickly and clearly distanced himself from leadership roles. Russia has not found a Ukrainian Kadyrov willing to side with the Kremlin against his own nation. As the military campaign falters and as Russia’s coffers for [buying support](#) increasingly empty, the prospect of finding a fitting pro-Russian leader for Ukraine dims by the day.

The **fifth** point of comparison in the wars in Chechnya and Ukraine is international media coverage and the support of the world community. On a much smaller scale than in the case of Ukraine, morally, the world was on the side of the Chechens during the first Russo-Chechen war. To a large extent, this was due to the international media coverage and work of journalists who were welcomed and protected by the Chechens. Their reports

depicted the war and suffering of the Chechen people, which encouraged the support of the world population and pressured the governments to criticize Russian actions, even if there were no sanctions imposed on Russia at that time. Realizing this, for the second campaign in Chechnya, President Vladimir Putin closed the access of foreign journalists to Chechnya while at the same time [taking control](#) over the main independent media outlets and television channels in Russia. By doing this, he allowed the actions of the Russian military to go unseen, as he unleashed ruthlessness and terror on the civilian population.

The Kremlin's control over domestic media during the second Chechen campaign ensured the dominance of Russia's view of the war and allowed for the creation of an extremely negative image of Chechens as dangerous terrorists who blow up apartment buildings. This accusation was later [debunked](#), but the September 11 attack in the United States and the ensuing global war on terrorism favored Moscow's attitude, which painted an independent Chechnya as an unstable Islamist republic. At the time, Washington received Russia's support in the Iraq and Afghan wars while ignoring the atrocities in Chechnya. Russia cannot exercise any such media control in Ukraine. Technological and Internet progress, numerous and evolving social media platforms, possibilities for international media to connect with and cover the Ukrainian side, and the size of the Ukrainian diaspora in many countries ensure an unstoppable information stream, which is disadvantageous for Russia. Limiting access to independent foreign media and strengthening domestic propaganda has been the only option for the Kremlin, but that only works in Russia on Russian citizens. While there were some similarities in sympathy for Chechens in the first war and for Ukrainians, there is a vast difference in media coverage and international support between the second Chechen war and the Ukrainian war, which has also been framed as an invasion of Europe itself.

Sixth, unfortunately, in both the Chechen and Ukrainian wars, we see little to no consideration of the human lives lost owing to Russia's military actions. The indiscriminate bombing and shelling, as well as the apparent targeting of civilian populations, the cutting off of humanitarian food and medical supplies, and the blaming of the opposing side for casualties, were widely used tactics of the Russian political and military leadership during the wars in Chechnya. The justification for this inhumanity happening in Ukraine is the same. Russian propaganda [accuses](#) "Nazis" of "hiding behind civilians or inside populated buildings," a tactic that is turning Ukrainian cities into the completely razed Grozny of 1995, or the Dresden of World War II. It is no surprise that Susan Glasser on CNN [likened](#) Putin's strategy in Ukraine to the "Groznyfication" of the war.

It is important to note that the targeting of civilians is not just a war crime or merely an inhumane approach to war-fighting. It is strategic in the sense that it stops collective action in the form of crowds or mass protests, and it also literally weakens urban populations in terms of their ability even to survive, which puts additional pressure on

the Ukrainian government to accept a ceasefire or an unfair peace deal. The record-breaking refugee flows are evidence that many Ukrainians see the danger of staying in place, given the increasing threat of Russian bombs, artillery, and missiles, making resistance even by just remaining in the country very costly. We have not seen thus far retaliatory violence against Russian civilians by Ukrainians within Russia, which did occur in the context of the Chechen war, [namely](#) in the campaign to “bring the war to Russia.” One of the most infamous actions of this kind was the hospital hostage crisis in [Budyonovsk in 1995](#), which became a key example of Chechen terrorism in Russia.

On the other hand, there are succinct but substantial differences between the wars in Chechnya and Ukraine: the size of the territories and populations, and the deep external support. Ukraine is thirty-five times larger than Chechnya territorially and population-wise. It is the second-largest country in Europe after Russia, almost as big as Texas, whereas Chechnya is about the size of Connecticut. The number of troops and administrators required to take over Ukraine is enormous in comparison to what was needed in Chechnya. Also, while there were some foreign fighters in the second Chechen war as there are now in Ukraine, the latter receives massive levels of foreign assistance from numerous countries. Ukraine’s third-party assistance both monetary and arms, and its large territory (and entry points), make it far more difficult to control than Chechnya.

Conclusion

The goal of any war is peace. It is a specific vision of peace that wars are waged for. This analysis suggests that Putin may have imagined peace in Ukraine similar to Chechnya after the campaign of 1999-2009, with a local government loyal to him/Russia. The outcome of the Ukrainian war, however, is currently looking much more like the first Chechen war of the mid-1990s when, after an eighteen-month-long military conflict, many civilian casualties, and Russian military losses, Yeltsin [signed](#) a peace treaty with the Chechen Republic.

The unprecedented unity of the world against Russian aggression, its financial, military, and moral support of Ukraine, and the readiness of businesses and governments to support economic sanctions against Russia, have made it hard for Russia to achieve, thus far, the scenario of the second Chechen war. However, in the face of domestic economic collapse and the prospect of further military losses, Russia might resort more and more to massive bombing and population cleansing. The cruelty of this strategy, as the second Chechen war demonstrated, can not only create a deep hatred between the peoples of Russia and Ukraine, but the civilian and humanitarian toll, if it continues to worsen and if it lasts for a long time, could also weaken national resolve, and swing the population toward pressuring the government to accept Russian terms. The time necessary for this change depends on the morale of the Ukrainian people, their readiness to sacrifice their own lives, and their willingness to fight long-term to protect their state.

PONARS ● NEW APPROACHES
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Dominating Ukraine's Sky

PONARS Eurasia Commentary

April 2020

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The demands to provide a no-fly zone (NFZ) over Ukraine will most probably not lead to its introduction. Yet, they need to continue as they might be able to bring positive results for the defense of Ukraine in other ways. It has now been made clear by the West/NATO/United States that they are not contemplating the introduction of an NFZ over Ukraine. Their absolute imperative, which clearly takes priority over aiding Ukraine, is to keep their personnel out of Ukraine (including its air space) and minimize chances for possible, even accidental, direct confrontation with Russian military forces. This seems to be cast in stone.

There is no evidence that the increased pressure, be it from Ukraine—President Volodymyr Zelensky just made a passionate, practically angry [appeal](#), accusing NATO of cowardness and short-sightedness, with the parliament joining his chorus—or its most fervent supporters around the world. That being said, these calls should not be dropped. These demands serve a positive purpose, even in the face of evidence of the NFZ not being introduced. First, they keep the global and regional focus on the need to help Ukraine in general, including, immediately, defensively. If not the NFZ, the boundaries of military assistance can and must be expanded. In other words, for Western decisionmakers, the question is: if we cannot deliver the NFZ, then what can we deliver that we have not yet? There is room in thinking about this, no doubt.

The incessant flow of mobile antitank launchers like Javelins and other Light Anti-tank Weapons (LAWs or NLAWs) has been ongoing for a while. We see they have made quite a difference for the defenders of Ukraine. The Russian occupation forces have sustained [heavy losses](#) of their armored vehicles. The supply of NLAWs, therefore, should be accelerated. The decision on the supply of Stingers (MANPADS) came late. They would have made a difference in the first days of the war. The Russian military has been seen relying on helicopters (to fire on Ukrainian positions and perform operations), a realm that Stingers excel in. They can bring down attack airplanes, too, if they are at lower altitudes. The pace of delivery to Ukrainian troops is vital.

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The refusal to offer an NFZ may help unlock the situation with the supply of fighter jets to Ukraine. The EU has initiated a [limited transfer](#) of around 70 fighter jets from the stockpiles of three Eastern European countries (all NATO members). Unfortunately, since that announcement was made, it has become clear that there are barriers to doing this. Would such a supply mean intervention by NATO in the eyes of Moscow? How do you deliver them to Ukraine? These hurdles can be assessed and removed if there is a political will. People here in Ukraine say: if not the NFZ, then at least provide Ukrainians with those airplanes. Ukrainian pilots will fly those the same as they learned to use antitank rifles and other types of military equipment provided by the West.

Surprisingly, Russia has not enjoyed total domination of Ukrainian skies in the first stretch of this war. The Ukrainian air force has proven brave and effective. The addition of even several dozens more jet fighters can go a long way in helping Ukraine defend itself more. In the first days of the war, Ukrainian anti-aircraft units performed much better than expected – against all sorts of targets, from planes to helicopters to drones. Ukrainians have the capacity to utilize defense equipment quickly and professionally.

There are various types of weapons systems that Ukraine needs but will most probably not receive. These include defensive missile systems, such as the Patriot, or surface-to-sea missile systems. Creating something similar to an Iron Dome over Ukraine is out of the question. Improving Ukraine’s naval power is not going to happen now. But many other types of military assistance can be considered, with the theme of pushing for an NFZ helpful here as a lever to press Ukraine’s allies to provide more.

Russia's War on Ukrainian Farms

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 786

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Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, Ukrainian farms have been under siege. This memo documents the damage inflicted on Ukrainian agricultural assets and production and draws conclusions about an aspect of Russia's war on Ukraine that has not received appropriate attention. The evidence presented below strongly suggests that seizing Ukraine's harvest and destroying the sector's infrastructural assets is a central war aim. While the concern about reduced export volumes of Ukrainian food crops is widely shared, it is less well known that agricultural assets are not just collateral damage of a Russian campaign focused on territorial gains. The Russian military is deliberately targeting key farming-related properties with the aim of inflicting short and long-term harm. The strategy of purposefully undermining Ukraine's agricultural potential harms the country's economy and export earnings and gives Russia more leverage over its grain trade partners in Africa and Asia, today and in the future.

We identified four types of critical damage to Ukrainian agriculture that merit the attention of policymakers. The first type is theft. Russian troops are reported to have stolen various types of grain and agricultural machinery from occupied territories. The second type of damage relates to the disruption of the current growing season due to the lack of access to agricultural inputs, the diversion of farm labor, and the intentional burning of crops. A third type of harm is the destruction of agricultural infrastructure. This includes damage to farm land (due to bombings and mines) and the destruction of machinery, irrigation systems, grain storage elevators, transport infrastructure, and other assets. A fourth type of damage is related to Russia's blockade of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, the export routes for the bulk of Ukrainian food commodity crops.

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Background: Ukraine's Rural Recovery

Ukraine has long been one of the world's most plentiful breadbaskets. The *chernozem*, Eurasia's black earth belt, runs through much of the country. The country's annual growing seasons are long, and rainfall patterns allow for the cultivation of most industrial food commodities – including wheat, corn, oilseeds, and sugar beets. Given the fertility of Ukrainian soil, the region fed industrial workers in Europe and the Soviet Union since the early days of the industrial Revolution. At the beginning of the 20th century, Ukraine was the main battleground between the Bolshevik revolutionaries and Russia's overwhelmingly rural population. Stalin's [collectivization](#) forced peasants to join collective farms, causing famine and death for millions of Ukrainians in the early thirties.

Today, Ukraine remains the home of Eurasia's most fertile and important arable land. While the 1990s was a challenging decade for Ukrainian farms, as it was for rural producers throughout the former Soviet Union, large-scale agricultural producers have become the driving force of a remarkable rural recovery since the early 2000s. In 2021, the agricultural sector [accounted](#) for more than 10 percent of GDP, and for 41 percent of exports, the largest share of any industry. Over the last 10-15 years, farms have also undergone a remarkable recovery, making agriculture the fastest growing sector in the Ukrainian economy, with output increasing by 14 percent in 2021 alone. Today, Ukraine [ranks](#) 5th globally in terms of total agricultural exports, 4th in terms of wheat exports, and 3rd in terms of corn exports. It provides food to about 400 million people globally, in addition to its own population.

Large agricultural corporations – often known as agro-holdings – first leased and more recently acquired ownership of vast tracts of farmland and invested in cutting-edge agricultural technology, which has boosted yields, production volumes, and exports. Kernel and Ukrlandfarming are Ukraine's two largest landowners, with Kernel owning 506,000 hectares, and Ukrlandfarming 460,000. Agro-holdings do not only farm. They are also vertically integrated corporations that have invested in farming infrastructure, building grain elevators and terminals, and administering transport logistics for other farms. Kernel, for example, buys products from 5,000 farmers. Ukrlandfarming owns 4 elevators and 110 horizontal granaries with a capacity of 3,000,000 tons. Ukrainian agriculture has also attracted significant foreign investors and operators. The country's largest two foreign agricultural [holdings](#) are Agroprosperis, owned by the American NCH Group, with a land bank of 300,000 hectares, and Continental Farmers Group, owned by the Saudi Continental Farmers Group, with a landbank of 195,000 hectares.

While Ukraine also has many smaller farmers who suffer from the war, large agro-holdings account for most of Ukraine's grain and oilseed exports. Asia is Ukraine's largest export market, [receiving](#) agricultural commodities worth \$7.5 billion in 2021. The EU is the second largest market, receiving \$4 billion, followed by Africa, receiving almost \$2 billion. Notably, Ukraine has re-directed foreign trade from the former Soviet region to

global markets: CIS countries accounted for only \$84 million of Ukrainian grain exports in 2021. China is the single largest importer of Ukrainian agri-food products, with a share of 15.5 percent of exports, followed by India at 7.1 percent, the Netherlands at 6.4 percent, Egypt at 5.8 percent, and Turkey at 5.3 percent. Over the last ten years, Ukraine has shifted to growing large quantities of commodity corn. Today Ukrainian corn makes up about 14 percent of world corn exports, and the European Union and China have become reliant on Ukrainian corn.

Cataloging War Damage to Ukrainian Farms

We identify four types of harm and damage that the invasion has wrought on Ukrainian farms. The first type is theft. Russian troops are [reported](#) to have stolen various types of agricultural machinery – combines, tractors, etc. – from occupied territories. In early June, it also became clear that millions of tons of grains and oilseeds were [seized](#) from grain elevators in Eastern Ukraine, worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

The second type of damage was brought about by the disruption of spring sowing and the current growing season. Spring wheat, corn, and many industrial crops are planted after the last spring frosts, normally in late March in Ukraine, which coincided with the early weeks of the war. The Ukrainian Environmental Protection Group [estimates](#) that on about 30 percent of Ukraine’s agricultural land, spring sowing was directly affected by hostilities or hindered by mines placed during the occupation. Moreover, virtually all the key inputs for agricultural production have been in exceedingly short supply, including seeds, fertilizer, and fuel. The shortage of diesel fuel for farm machinery was among the most serious problems. The majority of diesel fuel is imported from Russia and Belarus, and the war effort requires that the military have priority access to fuel.

Potash and nitrogen fertilizer have also been difficult to obtain. While most industrial crops (and corn in particular) are dependent on fertilizer, the supply of these inputs to Ukrainian farms was disrupted because virtually all of these agro-chemicals were previously imported from Russia and Belarus – the world’s largest producers of fertilizer. The Ministry of Agriculture tried to coordinate the distribution of fuel, seeds, and fertilizers to the extent possible. Hostilities also meant that labor was diverted to the war effort: a large share of the Ukrainian population is fighting in the territorial defense and armed forces, while many women were forced to flee the country. Although spring field care was delayed, shortened, or rendered impossible, farms were able to [complete](#) spring sowing by mid-June and field care by early June. And now, in the summer, the most recent damage has been brought about by [fires](#), intentionally set to destroy current harvests in or near occupied territories.

A third type of damage inflicted by Russian troops concerns various types of agricultural infrastructure. This includes damage to agricultural land due to bombing and mines, as well as the destruction of machinery, irrigation systems, and storage and transport

infrastructure, among other damage. The southern regions, which are currently suffering Russian occupation and heavy fighting, are also the regions with the most developed irrigation infrastructure. About 19 percent of all irrigated agricultural land in Ukraine is [located](#) in the temporarily occupied Kherson region; another 10 percent is in the territory of the partially occupied Zaporizhzhia region. Under the conditions of occupation, a significant amount of irrigation infrastructure is damaged or unused, significantly reducing this year's harvest. Livestock and perennial crops have been [destroyed](#) during the war, partly because farmers could not gain access to care for animals and partly because of shortages of feed and veterinarian services.

There are also many [reports](#) of Russian bombings of grain elevators and port terminals. A missile strike on the sea grain port Nika-Tera in Mykolaiv, Ukraine's third largest in terms of shipping volumes, for example, [destroyed](#) the port's grain terminal. A [report](#) by the Kyiv School of Economics and the Ministry of Agriculture estimates that total losses from the war by early June reached \$4.3 billion. A particularly devastating loss is the [destruction](#) of the "National Center for Plant Genetic Resources" in Kharkiv, which housed Ukraine's national gene bank, with more than 160,000 plant varieties and hybrids from around the world.

A fourth type of damage is related to Russia's blockade of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. The bulk of Ukrainian grain is [exported](#) via these maritime routes: sea transport accounts for around 95 percent of grains, oilseeds, and oils. In 2021, Ukraine exported 44.7 million tons of cereals and legumes, including 16.6 million tons of wheat, 23.1 million tons of corn, and 4.2 million tons of barley. Four major ports – Mariupol, Berdyansk, Skadovsk, and Kherson – are [closed and inaccessible](#) to Ukrainians due to the Russian occupation. Further, six other Ukrainian seaports are unable to accept and send cargo due to the Russian sea blockade: Yuzhny, Mykolaiv, Olbia, Odesa, Chernomorsk, and Belgorod-Dniester. At the onset of the war, about 13 million tons of corn (about a third of corn harvested last fall) was still in storage and could not be shipped and exported as planned. More grain will be harvested this year, in just a few short months, and Ukrainian farmers are acutely aware that there will likely be few options for their crop to reach world markets.

Ukraine's Responses

The Ukrainian government and EU countries have been working on ways to circumvent the Russian sea blockade. For instance, the Prime Ministers of Ukraine and Poland [signed](#) a memorandum on strengthening railway links between the two countries, hoping to increase the volume of grain transported from Ukraine to the EU and world markets through the Polish ports of Gdynia and Gdansk. Similar agreements are being negotiated with Romania, Moldova, Lithuania, and Latvia. Even with these new paths for Ukrainian grain, railway transport can only accommodate a fraction of the agricultural commodities that normally travel through seaports. Negotiations are currently underway between

Ukraine and Russia, brokered by Turkey. Lithuania has [proposed](#) a non-NATO naval escort operation to lift Russia's blockade on Ukrainian grain exports across the Black Sea. This plan requires demining parts of the Black Sea to ensure safe passage. Restoring Ukraine's seaports is an urgent and indispensable task for the coming weeks and months.

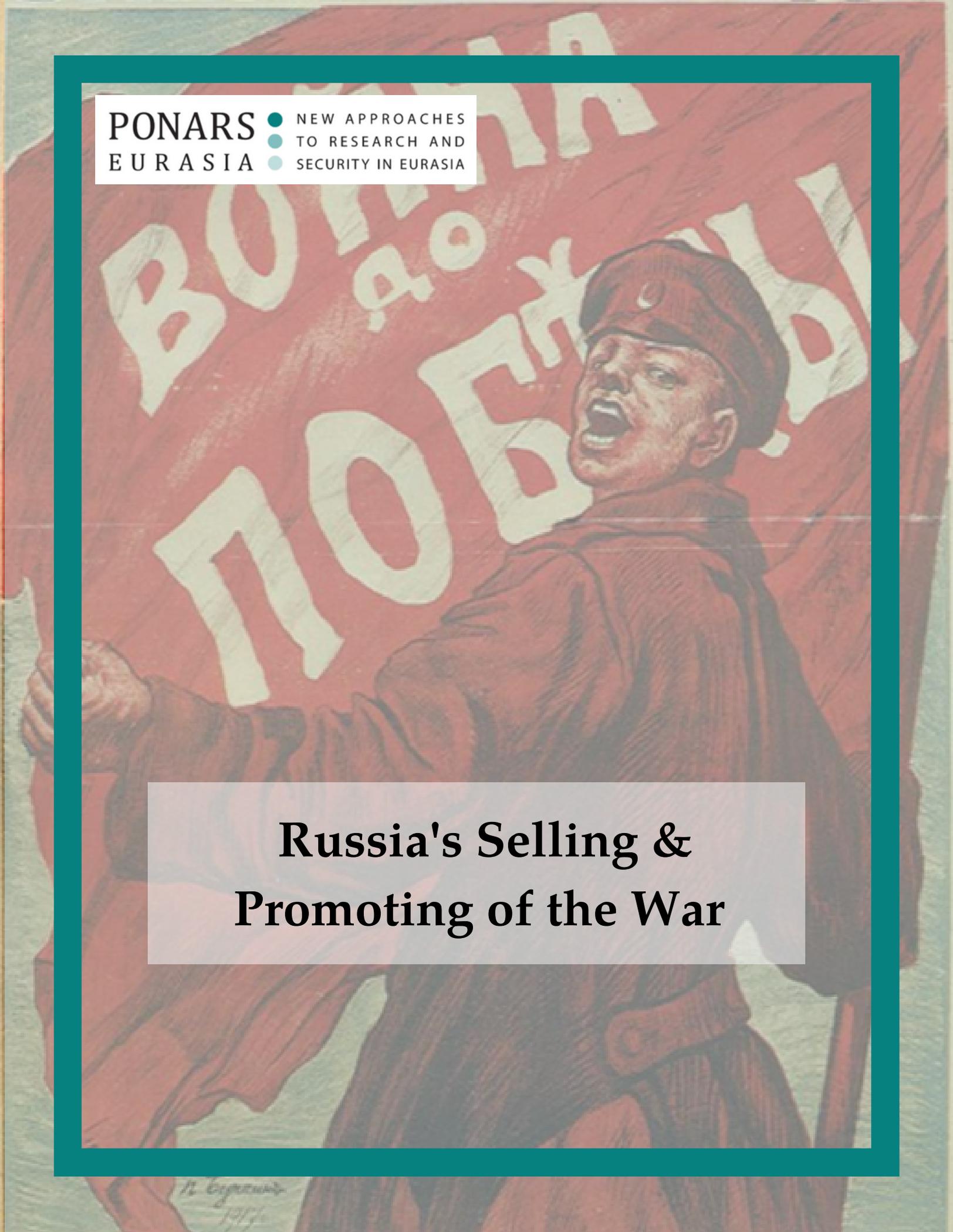
Conclusions

Due to destruction and disruptions brought about by Russian troops, Ukraine is planting, harvesting, and exporting much less grain, sunflower seeds, and other commodities. Nevertheless, Ukrainian farmers still planted whatever crops they could, and as of mid-summer 2022, they began to harvest grains in two regions. Farmers are facing a catastrophic scenario, however: they will accumulate significant and growing grain reserves, but are not able to sell, store, or export most of them. Russia's war on Ukrainian farms clearly hurts farmers on the ground, but it also hurts the EU, China, and countries in Africa and Asia with a high dependence on Ukrainian grain, such as Tunisia and Yemen. According to the Global Hunger Index, the number of countries [affected](#) by grain shortages is likely to grow from 47 to 60 this year due to the dire situation in global grain markets.

The destruction of farming assets raises the question of whether agriculture played an important role in Russia's calculations to invade Ukraine. Since the times of Lenin and Stalin, land and grain have [played](#) a central role in Russia's political history. While the discussions of Russia's motives are focused on geopolitics, territorial gains, and domestic legitimacy, the strategic targeting of agricultural assets confirms that Russia under Putin is still very much interested in the future of Ukrainian agriculture. Harming Ukrainian farms and imperiling Ukraine's agricultural future not only yields increased returns on Russian grain, it is already giving the country significant leverage vis-à-vis trade partners dependent on Eurasian grain.

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**Russia's Selling &
Promoting of the War**

И. Суров
1945

Who's to Blame? Sanctions, Economic Hardship, and Putin's Fear of Color Revolutions

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 767

April 2022

Stephen Crowley¹

Oberlin College

The sanctions now imposed on Russia – as severe as they are – are unlikely by themselves to lead to widespread protests demanding political change. Although at the time of writing, the exact cumulative impact on Russian society is yet to be seen, Russia's economy has already plunged into a deep recession, with [projections of economic contraction](#) of over 11 percent in 2022. Yet, even before the invasion, there were few pathways out of Russia's economic malaise that did not raise the prospect of potentially destabilizing social protest. Might the Russian government undertake reforms to revive the economy? If so, the answer to the key question for Russians of *Kto vinovat?* – Who is to blame? – could shift from the West and its sanctions to the Putin regime itself. While a mass uprising in the near term appears improbable, low wages and low productivity in Russia have led to a stagnating economy, which over time raises the potential for social and, ultimately political, protest.

Existing Economic Challenges

Whatever their intentions, economic sanctions by themselves [rarely lead](#) to regime change. Sanctions provide a country's leadership with a ready way to deflect blame for a population's suffering. As with war itself, the imposition of sanctions can lead to a "rally 'round the flag effect," at least in the short term, particularly in a country such as Russia, where mass media remain firmly under state control.

Yet Russia's economy was already facing stagnation before the current sanctions, with real disposable incomes 10 percent lower in 2021 than they were in 2013. The reasons are multiple, but the legacy of the Soviet past remains a major challenge for Russia's economy. Despite the dramatic economic decline of the 1990s, Russia averted mass unemployment, but only through huge drops in wage levels (including, for a time, their non-payment).

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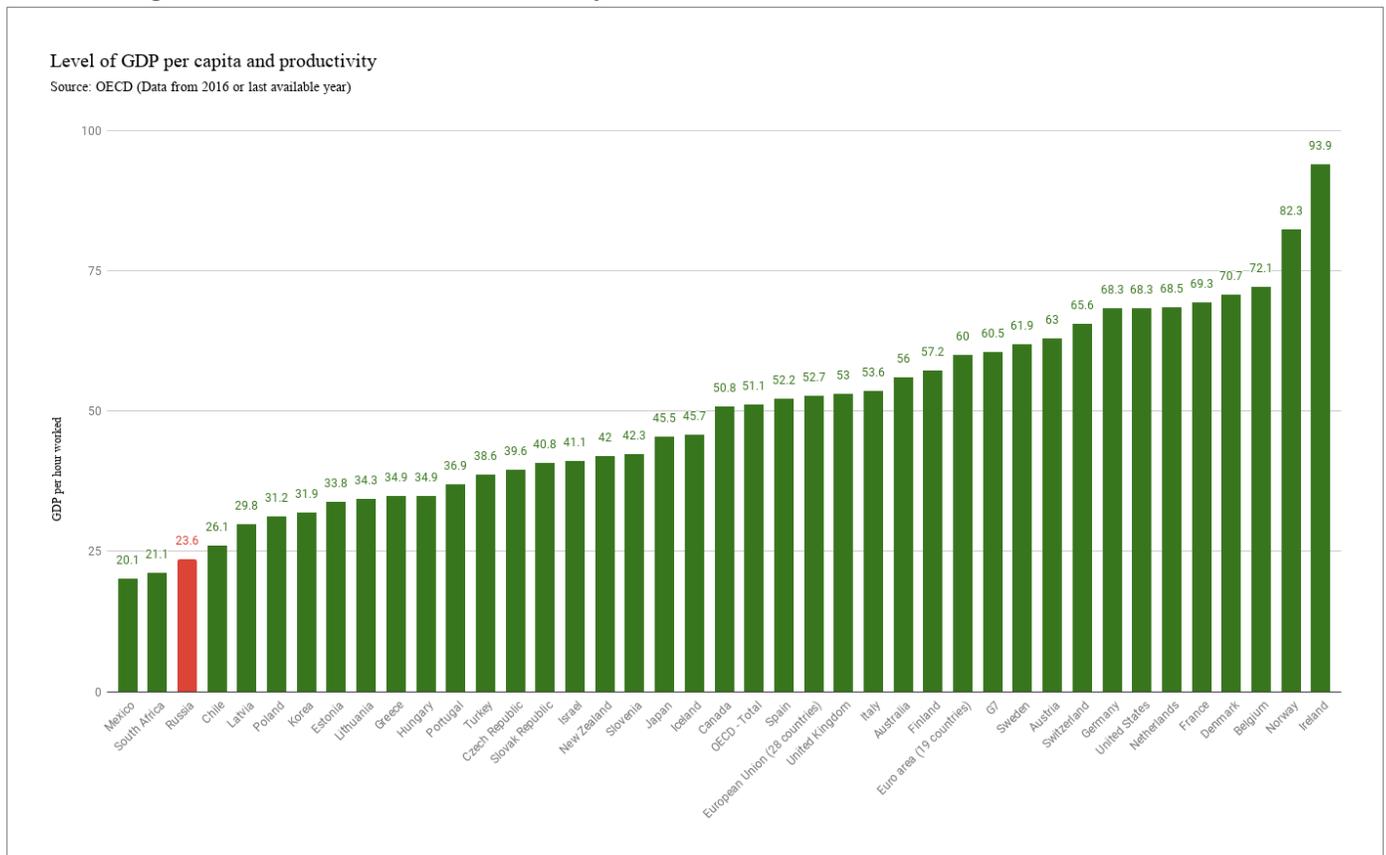
Though Russia avoided a “social explosion” during this period, it also evaded substantial restructuring of the Soviet industrial infrastructure. While wages rose again from their nadir with economic growth in the 2000s, Russia [remains](#) a high-employment, low-wage economy.

Low wages, however brutal for workers, can become a country’s global comparative advantage, provided that the economy is centered on the export of labor-intensive products. However, this is simply not the case in Russia, where outside of certain firms in the metals sector and military industry, Russian manufacturing exports are non-competitive. With wages low, there is less incentive to invest in education and technology. Why should an individual spend time and money upgrading one’s skills when there is little payoff? The failure to invest sufficiently in education has contributed to a decline in Russia’s human capital, a problem that has [become](#) “colossal” according to a number of leading economists and business experts (and this before the current exodus of educated Russians). The same is true with lagging investment in technology. Why should a firm spend money on expensive machinery when it can add more workers cheaply and pay them even less when times are tough?

Simply put, paying workers cheaply and failing to invest in education and technology reduces productivity. As Paul Krugman [noted](#), “productivity isn’t everything, but in the long run, it is almost everything. A country’s ability to improve its standard of living over time depends almost entirely on its ability to raise its output per worker.” Unless oil and gas prices remain high, future economic growth in Russia will almost certainly depend on increasing labor productivity.

Raising productivity would appear all the more compelling given Russia’s demographic challenge, namely the decline in its working-age population. That challenge would be less daunting if those in the workforce were able to produce more, making the question of productivity all the more crucial. Yet Russian labor productivity is very low by comparative standards. According to the OECD, for every hour worked, a Russian worker contributes the equivalent of twenty-three U.S. dollars to GDP, while the comparative figure for both the United States and Germany is sixty-eight. Indeed, Russian labor productivity is lower than that of Chile and Turkey. Of 36 OECD comparator countries, Russia outranks only Mexico and South Africa (see **Figure 1**).

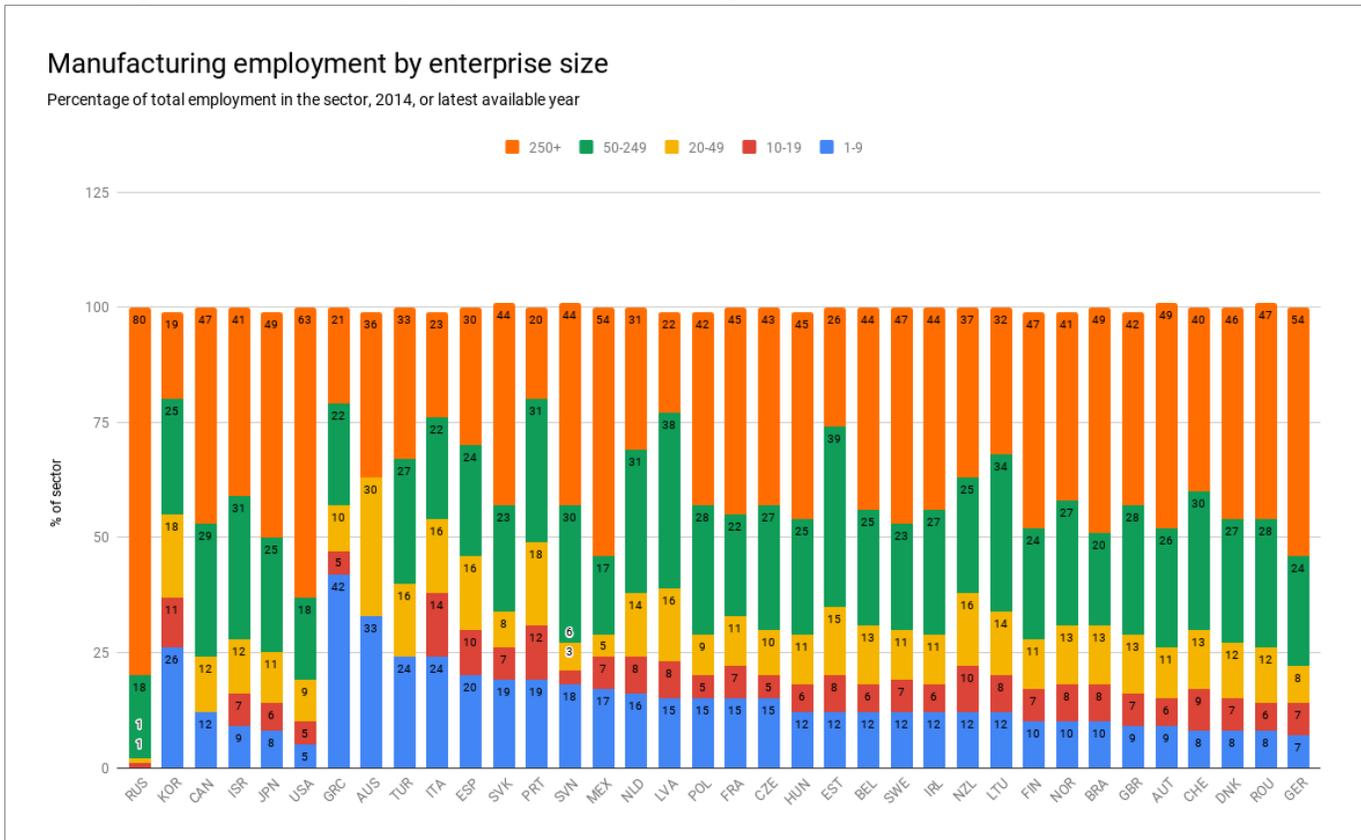
Figure 1. Russian Labor Productivity



Low wages create other social and economic problems as well. One is that workers will often seek out informal employment in jobs that are typically even less productive and with pay that does not contribute to revenue or social welfare funds. Increasing consumer debt has been another way that Russians have dealt with persistently low wages. The low level of consumer demand remains a [major hindrance](#) to economic growth in Russia.

Besides low wages, Russia's productivity is impeded by the many large factories inherited from the Soviet era. As of 2014, 80 percent of Russian workers employed in manufacturing were working in large enterprises (those employing 250 or more workers), by far the highest proportion of the 36 countries surveyed by the OECD. In almost all of those other countries, the majority of manufacturing workers were employed in small and medium-sized firms, which tend to be much more productive (see **Figure 2**).

Figure 2. Russians Employed in Manufacturing



While those large factories remained afloat during the 1990s, when times were bad, they also avoided major transformation during the oil boom of the 2000s. Workers remained employed, but given low productivity levels, the overall result was that Russia became stuck in what economists [call](#) a “middle-income trap.”

All of this was true before the potential impact of new and substantial economic sanctions on Russia’s economy. True, oil prices have peaked and could remain high for an indefinite period. However, with the prospect that global initiatives to [stem](#) climate change might begin to lower the demand for oil and gas as early as the next decade, the imperative for economic reform would appear all the greater. The absence of reform creates its own challenges since, to many Russians, stability has begun to look like stagnation, with a significant impact on living standards. Needless to say, beyond economics, all of this has social – and ultimately political – implications.

Social and Economic Protest

How might Russia escape the “middle-income trap”? The pathologies generally associated with that trap are well known to Russia: low productivity, low-skilled and low-paid work, inequality, and informality. Economists argue that there is a pathway out of

that trap: the key is to boost productivity growth through investment, especially in higher and technical education and research and development. In Russia, liberal Kremlin advisers such as Aleksei Kudrin have long [pushed](#) for such policies.

Yet, as Doner and Schneider [argue](#), the central challenge to escaping the trap is “more politics than economics” since the shifting of resources inevitably entails creating winners and losers out of different social groups. For instance, Kudrin and Gurchikov have argued that boosting economic growth in Russia will [require](#) “facilitating the movement of factors of production from less efficient to more efficient industries, i.e., to intensify what Schumpeter calls the process of ‘creative destruction.’” However creative such a process might be in the long term, the destruction of existing workplaces could well lead to widespread unemployment. That would be a substantial break from Russian practice, going back to the Soviet period, and would almost inevitably raise the likelihood of protest.

Indeed, most worryingly for the Kremlin, there are few paths out of Russia’s economic malaise that will not threaten to [spark](#) social protest, with the potential for political instability. The Russian experience of the last two decades suggests that it is not a hardship by itself that ignites economic protest but rather concrete government actions that push the population beyond their level of tolerance. When that happens, the answer of “whom to blame” becomes clear.

Russian society suffered tremendous economic hardship in the 1990s. Yet, in that era, when the collapse of Communism coincided with privatization and the first taste of the free market, [apportioning blame](#) proved difficult. In contrast, the Putin-era economy has increasingly become state capitalist, with the visible hand of the government near ubiquitous.

In explaining how social and economic protests have spread in Russia in recent years, my colleague Irina Olimpieva and I have [drawn on](#) the classic work of Charles Tilly, who developed the concepts he called “netness” and “catness” to [explain](#) successful protest mobilization. Netness refers to the ability of protests to spread through networks, such as labor unions, opposition groups, or other forms of civil society. In Russia, those groups are increasingly repressed or under Kremlin control. Catness refers to individuals belonging to a single category. Should the government undertake an action that adversely impacts all members of that category, other isolated individuals can suddenly find themselves united in a common cause.

When that happens, protests can erupt spontaneously, with little reliance on Russia’s demoralized opposition and beleaguered civil society. For example, the government’s attempt in 2005 to replace free public transportation for pensioners with cash benefits led protesters to [rise up](#), with little coordination, in numerous cities across Russia, forcing the government to back down. A raising of the pension age in 2018 led to similar protests,

even though the direct impact on the population would be delayed for years. During the global economic crisis of 2009, the government imposed a tax on imported vehicles in an attempt to preserve jobs in the domestic auto industry. But that quickly led to protests in Russia's Far East, where used Japanese cars were popular (riot police [flown in](#) from Moscow finally subdued the protesters denouncing Vladimir Putin). A tax on long-haul trucks in 2015 led to a spontaneous protest of truck drivers from Dagestan to Chita. While the truckers – seen as part of Putin's core supporters – initially [pleaded](#) "President, help us," in little over a year they called for a general strike, demanded the government resign, and tried to have their leader run for president against Putin (he was harshly repressed).

While protests with overt political demands have been dealt with severely in Russia, even before the invasion of Ukraine, protests based on social and economic grievances have been treated more leniently. However, the examples above demonstrate how social and economic protests can become quickly politicized. Moreover, protests by such groups as pensioners and truck drivers are extremely problematic because they point to dissatisfaction within Putin's presumed base of support.

Color Revolutions

Putin has long been [consumed](#) by the prospect of "color revolutions," popular revolts he believes are incited by the United States, such as the 2014 Maidan revolution that chased Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovich out of Ukraine. (Putin and President Xi Jinping of China [denounced](#) color revolutions in their recent joint statement). While many outsiders have expressed hope that Putin might be deposed by fellow elites in a "palace coup" in the post-Soviet space, such changes of leadership have come almost exclusively through mass-based color revolutions.

Putin survived the 2011-12 "Russia without Putin" protests – arguably the closest Russia has come to its own color revolution – in part by [claiming](#) that he maintained strong support from the "real Russians" in the country's industrial and rural heartland against the liberal cosmopolitan protesters in Russia and St. Petersburg. However, that claim became much harder to make in the years in conditions of declining wages and standards of living (even before the recent imposition of sanctions). Moreover, color revolutions in neighboring states have been closely connected to economic grievances and unpopular government actions.

For example, next door in Belarus, citizens took to the streets in large numbers in 2017 to protest a new tax on "parasitism" – essentially a tax on underground employment – with demands for President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to resign. The tax was scrapped, but the demonstrations presaged the country's even larger uprising in 2020. While the protests then centered around Lukashenka's fraudulent reelection, with the country's economy suffering due to reduced subsidies from Russia, workers – [presumed](#) by Lukashenka himself to be his base of support – joined the protests from numerous factories and

workplaces throughout the country. The mass uprising in Kazakhstan this past January was set off by an [increase](#) in gas prices and began in Zhanaozen, a city synonymous in the country for labor strife, where the government had shot and killed over a dozen striking workers in 2011.

The leaders of Belarus and Kazakhstan remained in power, but arguably only through Russian backing (and in the Kazakh case, direct Russian intervention). Following the Maidan revolution, Ukraine's Yanukovich fled to Russia with whatever he could carry in his suitcase, and the stolen spoils he left behind [became](#) a "museum of corruption." Should a similar uprising occur in Russia, who will prop up Putin? Where could he flee?

Conclusion

To be clear, there is little prospect of a mass uprising in Russia anytime soon. Sanctions and resulting hardship will be blamed on the West, as Russia's state media portrays the country as a besieged fortress. Oil and gas revenues could remain high for an extended period. But, with time – a time that could be measured in years rather than months – the Russian government may feel compelled to undertake painful reforms to improve otherwise intolerable economic conditions. Doing so would prove precarious, as the answer to the question – *Kto vinovat?* – could then become Putin himself.

How Russian Television Prepared the Public for War

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 761

March 2022

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Carleton University

In debates about the responsibility for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, television undoubtedly plays an important role in the public’s supporting, ignoring, or opposing the Kremlin’s war. A key aspect of this debate concerns the information environment in Russia and the kinds of news that Russians receive through the media. It is well known that most Russians get most of their news from television—a fact that likely will increase with the ongoing crackdown on foreign news and social media. Now that it seems clear that the military campaign was planned well in advance, it is worth considering how state-controlled media prepared the Russian public in the buildup to war.

Reported here are findings from a study of the frequency and content of messaging on various themes on Russian television. The goal of this approach is not necessarily to re-create Russians’ viewing habits, though one might reasonably assume that more frequently mentioned topics are more likely to have been viewed or noticed. Rather, the frequency and distribution of topics over time reveal the extent to which state-controlled television presented a coordinated campaign. In the absence of reliable public opinion data in war-time Russia, such an approach further suggests insights about the ways that Russians were prepared for and reacted to the onset of war. Despite Russia’s insistence that its invasion was motivated by longstanding concerns—genocide and fascism in Ukraine—the findings show that Russian television only paid brief attention to those concerns and quickly re-focused on other themes. Rather, the priming of the public for war began over a month prior to the invasion with the spread of “war talk” on television broadcasts.

What Was Included in the Study

The data for this study are drawn from the Integrum Profi television broadcast transcripts, which were analyzed on a week-to-week basis from December 13, 2021, through March

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13, 2022. The week of December 13 was chosen as a starting point just before President Vladimir Putin initiated a crisis in relations with Russia with the issuance of his [ultimatums](#) to the United States and NATO, hence a coordinated media campaign in Russia might also be observed from this time. Five channels were chosen for analysis: the state-run channels Pervyi Kanal (1tv) and Rossiia 1, the pro-government NTV (owned by Gazprom Media), Moscow's public television station TV Tsentr, and the independent Dozhd TV. Dozhd TV was included as a check on whether a topic has broad resonance across the political spectrum, though it bears noting that it was taken off the air after the start of the war and ceased operation on March 3, 2022.²

The Kremlin's Humanitarian Claims and Narrative Drift

Beginning with Russia's claim that its invasion was intended to stop an alleged genocide in eastern Ukraine, it is worth recalling that a similar claim was made (and quickly dropped) at the start of Russia's 2008 war with Georgia. Russia similarly invoked preventing genocide and opposing fascism as justifications for occupying Crimea and supporting separatist republics in eastern Ukraine in 2014. If the government's concern was principled, then one would expect to find at least somewhat constant signaling of this concern from the start of the crisis in December 2021 through the invasion of Ukraine and the early stages of the war. One would also expect genuinely humanitarian concerns to be reflected in reporting across the political spectrum.

Turning to the analysis of broadcast transcripts, quite a different picture emerges. Genocide barely rated mentioning save for a small spike by the state channel 1tv in late January (see **Figure 1**). By the time the decision to go to war had been taken, however, mentions of genocide skyrocketed on state-owned and pro-government television channels. Strikingly similar patterns are evident for mentions of "Nazi"³ (**Figure 2**) and the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, commonly referred to as "DNR" and "LNR"⁴ (**Figure 3**): both were hardly mentioned until it was time to prepare the Russian public for the decision to go to war in early- to mid-February. This instrumental mobilization of genocide and anti-fascism [fits past patterns](#) in Russia's justifications for attacking its neighbors.

Further evidence of the instrumental mobilization of humanitarian concerns is found in the shifting narratives in the weeks immediately following Russia's invasion of Ukraine

² It is also worth noting that this time period includes the New Years holidays, during which one observes a dip in reporting on all topics across all channels.

³ "Nazi" was preferred as a search term since it attributes the quality of being a Nazi to individuals, organizations, states, policies, and so forth. By contrast, searching transcripts for "Nazi" catches too many false positives as it also captures words like "national" that begin with the same sequence of letters in Russian. Moreover, the terms "fascist" and "fascism" were barely mentioned, at all, compared to the broader use of "Nazi."

⁴ Another term used to refer to the separatist republics is "Donbass," though in broadcast it was mentioned less frequently than "DNR" or "LNR."

(**Figure 4**). In the two weeks following the start of the war, “genocide” almost completely disappeared from mentions on Russian TV. A new narrative emerged concerning fears that Ukrainian nationalists might get ahold of nuclear materials to make dirty bombs, but this quickly dissipated after Russian forces’ messy and alarming seizure of the Zaporiz’ka nuclear power plant. Instead, that narrative was quickly replaced by new claims about the purported threat that increasingly desperate Ukrainian forces might resort to using (or had already planned to use) chemical and biological weapons.

Russia’s humanitarian justifications were not consistently signaled via state-controlled Russian television either before or after the invasion. Rather, the three themes of genocide, Nazis, and separatist republics were scarcely mentioned until a brief coordinated surge in late January and then a massive spike in coverage starting in mid-February. Even with war raging in Ukraine, they started to decline in broadcast mentions after the invasion. In fact, mentions of genocide virtually disappeared from Russian airwaves within two weeks of the invasion. From this, it is difficult to view Russia’s humanitarian justifications for invading Ukraine as little more than cynical manipulations that served to put such terms and discourse into circulation, perhaps providing viewers with a regime-friendly lexicon to frame and discuss the war.

Broadcasting Russia’s Security Concerns

The relative absence of genocide and anti-fascism in public discourse in Russian media until the eve of war perhaps explains why Putin’s ultimatums in December 2021 focused less on Ukraine than on the United States, NATO, and Russia’s security concerns. Of course, “security” can be understood in many ways. Since the late-1990s, security discourse in Russia has tended to involve [post-Cold War grievances](#) concerning its international standing and demands for recognition of its status as a great power. Particularly since 2014, these security concerns further involve disagreements (sometimes quite emotional) over whether Russia gained or lost international status.

Russia’s concern for status recognition tends to feed an enduring public obsession with the United States as a rival power, which some link to Putin’s now-infamous speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. In fact, mentions of the United States are so prominent on Russian television that they compete even with mentions of Putin (**Figure 5**). Not surprisingly, the United States and NATO were mentioned on Russian television in roughly the same proportions during the observed period, diverging only after the start of the war (**Figure 6**). The ebb and flow of both mentions in lockstep is an artifact of state control.

Despite this ostensible focus on the West, Putin’s rejection of Ukrainian statehood and nationhood was already well established. His lengthy essay on Ukrainian history published in the summer of 2021 elaborated on many of his various claims about Ukraine and Ukrainians, though seemingly without any clear motivation for the timing. If there

was any lingering doubt about the place of Ukraine in the Kremlin's worldview, [Putin's televised declaration of war](#) made it abundantly clear that his understanding of Russia's security concerns and international status derives from neo-imperial impulses. Accordingly, one observes relatively consistent signaling of this relationship: "security" and "Ukraine" were mentioned almost equally from the start of the crisis in December through mid-January/early-February (**Figure 7**).

Normalizing and Decoding Talk of "War"

While the patterns of mentions on Russian television are striking, how likely is it that they were noticed by Russian viewers? Absolute counts of mentions on television do not give us a sense of the distribution of mentions throughout the day. Though pre-war surveys indicated that most Russians continued to get their news mainly from television, one cannot assume that viewers would tune in constantly or that they would even watch attentively.

To establish the extent to which a topic's mentions rose above the background noise of everyday life, this study uses a simple measure of the number of mentions relative to the reporting of the weather. As the weather is perhaps the only thing that is reported objectively and consistently across all channels, it is a helpful measure of what constitutes normal background noise on Russian television. The assumption guiding this approach is that topics mentioned less often than the weather probably are less likely to be noticed, while those mentioned more frequently than the weather are more likely to be noticed.

This can be demonstrated by revisiting the Russian government's claims concerning genocide, DNR/LNR, and *Nazists*, for which the instrumental mobilization of these topics for Russia's war is thrown into sharp relief: before mid-February, *none* of those topics warranted more mentions than the weather on Russian television (**Figure 8**). By contrast, the United States and (to a lesser extent) NATO were mentioned early and often from the start of the December crisis through to the invasion (**Figure 9**). Mentions of Ukraine barely rose to noticeable levels until mid-January (**Figure 10**). In the case of both Ukraine and the United States, Presidents Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Joe Biden were mentioned far less frequently than their respective countries, suggesting a framing of discourse in *national* terms rather than attributing policies, stances, and outcomes to the leadership of either country.

One further observes a palpable rise in the number of mentions of "war" such that it emerges from the background from late January (**Figure 11**). Russian TV suddenly elevated mentions of war in all sorts of ways, none of which were initially related to Ukraine. Zooming in on the various ways that war was mentioned from January 24 through March 13 (**Figure 12**), one observes lots of "war talk" in reference to the Great Patriotic War in mid-to-late-January. This may be considered on-brand for the Kremlin, which has turned the memory of the war into a cornerstone of the regime's legitimization.

Historical framing was also a [prevalent feature](#) of legitimating discourse surrounding Russia's previous military interventions in Ukraine and Syria. Also present were references to the Cold War and Western aggression (past and present) in roughly equal proportions. By February, this "war talk" expanded to include substantial mentions of information warfare, particularly in mocking the West's "mythical Russian invasion" of Ukraine. Unsurprisingly, such references disappeared after Russia actually invaded Ukraine, to be replaced by the emphasis on the separatist republics in eastern Ukraine and the depiction of Russia's invasion as an intervention in the "civil war" allegedly being waged against innocent, freedom-loving people in the Donbas. The speed with which Russia lost control of the online narrative about the war is reflected in the immediate re-appearance of information warfare as a priority topic on Russian television, with particular emphasis on discrediting Western social media platforms.

The prevalence of "war talk" in the run-up to the invasion is darkly amusing for, as is well known, the Russian government refers to its invasion of Ukraine as a "special military operation." [Severe legal penalties](#) have been introduced for those who "discredit" the Russian military or spread "fake news" by using the words "war" or "invasion." Correspondingly, mentions of "Ukraine" on Russian television ramped up in advance of the invasion, while mentions of "war" started to build towards the end of January and then held steady through February (**Figure 12**).

Conclusion

This close examination of Russian television content helps to make sense of the cognitive dissonance experienced by Russian viewers following the declaration of war: while pre-war surveys by the Levada Center showed a majority of Russians to be uninterested in war, 50-60 percent [were nevertheless certain](#) that the United States and NATO would be to blame if war broke out. While pushing the United States and NATO as a security concern from the December crisis, Ukraine emerged from the woodwork on Russian television in January and took over as its main focus once the war began.

Russian television primed viewers for war with steady doses of "war talk" prior to the invasion. It reminded Russians of past victories as well as betrayals. Doing so accomplished what is known in the literature on memory politics as "[chronographic suturing](#)," or knitting together past and present such that people can experience a personal connection with national history through their observation of the present. For Russian viewers, state-controlled television deftly merged this "war talk" with narratives about Western and Ukrainian aggression before fully joining the war effort by advancing claims about the prevention of genocide and fighting fascism.

While there is little likelihood of displacing the central role of state-controlled television in rationalizing the war for Russian viewers, Western policy-makers should be mindful of actions that weaken countervailing voices in Russia. This is especially the case with regard

to access to social media like YouTube, which are crucial alternative sources of information and income for Russian youth and opposition. Policy-makers might also consider ways to facilitate easy access to free VPNs that would allow Russians to bypass state censorship and propaganda. While these are unlikely to change domestic political dynamics in the short term, they may prove important in the longer run to ensure such spaces preserve an alternative to state-controlled media in Russia.

Figure 1: Mentions of Genocide on Russian TV, December 13 - March 13

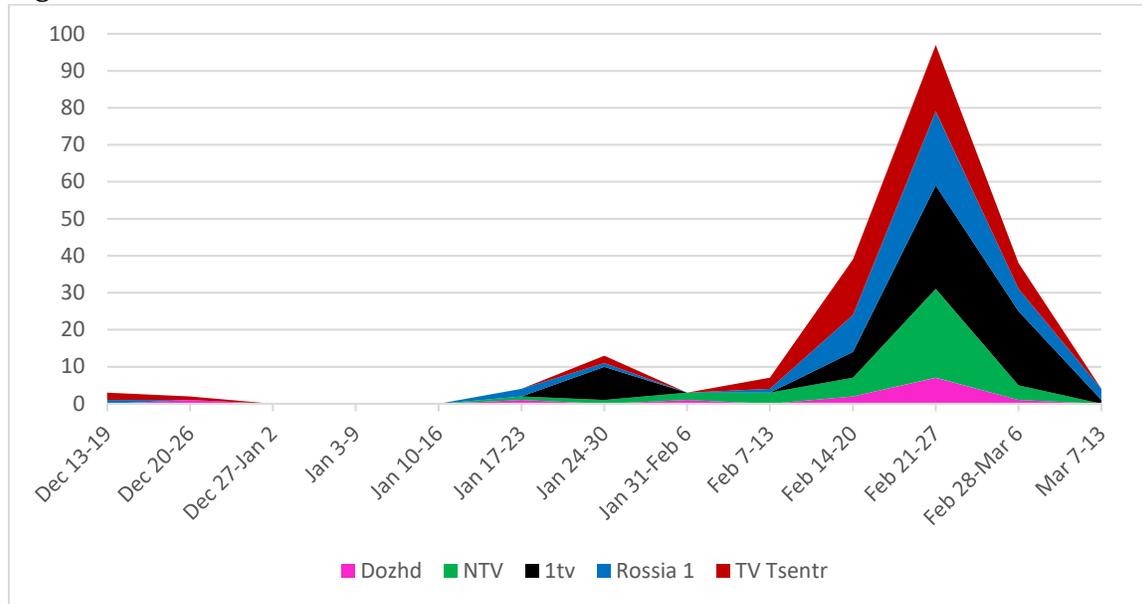


Figure 2: Mentions of Nazis on Russian TV, December 13 - March 13

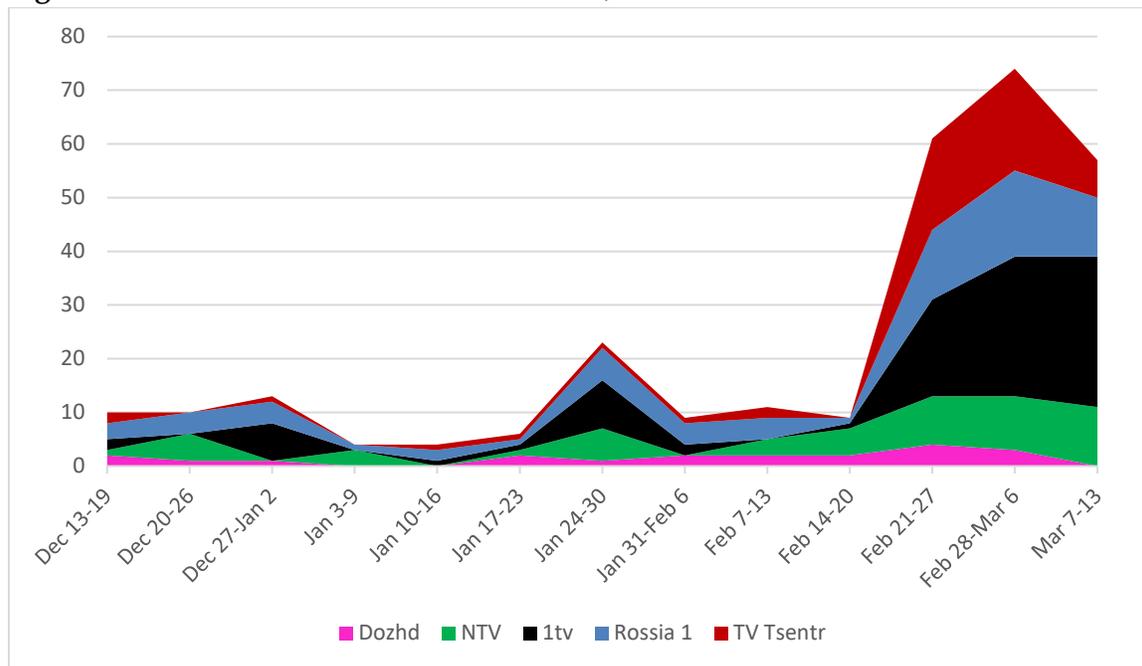


Figure 3: Mentions of DNR/LNR on Russian TV, December 13 - March 13

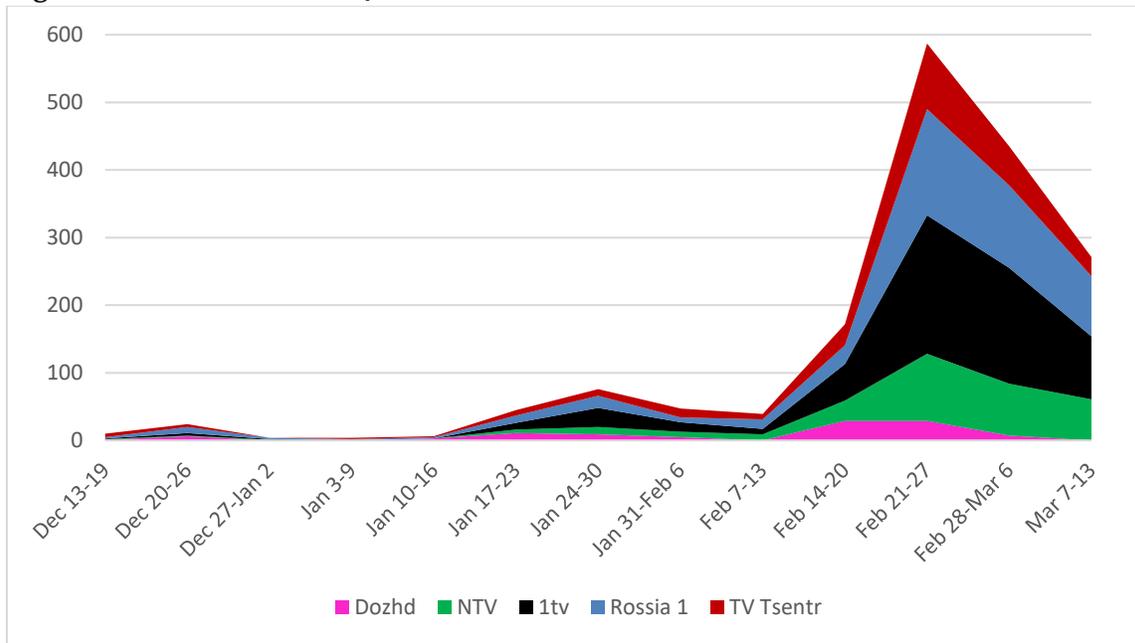


Figure 4: Shifting Narratives on Russian TV, February 21 - March 13

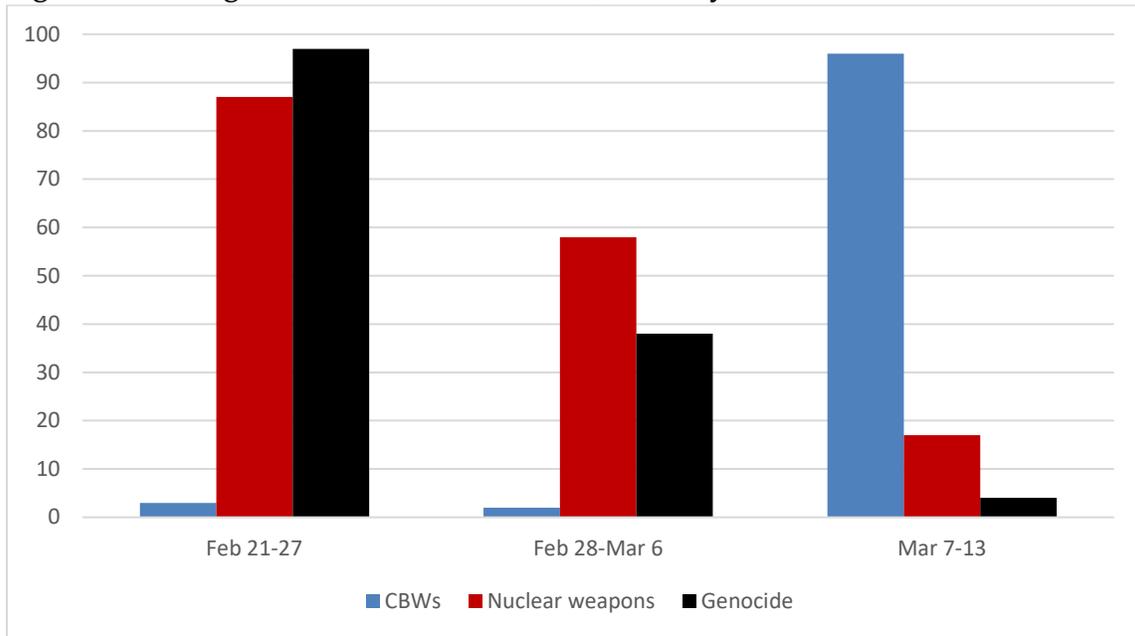


Figure 5: Mentions of Putin and USA on Russian TV, December 13 - March 13

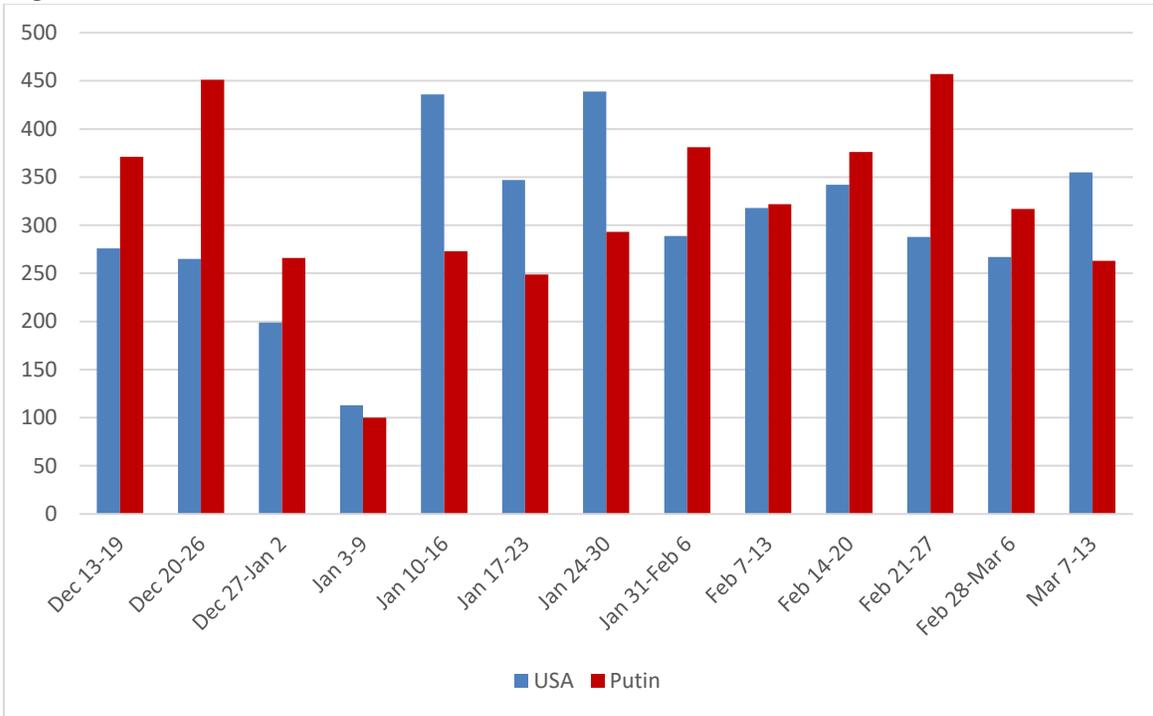


Figure 6: Mentions of USA and NATO on Russian TV, December 13 - March 13

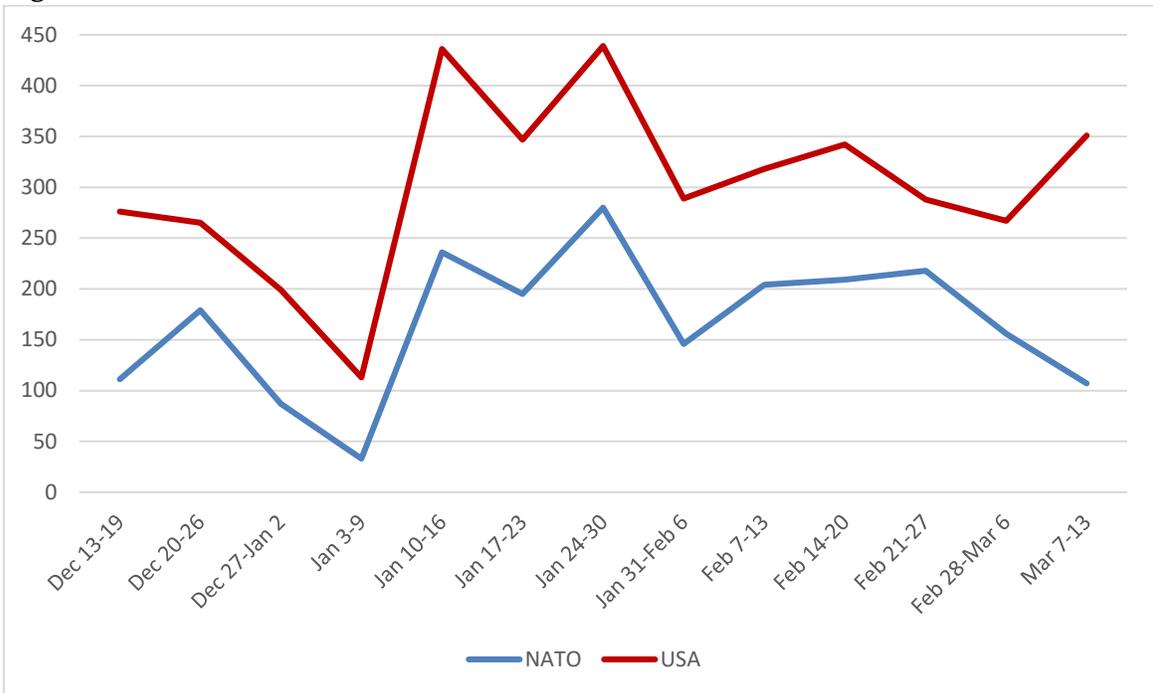


Figure 7: Mentions of Security and Ukraine on Russian TV, December 13 - March 13

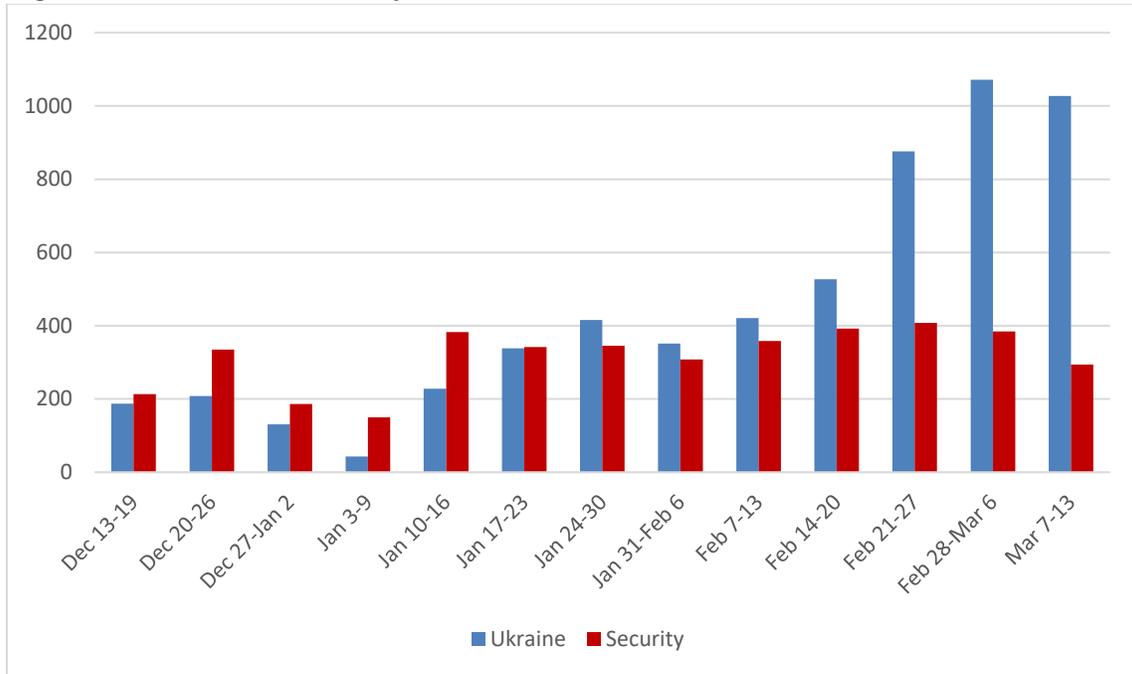


Figure 8: Mentions of Genocide, DNR/LNR, and Nazis vs. the Weather on Russian TV, February 13 - March 13

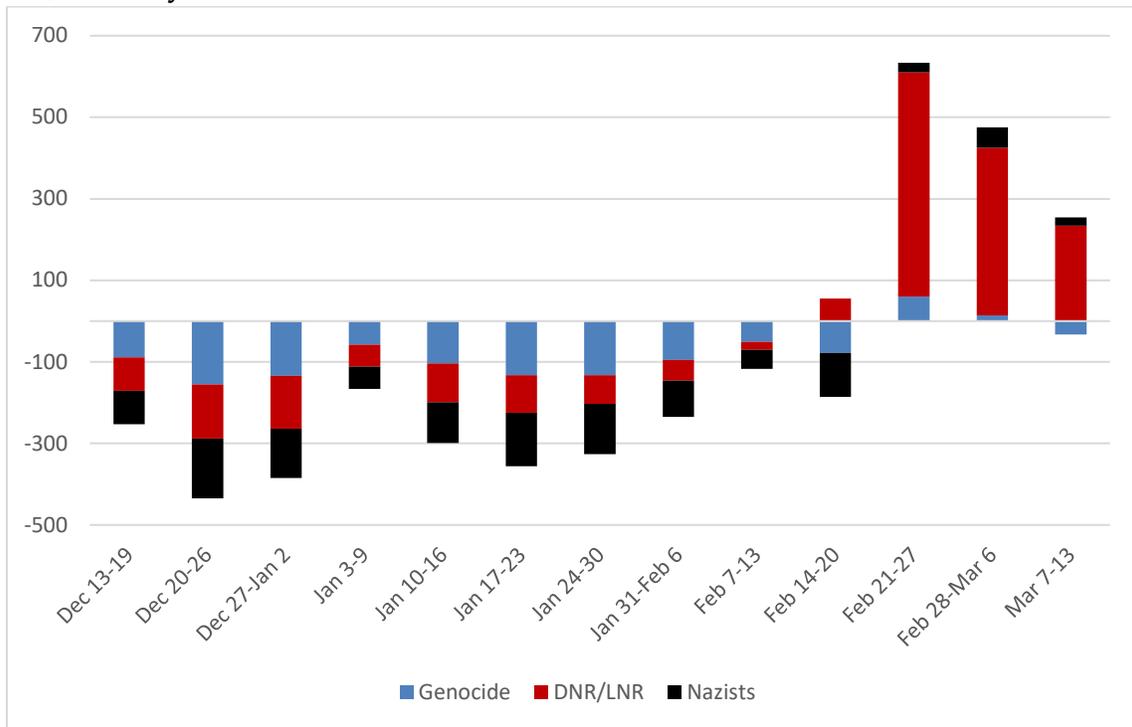


Figure 9: Mentions of the United States, NATO, and Biden vs. the Weather on Russian TV, December 13 - March 13

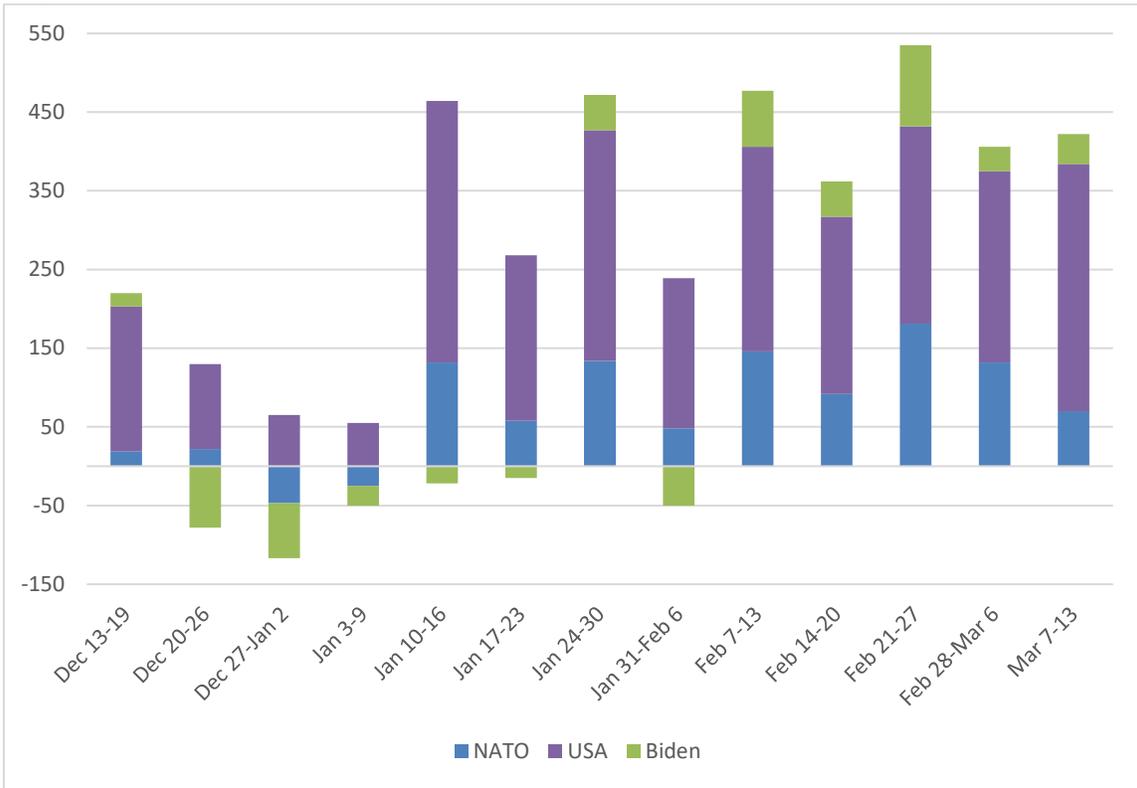


Figure 10: Mentions of Ukraine and Zelenskyy vs. the Weather on Russian TV, December 13 - March 13

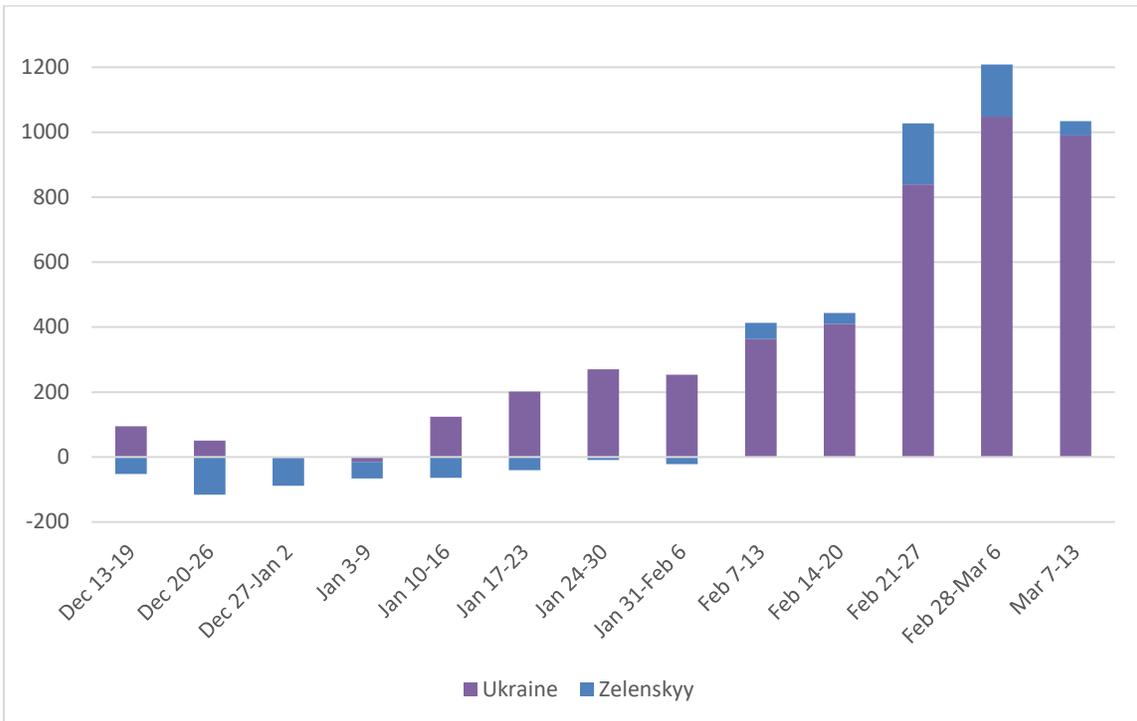


Figure 11: Mentions of War vs. the Weather on Russian TV, December 13 - March 13

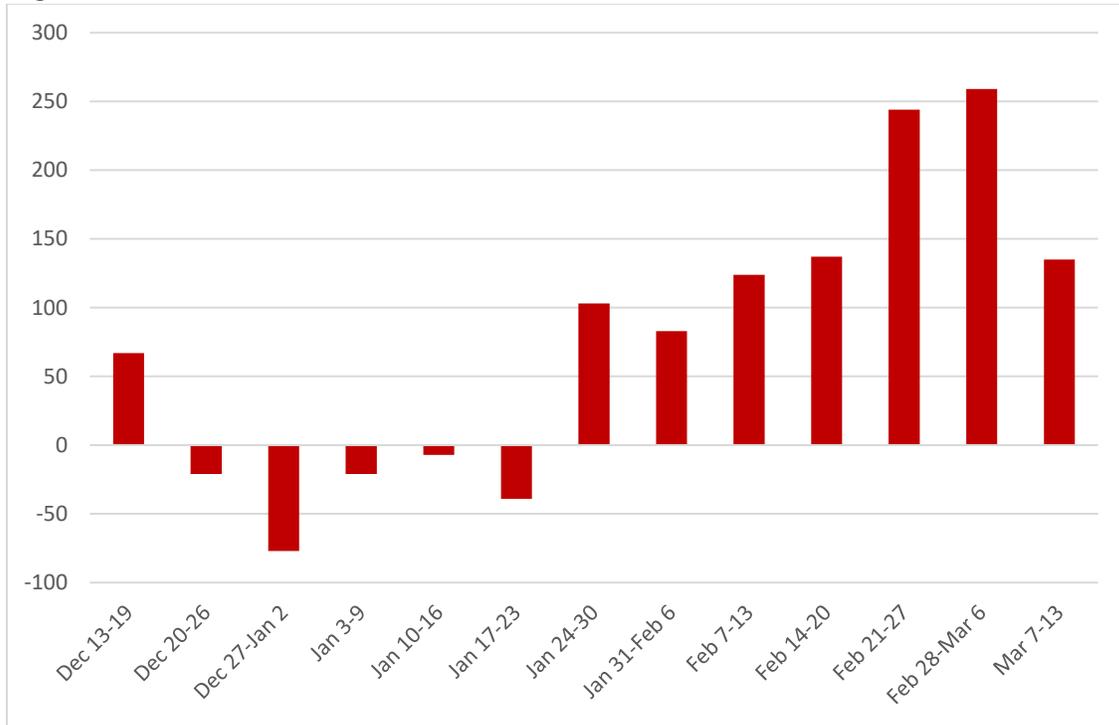


Figure 12: Associations with "War" on Russian TV, January 24 - March 13

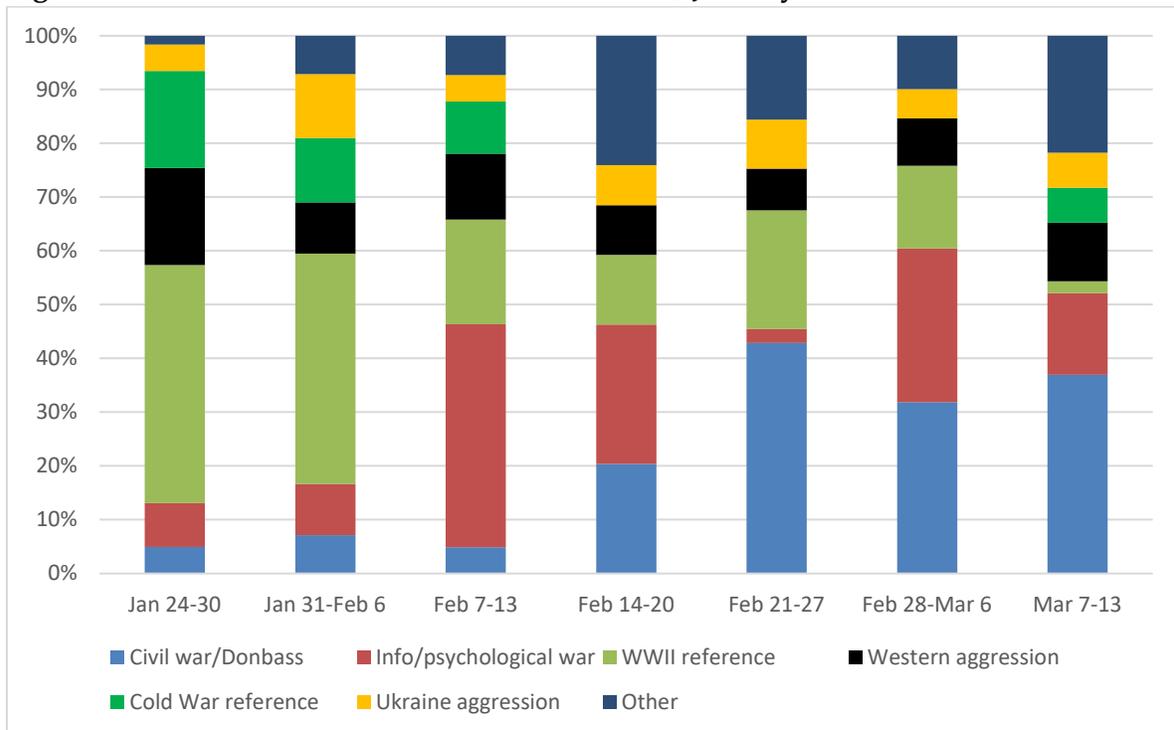
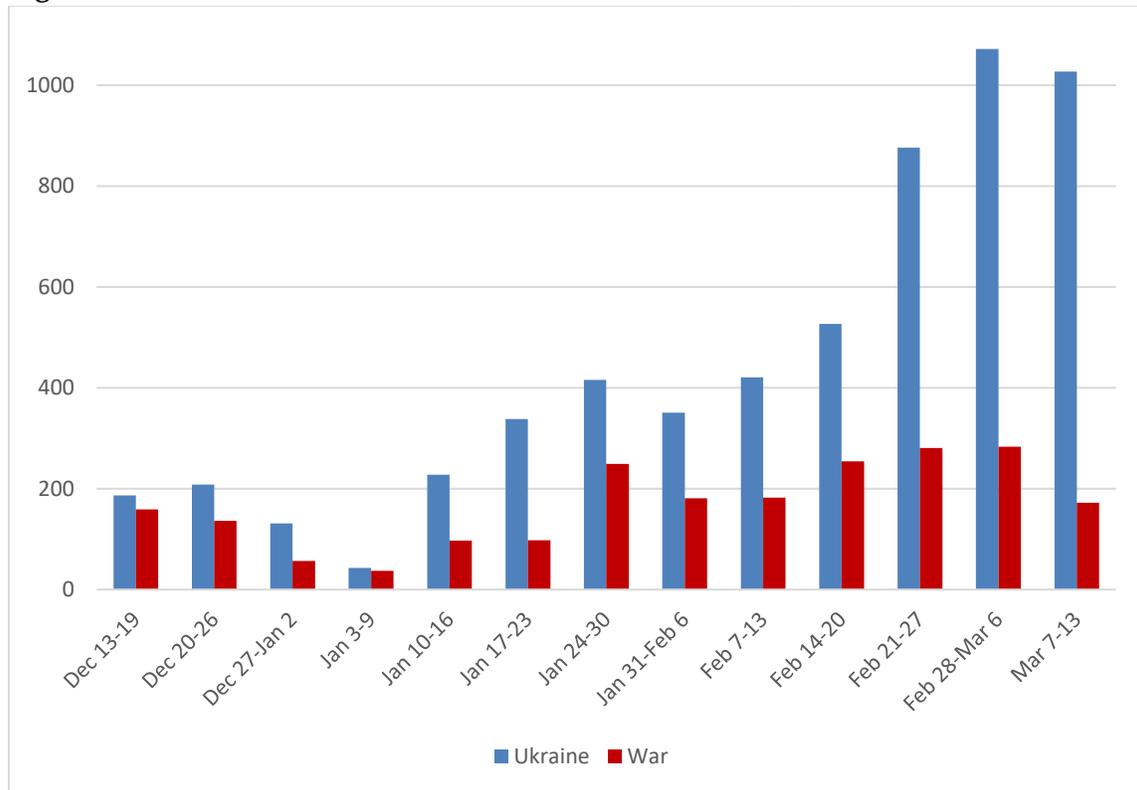


Figure 13: Mentions of “Ukraine” vs. “War” on Russian TV, December 13 - March 13



Manufacturing Support for War: Russia’s Preppers, Fellow Travelers, and Activist Networks

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 764

April 2022

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The impact on Russia of its war against Ukraine is heavier than President Vladimir Putin anticipated, both in terms of military losses and economic isolation. The survival of the regime will therefore largely depend on its capacity to generate popular support or—failing that—to keep people from engaging against the war. In order to succeed, the Kremlin has to ensure that a large part of the population is prepared to contend with the consequences of the war and show resilience in the name of the mission that Putin has chosen for himself and his country (and that those dissatisfied with the “new normal” are able to leave the country). To that end, the regime has to manufacture support for war by various means. Repression constitutes just one tool in the broader toolkit of the Kremlin, which needs to generate support by applying both top-down framing mechanisms and horizontal pressure to secure loyalty. This memo presents a preliminary mapping of the manufacture of support for the war by identifying three key groups on the domestic scene—the preppers, the fellow travelers, and the activists—and exploring how they have been coopted for the production of the war narrative.

The Preppers: The Central Role of *Agitainment*

The talk-show realm, for which Vera Tolz and Yuri Teper have coined the term [*agitainment*](#), has become a key feature of efforts on Russian television to build propaganda

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as a [spectacle](#). It allows the authorities to outsource ideological propaganda to the media realm, letting the different channels and their anchors compete for audiences, advertising revenues, and radical statements. The most infamously provocative political talk-shows – such as Sunday Evening with Vladimir Soloviev, 60 Minutes on Rossiia 1, and Time Will Tell on Pervyi kanal – have been discussing the supposed “genocide” of ethnic Russians in the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics and the supposedly Nazi groups in Ukraine (mainly the Azov Battalion) for months. The latest topic has been prevalent in the [talk-show realm](#) since the annexation of Crimea, but started being more heavily emphasized in the fall of 2021.

Since 2014, and more visibly since 2021, Russian state media have been cherry-picking anti-Russian news from Ukraine and inculcating Russian viewers with several messages that have become key arguments of the pro-war camp. First, the Ukrainian Army has been portrayed as having engaged in continued [bombardments of civilians](#) in Donbas since 2014 and as having mistreated the people there, causing thousands of deaths. Second, Ukrainian leaders have been described as neo-Nazis who want to exterminate Russians. This point is often exemplified by the 2014 speech of then-President Petro Poroshenko, who stated that Kyiv would win the war in Donbas because the separatist region would wither economically, [adding](#) that “our children will go to schools and their kids will stay in basements.” Third, Russian propaganda has actively shown the demonstrations of Ukrainian far-right groups, especially their [assaults](#) on those celebrating May 9 (Victory Day) and has placed particular emphasis on the slogan *Moskaliaku na hyliaku*, meaning “Lynch the Russians!” To this has been added the old trope that Ukraine lacks agency and is merely a tool of the US against Russia. Such a view was insultingly [laid out](#) by former Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in his 2021 article.

In a [recent study](#), Paul Goode states that the Russian media primed viewers with “war talk” beginning in December 2021, a sign of a coordinated campaign. Even if themes related to genocide, the situation in the Donbas, and the supposed “Nazism” of the Ukrainian authorities were unevenly discussed, the ideas that Ukraine was working out an aggression against the so-called People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and that the West wanted to weaken Russia were used to prepare the population for a conflict.

The ideological scene of Russian imperialism was also re-activated a few months ago. The infamous political philosopher Alexander Dugin has [denounced](#) Ukraine as a non-state and a non-nation ever since his first publications of the early 1990s. He has regularly re-activated this narrative during crisis moments such as the “Russian Spring” of 2014, during which his bellicose [call](#) to “kill, kill, kill” (Ukrainians) cost him his adjunct status at Moscow State University. The market niche of these ideologues has been to make more radical declarations than the state official narrative. Dugin, for instance, [stated](#) on the day of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine that “The only question is to know whether we will take Lvov and when” and [celebrated](#) the war as the final step toward the birth of a “new, authentic, real and independent eternal Russia.” This sentiment was echoed by Dugin’s

patron Konstantin Malofeev, who [rejoiced](#) on the YouTube channel of his Tsargrad media outlet that the world would soon see “the end of the time of shame for Russia.”

A Key Fellow Traveler: The Russian Orthodox Church

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has been a fellow traveler of the Putin regime for the past two decades. It has played an important role on the domestic scene in pushing – with [mixed results](#) – for a society that would be more obedient to the state, more patriotic, and more morally conservative. It has also played a central role in Russia’s outreach to European and American conservative circles, especially in the [Syrian](#) conflict, during which it developed an offensive religious diplomacy. Yet the Church has been careful in regard to Ukraine, afraid of weakening its already fragile status there: since the 2018 canonical schism, the autocephalous [Orthodox Church of Ukraine](#) (detached from the Moscow Patriarchate) has been gaining power, reducing Moscow’s influence over those Ukrainian parishes that still belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (which operates under Moscow’s umbrella).

During the first week of the war, Patriarch Kirill tried to maintain some nuances in his narrative. On February 24, he published a [statement](#) calling “on all parties to the conflict to do everything possible to avoid civilian casualties” and insisted that the “Russian and Ukrainian peoples have a common centuries-old history.” The Patriarchate obviously did not condemn the war – indeed, he even (in passing) congratulated the military on February 23, Russia’s Defenders of the Fatherland Day – but he was concerned to avoid a schism with the remaining Ukrainian parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. On February 27, Kirill took a more decisive position, [calling](#) those fighting against the historical unity of Russia and Ukraine “evil forces” and [insisting](#) on the need for “unity with our brothers and sisters in Ukraine.”

Finally, during his Sunday sermon on March 6, Kirill explicitly expressed support for the war. He referred to the alleged “genocide in Donbas” and [justified](#) the war as a fundamental civilizational divide, in which accepting or refusing a gay parade signaled belonging to either the Western civilization or Russian civilization. Notably, however, this framing of the war as representing a clash between liberal/decadent and conservative values has not been dominant in [Putin’s speeches](#) justifying the invasion of Ukraine.

The March 6 sermon marked not only Kirill’s complete endorsement of the state narrative – at the cost of [losing](#) the ROC’s Ukrainian followers – but also his metaphysical justification thereof. Indeed, the efforts to shroud Russia’s geopolitical ambitions in faith began long ago and have been reinforced over time. The Church has been one of the advocates of the idea of a [canonical territory](#) encompassing Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus and has defended the alleged brotherhood between Russians and Ukrainians since long before Putin espoused the idea in his July 2021 article. More importantly, the Patriarchate has deeply penetrated the Ministry of Defense, especially the nuclear forces, contributing

to the idea that for the Kremlin, “faith and force go hand in hand,” as Dmitry [Adamsky](#) has put it. Kirill’s claim that Russia’s invasion is theologically justified as spiritual warfare has already caused a [backlash](#): many ecumenical institutions have severed ties with the Moscow Patriarchate, while Pope Francis, talking to Kirill on March 16, insisted that the idea of a [holy war](#) cannot be justified (anymore).

The Activists: The Z Movement

To mobilize citizens in a more horizontal way, the social fabric of patriotic associations has been put to work: veterans, youth groups, and Orthodox charity networks are being heavily mobilized to cheer up the population. A new mythology has been crafted, with a new visual symbolism: the letters Z and, to a lesser extent, V, both in Latin script.

The two letters are painted on many Russian tanks (a classic military tactic used to distinguish between similar tanks belonging to opposing sides and show directions) and their meaning has remained a subject of inquiry among experts. The Russian Ministry of Defense recently [declared](#) that Z stands for “victory” (*za pobedu*) and V for “the strength is in the truth” (*sila v pravde*), a sentence taken from the cult movie [Brat](#)). Yet the origin of the initiative remains unclear: while the presidential administration seems to attribute it to the PR and marketing department of the Ministry of Defense—Shoigu is [said](#) to have a good sense of PR—in close collaboration with RT and its infamous chief editor, Margarita Simonyan, the Ministry of Defense seems to credit it to the presidential administration. Several advisers commented anonymously to [Meduza](#) that it was a mistake to select a Latin letter to defend the so-called Russian World, not to mention the letter with which Zelensky’s name begins. [Some](#) people even theorize that VZ stands for Volodymyr Zelensky as part of an attempt to demoralize him.

The letter Z has since appeared on many private individuals’ cars and has been proudly [displayed](#) as a sign of support for the Russian troops, in a manner similar to the use of the [St. George ribbon](#) in the 2014 conflict—the letter is, in fact, often depicted in the ribbon’s orange and brown colors. Yet, as always, it is difficult to disentangle genuine grassroots support from politicized astroturfing by the authorities, such as initiatives paying [TikTok](#) influencers to spread pro-war slogans. The emblazoning of the letter Z on many [official buildings](#) and its appearance on street billboards confirms that the impulse is coming from above in hopes of generating broader popular enthusiasm. Some regions use it to showcase zealous loyalty: the governor of the Kemerovo region, Sergey Tsivilyov, for instance, announced that his region would be now spelled KuZbas, with a capital Z. Similarly, the [Orthodox vigilante](#) movement Sorok Sorokov has renamed itself Zorok Zorokov. New conspicuous display of loyalty is also visible through the “za Putina” or “za prezidenta” slogan, with za written in Latin letters to refer the Z movement.

The consumerist machine has been activated too: one can now buy T-shirts, magnets, mugs, and stickers emblazoned with the Z symbol. Russia’s largest online retailer,

Wildberries, features a lot of small publishing companies that sell the Z symbol on a variety of everyday items and clothes. It also pushes sales of Z stickers: anyone searching Wildberries for “car sticker” or even “newbie sticker” will automatically get stickers with the Z symbol from companies with very few reviews, meaning that they pop up not because of their popularity but because the Wildberries algorithm has programmed them to be first.

Analysis of the public use of Z on the Internet demonstrates its relatively low popularity. We compared the usages of #Zamir (“For peace,” a slogan used during [Putin’s stadium speech](#)), #Svoikhnebrosem (“we don’t forget ours,” a popular pro-war slogan), and #Netvoyne (“no war”) hashtags in the searchable spaces of Facebook (2,700/22,000/109,000, respectively), Instagram (41,500/410,000/626,000), Vkontakte (78,300/437,000/128,700), and Odnoklassniki (11,000/25,000/8,1,00) as of March 29. As we can see from these numbers, the Western social networks of Facebook and Instagram gather a more anti-war public, while on Russian social media anti-war slogans are losing to pro-war ones. However, considering the centralized hashtag propaganda—all state media, administrative organs, and even schools must showcase the Z symbol on social networks—adherence to the Z slogan in general can be described as flabby.

The Z movement illustrates the difficulty of dissociating top-down propaganda actions from horizontal pressures. We know, for instance, that students at many educational institutions have been [obliged](#) to attend Z demonstrations and schoolchildren to [participate](#) in pro-war efforts. While cases of top-down action are well documented, it is more challenging to measure the level of horizontal pressures: many people may exhibit a Z as a simple badge of loyalty to avoid standing out or being finger-pointed. Others may employ the Z as a sign of belonging to Russia as an “imagined community” and display it with a vague feeling of patriotism or an empathic memory of the Great Patriotic War, but not a clearly defined pro-war stance.

Conclusion

Manufacturing support for the war has been and will remain more difficult than the easy rally-around-the-flag effect of 2014. The Russian population has moved from the epic moment of Crimea’s annexation to a bitter “no other choice than resilience” position. Western sanctions and actions cancelling Russian culture may generate a form of passive support that would benefit authorities. The latest Levada-Center survey, though its results should be interpreted with caution, shows [83 percent](#) of Russians support Putin, confirming a dynamic of defensive consolidation. Russian political elites, after two weeks of shock and surprise, seem to have [reconsolidated](#) around the regime after recognizing that they have no future outside of Russia and no way to return to their previous way of life.

But even among those ordinary citizens who support their president and the war – or, at least, the war as they know it – there are and will be nuances that Western policymakers must keep in mind when seeking to accurately assess the limits of Putin’s popular support. Crafting a more granular approach to Russian citizens, avoiding cancelations of everything Russian, and talking to all those who have left Russia as a sign of protest will help prevent a new Iron Curtain from falling on Europe.

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Moscow's Manipulated Memory Politics and Attack on Ukraine

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 758
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Hardly anyone expected that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which has been going on since the 2004 Orange revolution one way or another, would turn into an actual war. However, an analysis of Russia's memory politics, coupled with President Vladimir Putin's desire to preserve his own power, made a direct military clash almost inevitable.

On the 24th of February, one day after celebrating the Day of the Defender, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. From President Vladimir Putin's official [address](#) just before the attack, it was possible to discern three official reasons behind this decision. First, the war happened "to prevent a potential threat to Russia from Ukraine," which, according to Putin, was planning to join NATO and acquire nuclear weapons. Second, it was necessary "to stop the genocide of the Russian population in Ukraine." Third, it was Russia's "obligation" to provide military support to Ukraine's separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, which Moscow had just recognized as independent states.

Putin's unofficial goal is to ensure that Ukraine remains within the orbit of Russia's influence with a status similar to Belarus. But it is Russia's memory politics – via Putin as the main campaign architect – that preordained the war against a country with which it shares centuries of common history, Orthodox religiosity, and Slavic roots.

A New Russian Identity

To understand how memory politics became such a decisive factor in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, it is important to more granularly define the term. Memory politics can be understood as the official position of a country regarding historical events and their commemoration. This position, if shared by the population, forms a collective memory,

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which is the main component of collective identity. This connection between collective memory and collective identity is nicely defined by Russian scholar Anatoly Khazanov, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In his 2008 [article](#), “Whom to Mourn and Whom to Forget? (Re)constructing Collective Memory in Contemporary Russia,” he writes: “Tell me what you want to remember, commemorate and forget, and I will tell you who you are.” In other words, to understand who today’s Russians are and why they support Putin, we need to know what and how they remember and commemorate, as well as what they try to forget.

When Putin came to power in 1999, Russia for already ten years had tried to live according to the rules of the liberal international order. These rules included the idea of being fair and showing remorse for past misdeeds, which had inflicted suffering on other people. President Boris Yeltsin was mindful of this aspect and willing to include reparations for Soviet crimes in his political agenda. According to another Russian scholar of collective memory, Alexei Miller, Yeltsin [even kneeled](#) in front of the monument to the victims of the Katyn massacre, which the Soviet Union had denied and blamed on Nazi Germany. Yeltsin recognized this crime committed by the Soviet Union and, as a leader of the successor state, took responsibility for making amends for the past for the sake of a positive future relationship between Russia and Poland. Similar repentance from the Russian government was expected by the Baltic States, Ukraine, and the Russian nation itself—they all suffered at the hands of the Soviet totalitarian regime. The Russian authorities in the 1990s were working in close collaboration with the NGO Memorial that worked on investigating and memorializing the crimes of totalitarianism.

The situation radically changed after Putin assumed power, first as a prime minister in 1999 and then as president in 2000. During his first term in office, Putin realized that being remorseful does not fit well with Russia’s pride, and he harnessed the concept of “glory” to build a new Russian identity. The first steps in this direction were made by revisiting commemoration and memorialization policies. Instead of repenting for the crimes committed by the Soviet Union, Putin [suggested](#) justifying them by the circumstances and necessity.

For this purpose, in 2007, a group led by Russian historians Aleksandr Filipov and Aleksandr Danilov wrote a new book on Russian and Soviet history from 1900 to 1945, which was intended to be the leading [textbook](#) for students and high school teachers in Russia. The book suggested focusing on the glorious past of the Russian and Soviet state and on its role in winning the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945). The book emphasizes the Soviet contributions to the war and the USSR’s role in the liberation of Europe. This latter point, reinforced by official rhetoric that mixes criminal slang with an aggressively dominant stance toward neighboring countries while emphasizing the achievements of

the Putin era, became the focal point for the construction of a new Russian collective identity.²

The Kremlin went further. Reinstating an official version of history, Russia adopted legislation in 2014 that criminalized any “trials of rewriting history.” The amendments made to the Russian Criminal Code, in accordance with this so-called Yarovaya Law, made it punishable even to repost objectionable material on Facebook. Furthermore, just two days before the invasion, the Russian parliament introduced a bill [attaching](#) fines and prison sentences to a 2021 law [banning](#) “any public attempt to equate the aims and actions of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany during World War II, as well as to deny the decisive role of the Soviet people in the victory over fascism.” The NGO Memorial and other NGOs that received external funding were labeled as “foreign agents,” a term that bears a very negative connotation in today’s Russia.

In brief, Putin’s government put much effort into constructing a new Russian identity by utilizing narratives about the Great Patriotic War and promoting the memories of Russian and Soviet glory. It also encourages obliterating the memory of shame for Soviet crimes against humanity. This identity has been reinvigorated, as Gulnaz Sharafutdinova puts it, by the [entrenchment](#) of an idea of the “besieged fortress,” which portrays Russia as a country surrounded by enemies. The success of memory politics is difficult to measure, but the fact that Putin’s popularity [soared](#) after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 demonstrates that it had an effect on a large percentage of the Russian population. This success is explicable by two interrelated factors: 1) a certain nostalgia that persisted and that was nurtured by Putin’s memory politics among the Russian population regarding the powerful position of the Soviet Union on the world stage, and 2) disappointment with liberal values from the 1990s and a negative or confrontational attitude toward the West. Both factors suggest that the Russian electorate is or was ready to trade some personal material comforts in exchange for greater Russian state power.

The Inevitability of a Clash

Russia’s official interpretation of history is, by default, confrontational toward Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic States. Similar to the Russian Federation in the 1990s, these countries have been investigating the crimes of the totalitarian regimes that they suffered from. These investigations led to the condemnation of both Nazi and Soviet crimes during and after World War II and the equation of these regimes in terms of their violence and negative effects. Furthermore, they have criminalized the denial of their crimes and forbade the symbols of both. None of these steps were considered a problem by Russia up until Putin’s second term in office, when he started actively [pursuing](#) a new politics of

² Also see: Ivan Kurilla, “[Nationalizing Russian \(War\) Memory Since 2014](#),” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 659, July 2020; “[Russia, My History](#)”: History as an Ideological Tool,” Point & Counterpoint, August 2018; “[The Return of Stalin](#)”: Understanding the Surge of Historical Politics in Russia,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 429, May 2016.

memory. Eventually, opposition from the Russian side to the critical approach among East European countries ignited a conflict that reinforced Ukrainian political gravitation toward the West.

However, disagreements over differences in the memory politics of Ukraine within Russia could have stayed at a low level of intensity if not for one more element that also contributed to turning it into an actual war. This element is Putin's goal to preserve his own power. To achieve this goal, he relies on memory politics that were partly informed and partly encouraged by the above-mentioned readiness of the Russian population to trade some of its well-being for the promised laurels.

Putin first detected this mood of the Russian electorate in the public support of his Chechen military campaign. Indeed, his firm grip in handling the Chechen war turned the then-unknown head of the FSB within three months into a politician who won a Russian presidential election and continued to do so throughout the 2000s. His answers to foreign journalists and politicians, which were rich in Russian criminal slang, resonated positively with domestic audiences. The population clearly desired a strong leader who could respond to critiques from the West the way that the Soviet leaders used to. This popular demand not only informed the construction of a new Russian identity based on "glory," but it also trapped Putin, making him a hostage of his own memory politics.

To maintain his high popularity, Putin had to continue in the chosen direction, which also meant adding actions to words. After some time, his personal bravado, anti-liberal stance, and pseudo-patriotic rhetoric were not enough to keep his popularity high. The public was tired of the accumulating domestic economic problems and the immovable political elite, which had replaced the oligarchs of the 1990s. It did not believe in words and unfulfilled promises anymore. The annexation of Crimea solved the question of Putin's popularity for some time, but the support of separatism in the eastern parts of Ukraine did not have the same positive effects as Crimea due to its longevity and lack of resolution. The stagnation of the Russian economy also was leading to growing protests among the electorate, and new success in world politics—a way to reassert Russia's status in the world—was becoming a pressing priority.

Complaining vigorously about Ukraine's potential admission to NATO, which was not a likely scenario, had the advantage of revising the post-1991 Soviet humiliation and showing that Russia now had to be taken seriously in world affairs. Following apparent military successes in Chechnya in the early 2000s, Georgia in 2008, Crimea in 2014, and Syria in 2015, Putin assumed it would be unproblematic to use the military to assert control over Ukraine. However, it was a gross miscalculation, considering the strategic importance of Ukraine for Europe, the size of the country, and the willingness of Ukrainians to fight. To many external observers, it seems incredible that Putin did not recognize Ukrainian's commitment to their nation and state, but that his blindspot is a consequence of his political system.

Conclusion

Russian memory politics is based on two main principles: it cherishes the memory of Soviet glory and suggests obliterating the memory of shame. This memory politics led to a new Russian identity, which is based on the anti-liberal values of the Soviet era. The return to a Soviet-style collective identity constrained Putin's choices in international politics. To maintain his own popularity and secure his position in power, he had to back his anti-Western rhetoric with actions. An efficient, victorious war in Ukraine, which does not have NATO protection, would suit the goal. However, Ukraine's defiance coupled with the unified support of the West produced the opposite effect: Putin's position is now more vulnerable than ever.

Putin's Home Front: A War on Time

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The Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert—born in what is today Ukrainian Lviv—famously dubbed Iosif Stalin the “Great Linguist,” a derisive reference to the Soviet dictator’s [intellectual pretensions](#). Despite marked differences between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his communist predecessor, there are also discomfiting similarities. Conspicuously, Putin—who is said to keep [part of Stalin’s library](#) in his Kremlin office—likewise fashions himself a scholar, with his armchair forays into interpreting the past dating back to the early days of his presidency. Like Stalin, he is fixated on Ukraine and exquisitely concerned about his legacy, viewing himself as the latest incarnation in a long line of [Russian empire builders](#).

But Putin has no desire to genuinely understand the complexities of Russia’s past, instead [distorting it](#) to serve present-day purposes. This instrumentalization of history was on full display well before Putin ordered the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, with the Russian president claiming in [August 2019](#) that Western perfidy in appeasing Hitler left the USSR little choice but to conclude the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Subsequently, Putin penned a factually tendentious missive in [July 2021](#) disparaging the very existence of a Ukrainian nation. These two narratives, when combined with the uncritical adulation increasingly accorded the Soviet Union’s defeat of fascism in the Great Patriotic War, directly set the stage for the present conflict.

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Using and Abusing History: Ukraine and Beyond

The Kremlin's attempt to justify its invasion of Ukraine constitutes a glaring example of how the past may be utilized for political ends. In his speech broadcast on [February 21, 2022](#), Putin invoked a highly dishonest reading of history to argue that Ukraine was an artificial state "entirely and fully" created by Bolshevik Russia that now found itself a "colony" of the West with a "puppet regime" that did not reflect the will of the people, but rather the interests of oligarchs and far-right nationalists, the latter supported by "the leading NATO countries."

In making this argument, Putin transposed linguistic tropes associated with World War II onto the current geopolitical situation, accusing Ukrainian "Nazis" of committing "genocide" in the Donbas and claiming that Kyiv was planning a "blitzkrieg" against separatist enclaves in the Donbas. He went even further in the address he gave heralding the start of Moscow's offensive on [February 24, 2022](#). Drawing from a deep well of historical resentment and humiliation, he equated the US and NATO to Nazi Germany in referencing Stalin's failed attempts at appeasing Hitler and vowed that "we will not make this mistake a second time." The connection between the past and present could not have been clearer: "Your fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers," the Russian president emphasized, "did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland so that today's neo-Nazis could seize power in Ukraine."

Such propaganda reflects the misuse of historical analogies and language. Reality has succumbed to euphemisms, with terms like "special military operation" and "de-Nazification" obscuring the truth and banalizing the evil of German fascism, just as phrases like "extraordinary events" and "liquidation" did in the USSR. Even the pretext Putin gave for launching the war in 2022 – to defend the cultural and political rights of Russian-speakers in Ukraine – echo Stalin's proffered rationale for sending the Red Army [into Poland](#) on September 17, 1939, an act of aggression cast as a mission to protect "fraternal" Ukrainians and Belarusians.

Such statements have transformed the recall of history into a matter of national security and made it an integral part of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy. It is not surprising that the Kremlin has employed them, as propagandistic appeals are most effective when they echo core assumptions that their intended audience is predisposed to believe. Recollecting the sustained effort Putin's regime has undertaken to promote "[patriotic](#)" education, it is obvious the pump was already being primed a long time ago for what we are witnessing today. Speaking at a national teacher's conference in June 2007, Putin made clear that he saw the writing of history as a form of ideological combat, stressing that while Russia certainly had "problematic pages" in its past, other countries had even more of these to contend with. Engaging in classic "whataboutism" during this talk, Putin excoriated U.S. involvement in Vietnam before asserting that Russians cannot permit themselves "to be saddled with guilt" over their history.

The past, of course, always serves the state to some degree. Social media and now-perpetual news cycles have fundamentally altered the mode through which information is delivered and consumed, but the underlying manner in which historical legacies are deployed in Russia mirrors precedents. For example, the Kremlin has in recent years sought to [limit the range](#) of permissible statements that can be made about the Soviet era, notably by adopting [punitive memory laws](#) of the sort that have burgeoned throughout Eastern and Central Europe since the 2000s. Nonetheless, one respect in which Moscow's propaganda campaign has proven innovative concerns its bid to control how the present-day situation in Ukraine will be depicted going forward. This future-oriented development renders Russia's instrumentalization of the past far more pernicious and authoritarian than it had previously been.

During the first two post-Soviet decades, the Kremlin's politics of history was [primarily reactive](#). Russian leaders responded with increasing ire to what they perceived as overly negative depictions of the Soviet Union and its accomplishments, which generally emanated from the former Warsaw Pact states (engaged in their own political struggles over the past, the latter capitalized on the European Union as a forum to air historical grievances after their accession to it in 2004). Gradually, however, this progressed to promoting Moscow's preferred narratives through commissioning [school textbooks](#) that elided the crimes of Stalinism and inaugurating commemorative practices that lauded the USSR's role in World War II, shifting the emphasis away from the victims of communist totalitarianism. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine brought about yet another stage in its evolution: Russia has begun to limit how one may speak about still-unfolding events. The immediate goal of this censorship is to suppress dissent at the domestic level. But the underlying agenda goes far beyond the current crisis, its intent being to [prophylactically shape](#) how Russia is viewed in a broader historical continuum. Questioning the state's historical narrative—even a narrative that is still coming into existence—is now tantamount to treason, which [Putin terms](#) the “the gravest crime possible.”

Memory Laws (and Why They Matter)

In March 2022, the Russian legislature passed [a series of administrative and criminal statutes](#) designed to prevent the dissemination of “deliberately false information” about the armed forces, which includes referring to the war in Ukraine as anything but a “special military operation.” They likewise criminalize supporting Western sanctions and prohibit the “discrediting” of the military and other state organs operating beyond the country's borders. Penalties range up to fines of five million rubles (around \$90,000) and fifteen years of imprisonment, with legal experts speculating that these laws may be [enforced retroactively](#) (e.g., for internet content posted prior to their promulgation).

This legislation represents a corollary to an earlier [May 2021](#) statute that forbade drawing comparisons between Nazism and Stalinism. It also has antecedents in [two 2019 laws](#) that respectively banned the online publication of “fake news” and statements deemed

“disrespectful” to the state or public, as well as [Article 67](#) of the Russian constitution, amended in July 2020 to protect “historical truth.” Specifically, the 2021 law prohibits denying the decisive role the Soviet people played in countering the Third Reich and the “humanitarian mission of the USSR in the liberation of European countries.” This statute, in turn, is an outgrowth of [a 2014](#) law designed to protect the reputation of the Red Army.

Unlike in countries where such prescriptive laws are primarily symbolic, in Russia their violation is actively, if selectively, prosecuted. For example, in 2014 blogger Vladimir Luzgin was fined 200,000 rubles (around \$5,900 at the time) by the Perm Regional Court for sharing an article on his [vKontakte page](#) sympathetic to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and its leader Stepan Bandera, while blaming the USSR and Nazi Germany jointly for the start of World War II. Luzgin was found guilty of intentionally disseminating false information. More recently, in November 2021 a [19-year-old student](#), Matvei Iuferov, was sentenced to three years’ incarceration for uploading a video to Instagram that showed him drunkenly urinating on a Red Army veteran’s portrait. Although the veteran’s son did not seek damages and Iuferov quickly took down the video and issued an apology, he was nonetheless found guilty of “rehabilitating Nazism.” Meanwhile, Amnesty International reports that as of March 2022, prosecutors had already opened dozens of cases against Russian anti-war protestors, including [at least ten](#) for “discrediting” the military.

As a consequence of this latest intervention into free speech, Russia has veered from mandating a particular way of recalling disputed legacies into promoting outright disinformation. The past is now [thoroughly securitized](#), which also explains why it is so important to control how present-day events are discussed. Historical narratives are set against a backdrop of civilizational contestation. Ukraine is painted as an inalienable part of the Russian ethno-cultural complex, and depictions of the ongoing conflict are shaped to fit this overarching account. The European Union, in turn, is portrayed as a hedonistic and morally enervated pawn of the United States, a declining hegemon intent on brainwashing Ukrainians into accepting worldviews and geopolitical alliances that are culturally alien to them.

Embracing this narrative not only permits Moscow to position itself as the embattled guardian of Europe’s “traditional” values, but also allows it to self-righteously remind the West that, as Foreign Minister [Sergei Lavrov put it](#), “Russia has more than once saved Europe from itself.” Drawing on Russian experiences dating back to the Napoleonic Wars, this historical logic has been weaponized to argue that a heroic nation—especially one that sacrificed more than any other to free Europe from Hitler’s scourge—could not possibly be complicit in an unprovoked act of aggression against the Ukrainian people.

Reasoning in this manner makes sense from the perspective of Moscow. Russians, by and large, reject criticism of the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War. Framing the present hostilities in terms of 1941-1945 therefore resonates domestically, no matter how bizarre

[invoking “Nazi” boogeymen](#) or [juxtaposing](#) the pro-Kremlin “Z” logo against the orange-and-black of the St. George’s Ribbon (the quintessential emblem of Victory Day) may seem to outsiders. Moreover, doing so permits Russian losses in Ukraine to be equated to the sacrifices required to defeat German fascism.

Moscow’s actions underscore that publicly commemorating historical legacies in Russia is never simply about the past. Rather, the goal is to establish the legitimacy of Putin’s regime as the undisputed guardian of a sanitized and statist vision of history. But these Kremlin-led interventions encompass more than just attempts to memorialize the state while [modeling Russia’s future trajectory](#). Limiting how people may speak about Ukraine affects not only political discourse, but also the wider societal fabric.

Young people and educators have increasingly been [pressed into supporting](#) the Kremlin in recent years, including through the [Young Army Cadets](#), a state-sponsored organization created in 2016 that combines elements of scouting with military training and features a strong emphasis on memorializing Russia’s military accomplishments. However, manifestations of this sort of jingoistic propaganda have gone into overdrive since the invasion of Ukraine, with the last few months witnessing a proliferation of social media posts featuring children and teachers, as well as various [youth groups](#) and even residents of a [cancer hospice](#) in Kazan, displaying full-throated support for Moscow. The conflict has also made educational institutions overtly complicit in the Kremlin’s misdeeds, whether this be the Ministry of Education in Murmansk Oblast “recommending” educators teach a [blatantly pro-Russian version](#) of Ukrainian history or the Union of Rectors issuing a [statement endorsing](#) Putin’s invasion.

Implications: Past, Present, and Future

The sheer breadth of these prescriptions is what makes them so troubling. Their reach and vagueness render ordinary citizens, journalists, and academics potentially liable for a wide variety of speech acts, prompting self-censorship if not outright persecution. As a result, most of Russia’s [independent media outlets](#) have moved abroad or shut down, and access to social media has been [severely curtailed](#). Meanwhile, a [recent poll](#) found that nearly half of Russians have never heard of VPN clients, which would permit circumventing internet restrictions; even among 18- to 24-year-olds, less than a quarter regularly utilize them. Consequently, engaging in any critical reflection on the war in Ukraine – and past wars – requires a significant effort from Russians.

The long-term implications of this are dire. First, the Kremlin’s propaganda machine has inculcated a siege mentality in society, fostering the perception that Russia is under perpetual attack and has always been on the [right side of history](#). Second, the threat of domestic repression has increased markedly in recent months. On [March 16, 2022](#), Putin sounded positively Soviet when he referred to pro-Western Russians as “scum and traitors” and asserted that Russia will undergo “a natural and necessary self-purification

of society.” (He had already previously proposed elaborating conditions for “[citizenship termination](#).”) Third, fear of the state is once again beginning to grip Russians, as indicated by the growing willingness to inform on those [deemed disloyal](#). As Russia becomes an increasingly closed society, the propagation of a warped version of the past – and the war in Ukraine – will only prove easier to achieve.

Conclusion

Russia has not yet regressed into a political condition comparable to Stalinism, but today it is closer to it than at any time since the USSR’s dissolution. Linking the Great Patriotic War to the conflict in Ukraine allows the Kremlin to tap into a reservoir of historical imagery that remains profoundly meaningful to Russians; it also provides a convenient distraction, one that Putin’s regime has adroitly exploited to curtail the rights of citizens. This mendacious mnemonic behavior has been rewarded: As of May 2022, [77 percent of Russians](#) surveyed supported the armed forces’ actions in Ukraine, while the number who want Putin [to remain in office](#) after his current term expires in 2024 rose from under 50 percent in September 2021 to 72 percent. More recently, a [June 2022 poll](#) found 81.3 percent trust Putin and 78.9 percent approve of his performance in office.

The securitization of history, however, is a dangerous gambit. When the destruction that Moscow has wreaked on Ukraine is finally acknowledged, the moral and practical repercussions will affect Russia for generations to come. And then, as [Yevgenia Albats](#) observes, “the myth of the liberators, which was the most important component of our self-identification, what lay at the very root of national memory – regardless of whether you are a supporter of the regime or not – will finally be destroyed.” Given this, the words of the dissident Russian academic [Yuri Pivovarov](#) ring prophetic: “What version of the past we get will determine our future.”

PONARS ● NEW APPROACHES
EURASIA ● TO RESEARCH AND
● SECURITY IN EURASIA

A photograph of Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, speaking at a podium. He is wearing a dark suit, a light blue shirt, and a red patterned tie. The background is a blue wall with a white curtain. The image is framed by a teal border.

Effects of the War on Russian Domestic Politics

Discontent, Discussion, Dissemination

MOUNTING GRIEVANCES IN RUSSIA'S SECURITY SERVICES LEADING UP TO FEBRUARY 24

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 755
March 2022

Emily Ferris¹
Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI)

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has set a series of events in motion, from which there is no return, least of all for President Vladimir Putin. For years, he has been preoccupied with his personal legacy. This includes his definition of what constitutes Russian national interests and the protection of them—one of the flimsy [pretexts](#) for the recent ground incursions into Ukraine. But now, embroiled in an inevitably messy conflict and amid nascent [protests](#) in Russia against the war, maintaining a reliable security service at his disposal will be vital. This, alongside burgeoning internal pressures, including an economy [bending](#) under the weight of fresh U.S. and EU sanctions, will mean that when the authorities' social contract with its people inevitably wears thin, a supportive security force will be vital in maintaining public order. But there is already growing evidence that the security forces' obedience to the Kremlin is waning.

Could it be that Russia's key security services, designed to restore order and quash protests, are themselves not under control at a time when Putin needs them the most? Since Putin's resumption of the presidency in 2018, there have been increasing numbers of former and serving security service members that have publicly criticized the government for presiding over abuses of power, violent hazing rituals, and suicides. While in themselves these acts are nothing new, the absence of an official and functional complaints department has resulted in the use of social media to document and amplify these claims.

Maintaining Order

Putin has a range of security services at his disposal, including his own bodyguard service (FSO), the army, riot police (OMON), the Federal Security Services (FSB, domestic

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intelligence), the police force, and the National Guard (Rosgvardia). These are all services that, among other functions, help the Kremlin to maintain order or quell protest action, particularly around elections.

Russian society has gradually become more securitized. The Kremlin has moved to further [restrict](#) the online and offline activities of its opponents. It has [silenced](#) the media that document the corrupt practices of senior public officials and has [intervened](#) ever more overtly into electoral processes to ensure a favorable outcome for the ruling United Russia (UR) party. With the opposition stymied, the September 2021 regional elections showed comfortable [wins](#) for UR across the board with few staffing changes, allowing Putin to focus on political stability.

Russia's steady securitization has been matched by a concomitant increase in state [spending](#) on internal security, but this has not been reflected in the security services' salaries or improvements to their working conditions. There seem to be cracks appearing in the security apparatus, with increasing complaints, suicides, and reports of violence. Low pay, long hours, and poor pension plans, alongside more general [claims](#) of abuses of office, are common complaints across all of the security agencies.

Who You Gonna Call?

In the absence of an official complaints body, security officers are often forced to turn to social media to express their concerns, which has created a publicly available body of information about their treatment. One of the most unusual occurred in April 2019, when a group of veteran OMON officers posted a video to YouTube personally addressing Putin and [appealing](#) for his help in increasing their pensions. The officers requested government housing upon completion of their service, from which they are routinely evicted when they retire. Amongst others, the video made mention of the officers' distinguished roles in suppressing protest movements during the 2012 elections, which saw Putin resume the presidency for a third consecutive term in office. But their years of long service apparently counted for little.

To meet this demand for registering complaints, a social media platform known as the [Police Ombudsman](#) was set up by a former police officer in 2017. This is a semi-formal group on the Russian networking site VKontakte, in which officers exchange views, report instances of abuse, and amass and distribute statistics to this end. The Ombudsman also hosts a Telegram channel, and in 2017 one of the most attention-grabbing [posts](#) related to huge bonuses for office support workers said to be well-connected to Kremlin insiders (and un-fireable) but who have no link to police work. The Ombudsman's official spokesman and founder, Vladimir Vorontsov, was a police officer for 13 years before he [left](#) the service in 2017, launching the Ombudsman service on VKontakte shortly afterward. It now has a subscription of 300,000 users, many of whom are former and serving officers.

While the authorities seem to have tolerated these pockets of complaints for a brief time, Vorontsov was suddenly [slapped](#) with spurious extortion charges in May 2020. He documented the claims against him, [maintaining](#) that the operation to search his apartment involved senior detectives normally assigned to cases of the highest importance, even though the crimes he is accused carries a sentence of no more than two years in prison. This might seem like an overreaction from the police force, but it could also suggest that the Ministry of the Interior – under whose auspices the police operate – views the growing complaints against its system as a potential threat. Although the Ombudsman channel has not yet been formally shut down, fears of similar reprisals would likely deter other officers from picking up Vorontsov’s mantle.

Low salaries and overwork are just some of the complaints, but in the past three years, there has also been a spate of suicides among serving officers across the country, which the Ombudsman initially led the way in reporting. The Ministry of the Interior does not publish official statistics on this, but in 2019 the Ombudsman [released](#) tabulated data indicating the suicide rates, showing 50 such incidents in 2018, predominantly in the republic of Bashkortostan with [reports](#) of understaffing, overwork, and underpay, details of which are glossed over by the local force.

Under [pressure](#) to preserve order during election cycles and ensure an optically smooth platform for UR, officers work long hours, and the continued use of quota-based indicators known as the *palochanaya sistema* (stick system) forces officers to [agree](#) on the number of crimes they have processed, which incentivizes officers to punish civilians. Increasingly, interviews with disgruntled officers are surfacing in local media – which rarely make national headlines – who have been forced to turn to journalism to highlight their plight. Most recently, in February 2022, Major Alexander Malygin, with 20 years of service on the police force in the central coal-mining region of the Kuzbass, gave an [interview](#) to a local news outlet in which he outlined issues such as unmanageable bureaucracy, abuses of office, backlogs of cases, and an emphasis on creating paperwork rather than solving crime.

Tackling Hazing

The situation among other Russian security services does not appear to be much more promising. Technically, the army is highly regarded by Russians. According to research [published](#) in September 2020 by the independent Levada Center polling agency, the army is the most trusted institution in Russia (66 percent), even more so than the president himself (58 percent), the FSB (53 percent), and the police (just 36 percent).

But reports of violent hazing rituals known as *dedovshchina*, in which senior officers purposefully target new recruits, have for years been widely [publicized](#) on social media outlets or on occasion by victims’ families. These rituals appear to be more common in

remote border postings where there is little oversight from Moscow. But then, in late 2021, a spate of suicides in the army, including an escapee, prompted a deeper public examination of these rituals. Investigative journalists reported increased incidences of hazing, whose cases were acquitted or entirely dismissed, a trend that is [growing](#). In a widely publicized case, in October 2019, a military conscript stationed in the Far Eastern region of Zabaikalye [shot](#) eight other officers, wounding two others. Media at the time covered the incident extensively and attributed it to the officer's experience of violent hazing rituals, although defense officials [maintained](#) that he had had a nervous breakdown.

The official response has been to ignore the issue. Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu has [denied](#) there is a systemic problem, dismissing the allegations as isolated incidents of bullying. The slow-moving judicial system officially maintains that convictions for abuse of power, violence, and psychological torture are down, but NGOs [report](#) a different picture.

As with the police forces' complaints, however, and notwithstanding Shoigu's framing of the problem as an unconnected series of events, it appears that the authorities have had enough. Instead of addressing the problem, increasing wages, reforming the judicial system to process the cases, or improving oversight at military bases, Russia instead has legislated.

The Kremlin has taken formal [steps](#) to restrict the dissemination of information about anything to do with military crime, the deployment of the Russian military, and its training. The FSB, in October 2021, [published](#) its treatise of topics that would result in foreign agent status should organizations or individuals write about them. The list includes any [information](#) about the moral or psychological state of the armed forces—even sharing any [discussions](#) about these practices online would be considered a violation of the FSB's list. Inclusion on the list requires lengthy and regular financial reports to be submitted to the FSB, as well as a prominent standfirst above each article that reiterates their status as a foreign agent, alienating them from potential partners or funders as well as audiences.

The law has already been a successful tool of self-censorship. The Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg, an NGO established in the 1990s and dedicated to protecting the rights of army conscripts, abruptly [announced](#) in October 2021 that it would be ceasing its activities, days after the FSB introduced the new law.

Another new law in March 2019 [forbids](#) military personnel from using smartphones or other devices capable of connecting to the internet, which would prevent them from posting details about their military service online. This law was likely a [response](#) to the growing number of leaks from soldiers about the movement of military equipment—allowing open-source analysts a much more detailed look at troop movements from

geolocation tags. But it was also a direct effort to prevent officers from using their devices to film and document incidents of hazing, which had previously been passed to investigative journalists as evidence.

Cementing His Legacy

The Kremlin's attempts to stifle dissent in its own security services are in line with a growing trend of repression, from which no one is immune. The 2021 regional elections were noteworthy in that they demonstrated the almost total suppression of political newcomers or oppositionists. Oppositionist Alexei Navalny in previous years had regional offices mushrooming all over Russia, but these were abruptly shut down; he was imprisoned on dubious charges and his colleagues harassed or jailed. Police officers have privately [reported](#) that serving officers who "like" or share social media posts about Navalny are immediately dismissed. Protest action around these elections was paltry, unsurprisingly given that earlier in the year, from January-March 2021, 68 percent of [protests](#) in Russia were met with a state response, and in many cases, the use of excessive force by the OMON and Rosgvardia, as well as the military police.

Legislation can be a powerful tool in Russia, even when it is selectively applied. The security services' remit has been expanded – another law was quietly [passed](#) in December 2021, which gives law enforcement officers the power to, among others, enter and search citizens' homes even if the homeowner is not present, abandoning the need for search warrants. While the September elections indicated the [importance](#) to Putin of continuity, accompanying legislation days after the election that [scrapped](#) term limits for regional governors essentially ensures the same leaders remain in office across the country, with little scope for political change. This also reduces the prospects for political newcomers that Putin may not trust, ensuring that the old guard remains intact.

The stifling of discontent within the security services, punishments for those who express it, and denials that there is a fundamental problem all suggest that Putin cannot afford to be seen to address these issues. In the early years of his presidency, Putin was lauded as a newcomer who brought a semblance of economic [equilibrium](#) following the rocky 1990s, as well as quashing the previously volatile North Caucasus republics. But now, amid a new hot war with Ukraine, Putin's domestic legacy as the guarantor of stability is at risk.

Conclusion

Anti-war demonstrations across the country are likely to be detained or met with violence from riot police – particularly if the protests take on an anti-Putin tone. However, it would be worth noting any hesitancy on the part of these officers to detain civilians, particularly if some of them share similar sentiments around the war. Most pressingly, if Putin is unable to call on the security services to put down anti-war demonstrations, ensure that

the opposition remains weak and fractured, and protect him personally, there is a risk of an uneven transition of power in the years to come.

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Breaking Ranks? Signs of Unease in Russian Military Circles

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 739

February 2022

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With Russian forces poised to invade Ukraine, there are signs of possible dissent amongst Russia's upper echelons. Early February saw two publications by retired Russian military officers that are highly critical of plans for military action against Ukraine. These dissenting voices attracted attention in the mainstream [Western](#) and [Russian](#) press.

Western analysts are unsure what to make of the surfacing of dissenting voices on the periphery of the Russian military community. The consensus [view](#) is that these figures are far removed from the center of power and cannot be taken as representative of the views of the officer corps as a whole. Surveys suggest that there is strong support for President Vladimir Putin [across](#) all sections of the Russian elite – for his assertive foreign policy and the military in particular. However, it is highly unusual to see such critical commentary from retired senior officials who still have close ties to the military establishment. Is it a sign of important stirrings in the attitudes of the Russian officer corps? It is plausible that their ideas could gain traction in Russian military circles should a war in Ukraine go poorly. Further, these could be the early signs of more forthright political opposition in Russia.

Debates Behind Closed Russian Doors

Western analysts tend to assume that the Russian elite is monolithically united behind Putin and that his opinion is the only one that counts. While it is true that decision-making in Russia is extraordinarily [centralized](#) around the person of Putin, there are policy debates and power struggles behind closed doors. Differences of opinion can even be found among leaders of the security organs – the *siloviki*. And there are, of course, inter-service [rivalries](#). It is former KGB officers who dominate Putin's inner circle – but it is the armed forces who would bear the burden of extensive military operations in Ukraine.

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The Russian president's [ultimatum](#) to the United States in December has caused the biggest international crisis in Europe since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A decision to launch new military action against Ukraine would have a momentous impact on Russia's relations with the West and on Russian society. The Russian media has been vocal in [blaming](#) the crisis on the United States, claiming the need to protect Russian citizens in the breakaway Donbas from an imminent attack by Ukraine. The willingness of the Russian military to carry out an invasion of Ukraine is not questioned in Western [media coverage](#) of the planning for war, and there is no reason to doubt that they will carry out their orders. But we really don't know what they are thinking.

Aside from the Ukrainian people and their forces, Russian service members would be the people most directly bearing the costs of Putin's aggressive strategy. And their leaders stand to shoulder a good share of the blame if things go wrong. It is therefore not unreasonable to suppose that some may have grave concerns about Putin's bellicose approach. As such, the appearance of critical commentary at this juncture bears careful scrutiny since it may be an early signal of broader pushback against the rush to war within the military ranks or against the continued prosecution of the war should it not be swift and successful. Hopefully, it will increase the pressure on Putin to step back from further escalation.

Some Elevated Voices

One early dissenter is retired Colonel Mikhail Khodarenok, a former General Staff officer. Khodarenok was born in 1954 and [served](#) in air defense before working in the administration of the General Staff from 1992-2000. Since then, he has been an author and journalist, serving as editor of the [Military-Industry Courier](#), a daily paper with close ties to the military-industrial complex, from 2010-2015. He currently writes for [Gazeta.ru](#) and the radio station Vesti-FM.

In an article in the [Independent Military Review](#) published on February 3, Khodarenok was blistering in his attack on the rationale for military action against Ukraine. He warns that while "bloodthirsty politologists" predict an easy victory, "it will not be a walk in the park." He sees the apparent faith in a single disabling mass blow by missile strikes as a [revival](#) of the Italian military theorist Giulio Douhet's airpower doctrine of the 1930s. Ultimately, that strategy did not produce a victory for Adolf Hitler, nor did it work for Soviet forces against the Afghans and Chechens, who had no air force but nevertheless managed to fight Russian forces to a standstill in the First Chechen War. Khodarenok also [notes](#) the shocking losses of Russian aviation to Georgian anti-aircraft fire in the 2008 summer war.

Assuming that the initial onslaught does not result in a Ukrainian capitulation, Russia would then be facing a protracted occupation of a hostile population in a country the size of France. Khodarenok argues, "the level of hatred towards Russia is underestimated. The

Russian army will not be met with bread, salt, and flowers in Ukraine.” Moreover, “Nothing has been learned from the events in south-east Ukraine in 2014,” when pro-Kyiv Ukrainian forces fought fiercely. Big cities are ideal terrain for insurgents, and “there would be more than one Stalingrad or Grozny in Ukraine.”

Putin’s next critic is retired Colonel-General Leonid Ivashov. Born in 1943, Ivashov [is the head](#) of the All-Russian Officers Assembly, a small radical nationalist veterans’ organization. He [held](#) senior positions in the defense ministry from 1976 until 2001 and was reportedly behind the Russian paratroopers’ “dash to Pristina” in Kosovo in 1999. Since being fired by Putin, he has been a gadfly on the “red-brown” end of the political spectrum, active in groups such as the nationalist [Izborsky Club](#).

His critique, published online as a petition to the Russian president and people, was even more castigating than Khodarenok’s. In the appeal, Ivashov implores the Russian president not to go to war with Ukraine and even calls on the president to resign. Ivashov agrees with the Communist Party in seeing the main threats to Russia as internal—demographic decline, an apathetic society, and a state apparatus in the hands of a corrupt, kleptocratic elite. In his eyes, Russia’s confrontation with Ukraine is a diversion by “anti-national forces” to enable them to continue stealing the country’s wealth. Ivashov gave a follow-up [interview](#) to *Novaya gazeta* on February 12, in which he explained his political position in more detail. He said that the language of ultimatums that Russia is using had not been seen in Europe since Adolf Hitler, and he praised Alexei Navalny for his willingness to expose corruption.

Most Western analysts are skeptical of the political significance of Ivashov’s démarche. Indeed, he has long been a [critic](#) of Putin’s rule. As a radical nationalist, he supported the annexation of Crimea, but he wanted Putin to go further in carving out a pro-Russian Novorossiia in Ukraine. The Putin administration has managed to effectively [shut down](#) the political challenge from the radical nationalist opposition that Ivashov represents. Still, the fact that someone like Ivashov is now criticizing the idea of attacking Ukraine is significant and could, as I discuss below, open up the Kremlin to a new political challenge from the radical right.

The respected liberal military commentator Aleksandr Golts [wrote](#) that when he first read Ivashov’s anti-war appeal, he thought it was a fake, given Ivashov’s track record as a nationalist hawk. Golts added that Ivashov “has deep roots in the establishment,” playing a prominent role in opposition to the reforms led by Anatoly Serdiukov, defense minister from 2007 to 2012, and in the 2019 controversy over whether Israel was responsible for Syria’s downing of a Russian plane. Serving Russian officers are not allowed to speak out on political topics (like their U.S. counterparts), so it is possible, Golts suggests, that Ivashov is being used as a vehicle to express their views.

These dissents, and Ivashov's in particular, could herald the [resurgence](#) of a "red-brown" alliance of radical nationalists and the Communist Party. The Communist Party still has an [organizational network](#) and a loyal support base. It has successfully mobilized around social issues, from the increase in the pension age in 2018 to COVID-19 vaccine mandates in 2021. The Kremlin has [struggled](#) to keep the Communist Party under control. It is shifting from the "systemic" to "non-systemic" opposition – that is, it is willing to openly challenge the Kremlin's policies, whereas before, it was more loyal.

Conclusion

Historically, the Russian army has [stayed out](#) of politics. But at crucial points, it has played a decisive role. In August 1991, the army's lackluster support for the coup against Mikhail Gorbachev sealed the fate of the Soviet Union. In 1993, the willingness of Army leaders to shell the rebel parliament ensured that Boris Yeltsin would stay in power. The launching of the second Chechen war in 1999 was key to Putin's accession to the presidency, and the army managed to deliver a victory, of sorts.

Since then, Putin has lavished [increased spending](#) on the Russian military, and turned it into a much more effective fighting force. However, the nature of Putin's relations with the military remains rather opaque. Neither Putin nor Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu themselves served in the Soviet Army – Putin was in the KGB, and Shoigu was a construction engineer who rose to the position of minister of emergencies in the early 1990s.

Most of the civilian policy establishment in the Kremlin-friendly think tanks in Moscow have stuck loyally to the party line in the confrontation with the West over Ukraine. However, some of them have given hints of unease about the escalating crisis. For example, Andrei Kortunov, director of the Russian International Affairs Council, [wrote](#) on January 27 that "war would not be beneficial for Russia under any scenario." Fyodor Lukyanov, the chair of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and research director of the Valdai Forum, [wrote](#) on December 17 that "Russia presented NATO and Washington with an ultimatum." But a few days later, Putin [told](#) a defense ministry meeting that Russia's proposals to NATO were *not* an "ultimatum."

A full-scale war would be a tremendous political risk for Putin – and he is known to be [risk-averse](#). So hopefully, he will heed the warnings from the military and civilian skeptics, step back from the brink, and be content with a modest gain, such as declaring [formal recognition](#) of the separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Russia's Right-Wing Reactions to the War

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 772

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Russia's right-wing realm consists of two segments: the mainstream right and the far right. The first is a faction of the ruling elite, while the second leads a largely oppositional existence. They overlap in both pursuing the goal of [restoration](#) of past greatness but differ in how they understand restoration. The mainstream right prioritizes a return to superpower status and opposes the West as a transatlantic structure and enemy of Russia. The far right pursues identitarian projects of ethno-confessional homogeneity or Russian/Orthodox advancement and superiority within the country's multinational framework. It does not simply oppose the West and its elites but spans a historical line over centuries from the Rothschilds to George Soros with a barely hidden anti-Semitic underpinning. During the pandemic, segments of the right were anti-lockdown and anti-government, but now both segments stand in support of Russia's "special operation" in Ukraine. Examined here are both right-wing segments' reactions to the war. We show where they differ and where they overlap in their perceptions. Our argument is that the right's various segments have merged into one pro-war camp but have contrasting expectations vis-à-vis the scope of the war.

The Far Right: From Ethnic Nationalism toward Imperial Greatness

The far-right's composition changed over three post-communist decades. Its strong identitarian, Aryanist, neo-Nazi, and White Supremacist components moved toward an imperial, monarchist, and Orthodox fundamentalist outlook. Self-identifying as the [Russian] "nationalist movement," the far right experienced its peak in the late 2000s with annual "Russian Marches" through Moscow and other cities. As the movement grew increasingly violent, [engaging](#) in numerous attacks leaving hundreds dead, the Putin regime imprisoned movement leaders and outlawed most neo-Nazi organizations.

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The 2014 Ukraine war divided the realm, with parts of the neo-Nazi segment leaving Russia to fight in Ukraine's volunteer battalions while others joined the Donbas separatists. The movement has re-organized ever since, mobilizing around an ultra-conservative agenda of restoring "traditions" embodied by the Church and family vis-à-vis the onslaught of international elites planning a "global government" and "[Great Reset](#)" through "digitalization" and "transhumanism." The far right delegitimizes its opponents by portraying them as agents of Russian and foreign elites [operating](#) as a "4th LGBT Reich," from Pussy Riot to protection of immigrants (analog of Black Lives Matter) and lesbians and gays.

The war started as the far-right's mistrust of the Russian government was at an absolute height. Driven by opposition to the state's COVID-19 vaccination campaign, the far right was grasping old (and new) conspiratorial beliefs. These purported that an international globalist elite controlled the Russian government, pushing it down the path of force-vaccinating Russia's population in order to enslave or exterminate it. Despite the many calls to resist state vaccination campaigns, the 2022 war suddenly overturned the far-right's anti-state stance in some of its most notable organizations, such as [Dvizhenie Sorok Sorokov](#) (Forty-Forty Movement), one of the main far-right presences on Russian streets since the early 2010s.

The far-right's neo-Nazi component opposed the war against Ukraine in 2014, but by 2022 its presence had moderated. Broadly, the far right welcomed Russia's attack on Ukraine and celebrated President Vladimir Putin's February 24 speech denouncing Ukraine as a Leninist creation. It derided Western sanctions and applauded the president's speech at Luzhniki Stadium on March 18, seeing in it references to Russia's tsarist past. It welcomed Putin's [threats](#) directed at the "collective West's" "fifth column... national traitors... people who earn money here and live there." It saw in these words the promise of [purging](#) Russia's political-economic class. It drew a parallel between the war on Ukraine and the January 2022 draft presidential [decree](#) on the "Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values" and [called](#) for silencing the intellectual opposition to the decree.

Both the war and the decree signaled for the far right a restoration of imperial power and "traditional" social organization. In this context, it interpreted as bad news the late March negotiations in Istanbul, and the Russian negotiators' statements that a compromise was in sight and troops were withdrawing from Kyiv. For the far right, such negotiations were a betrayal of the initial goals of the "special operation," namely occupying the whole of Ukraine, which the 2014 military operation had already failed to achieve.

Vocal criticism came from those segments that had fought in the 2014 war on the pro-Russian side (such as Igor "Strelkov" Girkin, initially the main warlord operating in the Donbas), questioning the Russian army's preparedness, demanding a partial mobilization that would also return them to arms, and warning about the effects of Western sanctions.

As Russia's military advance failed to capture major Ukrainian cities, far-right critics demanded that Russia accept the participation of volunteers from their own ranks. News about the recruitment of Syrian volunteers and the involvement of Chechen troops further antagonized far-right critics such as Strelkov. Anatoly Chubais' March 23 flight to Turkey also sparked further rage in these circles, suspecting that parts of Russia's elite had sabotaged the war effort again (as in 2014) by allowing such top officials to leave the country.

The Mainstream Right's "Restoration of the Future"

The mainstream right [consists](#) of neo-Eurasianists, neo-Stalinists, conservative Orthodox, and Great Russia nationalists ("supranationalists"). These were early opponents of the 1990s shock therapy, the dismantlement of economic bonds with former Soviet republics, and the 1993 Russian Constitution that attempted to provide a Western constitutional framework. They formed a "conservative counter-movement" against liberalism and Westernization by the late 1990s, which, throughout the 2000s, grew increasingly close to the Putin regime.

Mainstream right members only rarely started from the far-right camp, with the notable exception of the revanchist and self-proclaimed Eurasianist Alexandr Dugin, well known in the West, who decided to become a Putin loyalist in the early 2000s. Some already belonged to the political class before Putin, such as Parliamentary Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin. On February 24, 2022, Volodin [made clear](#) that Ukrainians and Russians are "one people," "one culture," and "one faith." Others only started their political careers under Putin and orchestrated the conservative ideological turn after 2012, such as former Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky, who was appointed to lead peace talks with Ukraine in March 2022.

Although many on the mainstream right belong to United Russia, membership is not decisive for being part of it. Some have close ties to the Russian Orthodox Church or to the industrial-military complex. For the latter, a prominent figure is Dmitry Rogozin, one of the founders of the "national-conservative party" Rodina (2004-2006) and a former ambassador of Russia to NATO (2008-2012). Rogozin served as vice-premier (2012-2018) before Putin appointed him as general director of the state corporation Roskosmos. In an interview with the TV channel Rossia-24 on March 3, Rogozin [threatened](#) the West to cancel collaboration on the Russian space program "in the interests of defense." A week later, he [celebrated](#) the war not only as an act to liberate Ukraine from Nazism but also Russia "from the rot that has now shown itself to be a traitor."

Elena Panina, a member of the Duma Committee on International Affairs, belongs to that group too. She started in the 1990s as a businesswoman and became chair of Moscow's Confederation of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. She founded the *Zemstvo* movement inspired by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's manifestos and became a board member of the

World Russian People's Council (*Vsemirnyi Russkyi Narodnyi Sobor*) headed by Patriarch Alexei II. In 2020 she launched her own think tank, Russtrat, which advocates for Russia's "traditional values" and [renewal](#) of efficient strategic planning in Russia. Panina shares with many others in the mainstream right the view that the West wants to destroy Russia, having [stated](#), "Of course, any war ends with negotiations and a peace treaty. However, for Russia, there is only one way to conclude such a treaty – from the position of the winner."

On the mainstream right's ideological fringe [operates](#) the Izborsk Club that was founded in 2012 by neo-Stalinist Alexander Prokhanov and the Institute of Dynamic Conservatism. With Dugin and Prokhanov, the Izborsk Club maintains a closeness to the monarchist and ultra-Orthodox far right. Dugin's Eurasianist Movement participated in the "Russian March" in the 2000s, while Prokhanov's *Zavtra* newspaper provided the main publication outlet integrating various far-right figures, including, among many others, Girkin-Strelkov. Izborskians (Club members) have an important ally in the former investment banker and orthodox-monarchist Konstantin Malofeev, who, among other positions, also has served as Patriarch Kirill II's deputy in the World Russian People's Council since 2019.

In 2015 Malofeev created his TV channel Tsargrad and the "political-analytical center" Katekhon, with Dugin as the website's chief editor. Katekhon's supervisory board further includes another Izborskian, the heterodox economist Sergey Glazyev, a full member of the Academy of Science. Glazyev worked on founding the Eurasian Economic Union and currently belongs to the Eurasian Economic Commission's Board as minister for Integration and Macroeconomics. The Katekhon board [features](#) people even closer to the political establishment, such as Federation Council member Andrey Klimov and Leonid Reshetnikov, a former Lt. General of the FSB and former director of the president's well-known political think tank, the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (RISI). Both Malofeev's Katekhon and the Izborsk Club were active supporters of Crimea's annexation and the Donbas separatists in 2014.

Izborskians regard themselves as the avant-garde of an encompassing alternative agenda to oligarchic capitalism and Western integration, an agenda that they have recently [entitled](#) the "strategy of victory." The 2022 war sparked hopes that Izborskians would have their new momentum, with the power elite finally having no other choice but to listen and [implement](#) their developmental statist agenda. This approach entails a strong sovereign state (with a morally renewed elite), protection of core industries, strategic planning, and a conservative idea of Russia as a unique, non-western civilization. They regard the break with the West as a final turn to the East, not just as a question of Russia's identity but as a long-postponed paradigmatic shift in Russia's political economy, away from a resource-extraction economy for export toward a domestically-driven growth strategy promoting value-adding in key industries and further Eurasian [integration](#). Therefore, the Club's economists welcomed the Western sanctions in 2014 and (partly) 2022, seeing them not just as a threat but as an opportunity. Right after the first new round

of sanctions, Glazyev, for instance, [called](#) for a radical turn in Russia's monetary policy and for demanding rubles in exchange for gas, an idea that Putin eventually picked up.

Conclusions

Russia's right wing is united in strongly supporting Putin and the war against Ukraine as a justified and urgent matter for Russia's survival. Despite many differences about what "full" economic, political, and cultural sovereignty exactly means and how one can accomplish it, the right shares the view that the fight over Ukraine is not just about historic Russia or Eurasian unity but also [about](#) "de-Westernizing" and "de-Europeanizing" the whole world. Russia under Putin is supposed to be on a postcolonial mission (together with China and India). Yet there are important differences between the far right and the mainstream right. The far right only bandwagoned on the "conservative turn" after 2012 to survive and continues to foster conspiratorial beliefs that position it on an outright collision course with much of the country's political-economic elite.

In contrast, despite the overlap with the far right caused by fringe characters such as Dugin, Malofeev, and Prokhanov, the mainstream right represents a fraction of the political class and its elite. It contributed to the "conservative turn" by feeding the propaganda apparatus, supporting Putin in intra-elite conflicts, and inspiring (selectively) concrete policies. Its ideologues [promoted](#) the formula of "Russian spring" and "Novorossiya" for the Donbas, pondered over Russia as a distinct civilization, and elaborated on a new Russian conservatism long before these went into official documents. They pushed for the Eurasian Economic Union since the end of the 1990s, organized the lobby for the law on "internet safety" (2012), established a blacklist for internet websites, and helped to formulate the 2013 law against "gay propaganda," to name a few examples.

At the same time, the mainstream right's fringe elements and the ultra-Orthodox and monarchist far right continuously criticize Russia's political class for not acting decisively enough in developing Russia's own way. In turn, Russia's political elite abhors the right's criticism of Russian politics. Dugin [stated](#) after fourteen days of war, "Since the 1990s, a powerful anti-state stratum has formed in Russia, which has been significantly pushed aside by Vladimir Putin. But not eliminated in any way, only weakened." Although Dugin [claims](#) that Putin finally made his "choice" to restore Russia's empire, there's uncertainty within the right as to what extent this will last.

Russia's Muslim Leaders on the Invasion of Ukraine

UNITED IN A DISPLAY OF LOYALTY, DIVIDED IN COMPETITION FOR POWER

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 765

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 has deepened the existing cracks within Russia's biggest religious institution, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The Moscow Patriarchate is about [to lose](#) its Ukrainian eparchies that have, until recently, remained obedient to Patriarch Kirill. Little, however, has been said about reactions to the invasion among Russia's Muslim leaders, who represent Russia's second-largest religion—Islam. The presence of the “Islamic factor” in the Russian military campaign became apparent after the deployment of thousands of *Kadyrovtsy*—troops not incorporated into the Russian army but under the direct command of Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Muslim-majority republic of Chechnya. Furthermore, Crimea and the two breakaway states—the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR)—have a considerable Muslim population and thus constitute a battleground for Russia's major Muftiates competing over spheres of influence.

Signaling Loyalty

Since Vladimir Putin's ascension to power, Russia's Muslim elites have been [instrumental](#) in [legitimizing](#) Russian state policies at home and, to [a lesser extent](#), abroad. Since official Islamic institutions (Muftiates) depend on government funding, leaders of these institutions cherish close relationships not only with the state but also with the ROC, the latter being the primary beneficiary of presidential grants given to non-governmental organizations. Muftiates have traditionally [followed](#) ROC rhetoric when responding to important events or formulating their position on relevant social issues (such as women's and LGBTQ [rights](#)). In 2014, Muftiates [supported](#) the annexation of Crimea. With regard to the recent invasion, Muslim leaders echoed the words of official Russian spokesmen and ROC Primate Patriarch Kirill, who [accused](#) “the West” of disregarding Russia's security concerns and escalating the conflict that “did not start today.”

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Talgat Tadzhuiddin, head of the Central Muslim Spiritual Directorate in Ufa and notorious for provocative statements, [described](#) the ongoing war in Ukraine as “a necessary measure” (*vynuzhdennaia mera*). He [blamed](#) the Ukrainian leadership and “the Western world” for “trying to arrange a genocide [of the Russian people] and revive fascism,” that is, practically repeating President Vladimir Putin’s fabricated *casus belli* [statements](#). The chairman of the Coordinating Center for Muslims of the Caucasus and Mufti of Karachay-Cherkessia, Ismail Berdiev, also [supported](#) the invasion, stating that innocent people “need to be saved from bandits.”

Albir Krganov, the head of the Spiritual Assembly of Muslims in Russia (DSMR), and Kamil Samigullin, the chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Tatarstan, [recalled](#) that the conflict had been going on for eight years already; thus, suggesting that the escalation was inevitable and justified. Samigullin, in particular, [criticized](#) the double standards adopted by “the Western world.” According to him, the international community imposes sanctions only when a conflict occurs in Europe, while bloodshed in Muslim-majority countries, such as Iraq, Libya, and Palestine, too often remains unnoticed.

More restrained in his words was the chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol (DUMK), Emirali Ablayev, who [expressed](#) hope for a speedy resolution of the conflict. Similarly, the head of the major Spiritual Administration of the Russian Federation (DUM RF) in Moscow, Ravil Gainutdin, made a public [appeal](#) in which he only called to pray for peace in Ukraine, without openly approving or condemning the invasion.

As far as the public reaction is concerned, only Shamil Aliautdinov, the imam of Moscow’s Memorial Mosque on Poklonnaya Hill, [provoked](#) criticism. A popular Muslim life coach and author of *Think Like a Trillionaire* (2014), Aliautdinov urged his followers to use the crisis to invest in Russia’s crashing stock market. In his [words](#), after the necessary investments are made, one should take care of their health and limit consumption of negative information by abstaining from following the news.

New Spheres of Influence in the LNR and DNR

All Muftiates expressed unanimous support for refugees coming to Russia from the LNR and DNR, the two breakaway republics in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Tadzhuiddin [called](#) on co-religionists in Bashkortostan to assist refugees settling in there. Furthermore, the charitable foundation “[Insan](#)” and the Spiritual Administration of Dagestan, among [other Islamic](#) organizations in the country, provided humanitarian aid for those relocating from eastern Ukraine to Russia.

The two unrecognized quasi-states have also been a target in the political struggle between Muftiates over spheres of influence. Until 2014, the Donetsk and Luhansk regions together [constituted](#) the second-largest ethnic Muslim region in Ukraine after Crimea.

After February 22, 2022, when the Russian government announced its decision to recognize the DNR and LNR as independent from Ukraine, several Muslim spiritual organizations sought to claim control over Muslims in the region. Ravil Gainutdin was quick to [welcome](#) LNR and DNR Muslims as part of the DUM RF if they decided to leave the Muftiate in Kyiv (led by Said Ismagilov).

Roman Silant'ev, a [controversial expert](#) on Islam who is closely associated with the ROC and a critic of Gainutdin, pointed to hurdles that would prevent the LNR and DNR from forming an affiliation with the Muftiate in Moscow. He noted that the DUM RF's charter limits its influence only to the territory of the Russian Federation; that is, as long as the LNR and DNR remain independent, the DUM RF is legally unable to establish control over Muslims residing on their territories. Furthermore, Silant'ev stated that Donbas Muslims were represented by the All-Ukrainian Spiritual Administration of Muslims "Unity." "Unity" is currently chaired by Mufti Rinat Aisin, who arguably [maintains](#) close cooperation with DSMR leader Albir Krganov – Gainutdin's old rival. On March 22, the LNR Muslims [stated](#) their desire to become part of the DSMR.

A Continuous Battle for Crimea

The situation in annexed Crimea also remains complex. Crimean Tatars – the peninsula's most prominent Muslim community – are represented not only by religious but also by ethnonational organizations. Since 2015, the official Islamic institution there has been the Spiritual Administration of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol (DUMK). This Muftiate has [managed](#) to maintain political independence from both DSMR and DUM RF, though it has a closer collaboration with the latter. In parallel, the interests of Crimean Tatars are advocated by the Mejlis (Crimean Tatar representative assembly) and the National-cultural autonomy of the Crimean Tatars. The Mejlis, led by Refat Chubarov, was [outlawed](#) in 2016 for "the use of propaganda of aggression and hatred towards Russia," and its leaders are currently in exile.

On February 28, 2022, the head of the National-cultural autonomy of the Crimean Tatars, Eyvaz Umerov, addressed Ramzan Kadyrov, who then was deploying his troops in Ukraine. Umerov [asked](#) for "not losing sight" of the "Nazis" from the Mejlis in Ukraine and requested their detention. Several days later, on March 2, 2022, Chubarov, who does not have the ear of Muslim leaders in Russia, [reached out](#) to the Mufti of Belarus, Abu-Bekir Shabanovich. Chubarov urged Shabanovich to dissuade Muslims in the ranks of the Russian army from "killing Ukrainians." No response from Shabanovich has yet followed.

Crimea remains a sensitive issue for Russia's Muftiates that have close contact with Turkey. Although, during a telephone conversation with Vladimir Putin on March 6, 2022, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed disapproval of the "cancel" campaign against Russian culture abroad that followed the invasion, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs [restated](#) its refusal to recognize the annexation of Crimea and assured it would

watch the situation around “the Crimean Tatar Turks” closely. As Turkey struggles to maintain the position of a mediator in the current conflict, joint projects between Russia’s Muslim leaders and their Turkish counterparts will likely be suspended.

Kadyrov’s Propaganda Machine

Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Muslim-majority Chechen republic, announced on February 26, 2022, that his forces were positioned on the battlefield in Ukraine. Since then, he has been regularly publishing social media videos of Chechen soldiers allegedly participating in military and humanitarian activities on Ukrainian territory. Kadyrov is probably the only high-ranking Russian official who openly calls for an escalation of the conflict with Ukraine. On March 23, he [claimed](#) he had been receiving positive messages from Arab Muslims, who allegedly thanked him for recreating the true spirit of *jihad*, which was distorted by ISIS.

Experts, however, have been skeptical of the physical role Kadyrov and his troops play in the military operation. Kadyrov’s video of himself in a room full of soldiers, arguably filmed near Kyiv, was likely false bravado. [According](#) to Ukrainian intelligence, the head of Chechnya never crossed the border into Ukraine. It is more likely that the *Kadyrovtsy* presence in Ukraine will have a more symbolic effect than serving any particular military goal. Some observers [argue](#) that the Russian state has been feeding into the image of Kadyrov and his associates as a merciless, destructive force to weaponize that perception in the information war: Kadyrov’s involvement in the conflict is supposed to spread fear among Ukrainians and damage their morale.

However, heavy [losses](#) among Kadyrov’s troops and [lack](#) of support for the invasion among ordinary Chechens pose a serious challenge to the authority of the Chechen leader. Whether he comes out stronger or weaker at the end of the war will be a problem for the Russian political elites as well. Kadyrov will either continue to independently deploy a private, combat-experienced army to get rid of his opponents or, on the contrary, completely lose control of the Chechen republic. Either of the two outcomes will certainly require Moscow’s involvement.

Conclusion

The Muftiates’ reactions to the invasion have not produced any visible effect on the federal level. Their statements tend merely to echo narratives produced by the presidential administration and official media channels. For some, the approval of the conflict is a stimulus to display loyalty to the state, while for others, it is their only possible reaction under the given circumstances. Since the Russian parliament [passed](#) a bill introducing jail terms of up to 15 years for “fake news” about the Russian army, any diversion from the official discourse poses a severe risk.

The struggle among Muftiates to gain control over Muslims in the DNR and LNR proves the general trend of the last thirty years. Russia's Muslim leadership continues to be highly divided, with several prominent figures competing over parishes to boost their authority as *the* leader of Russia's Muslim community, at least across the country's European part. Though in the past, the rivalry was chiefly between Mufties Gainutdin in Moscow and Tadzhuddin in Ufa, recently, Krganov has been gaining more visibility in challenging Gainutdin's power. Krganov's success in securing ties with Muslim leaders in the LNR suggests his growing political ambitions.

The imagery around Kadyrov and his troops may have the desired propaganda effects; however, it also reinforces already prominent Islamophobic ideas about Muslims being belligerent, brutal, and incapable of compassion. Kadyrov's involvement has awoken the specter of Islamic terrorism, and the shocks will be felt across both Ukraine and Russia. Potential victims of inevitably rising Islamophobia will include people from Chechnya and the Caucasus who did not support the war and Russia's Muslim community as a whole.

Cloudy Forecast for the Climate

RUSSIA'S CLIMATE POLICY IN A TIME OF WAR

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No.
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How will the war in Ukraine affect Russia's climate politics? Our research [demonstrates](#) that authoritarian regimes are not necessarily weak on climate policy. In fact, they may actively participate in negotiations on international climate agreements and develop robust climate policies at home. However, the Russian government's approach to climate change has been limited by the importance of energy exports to economic growth and hostility toward domestic climate activists, two tendencies that the current war has exacerbated.

Many observers have focused on the worldwide impact that Russia's war is likely to have on energy and climate policies, especially in Europe and the United States. The war's indirect and external effects on global efforts to address climate change are difficult to predict, as the upheaval in energy markets may lead to more rapid [decarbonization](#) or to countries relying on high carbon alternatives in the name of energy security. But for Russia's own climate policies, we argue that the war is likely to have a decidedly negative effect on the country's internal efforts to combat climate change for some time to come. Russia's war, in any case, will likely serve as a critical juncture for energy and climate policy globally.

Ambivalent Climate Policies

Moscow's progress on [developing](#) an ambitious climate policy was ambivalent even before the war. In recent years, the Russian government has made some progress in acknowledging the reality of climate change and pledging to address it. Russia ratified the Paris Climate Agreement and, in advance of the 26th Conference of Parties (COP) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Glasgow in 2021, the

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government updated its 2030 target to a 30 percent reduction of CO2 emissions below 1990 levels, a modest improvement over its previous target of 25-30 percent. However, given the 1990 baseline prior to the post-Soviet industrial collapse, the target [represents](#) an unambitious goal that Russia “will likely achieve... without the need for any additional climate policies.” President Vladimir Putin [set](#) 2060 as the target year for Russia to become carbon neutral, which is a modest goal compared to [many](#) countries targeting 2050, but it is at least a commitment.

The Russian government also recently produced some significant pieces of legislation and long-term plans related to climate change. In December 2019, it [announced](#) the National Action Plan for Adaptation to Climate Change. A bill on limiting and reporting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions was also [passed](#) but represented a weak effort. In the midst of the acknowledgment that climate change presents a serious challenge to the country, [rhetoric](#) about the pluses and minuses of climate change remains prevalent. For example, the National Action Plan [outlined](#) measures to mitigate climate change damage and to “use the advantages” of warmer temperatures, such as greater access to Arctic waterways, expansion of agriculturally viable land, a possible increase in the “productivity” of boreal forests, and lower heating costs.

How might the war shift Russia’s climate policy from this equivocal baseline? Below we consider three sets of factors related to 1) Russia’s participation in the global governance of climate issues, 2) the opportunities and challenges facing Russian climate activists, and 3) the effects of sanctions on the Russian energy industry. In addition to these internal developments, we conclude with a few thoughts on the ambivalent external effects of these developments on other countries’ climate and energy policies.

Broken Global Engagement Spells Policy Bleakness

Russia’s war in Ukraine has disrupted international cooperation on a host of issues, including climate, even as it has instigated rapid change. On June 1, 2022, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres captured this dynamic, [stating](#): “The sense of urgency in the debate on climate has, of course, suffered with the war in Ukraine. ... But I think this war has demonstrated one thing: How fragile is the world in its dependence on fossil fuels.” In the wake of its invasion of Ukraine, Russia’s participation in global governance efforts on climate and environment has been called into question domestically and by other countries.

Very early on, at least one of Russia’s climate representatives came out in opposition to the war. At a February 2022 IPCC meeting, Oleg Anisimov [said](#), “First of all, let me thank Ukraine and present an apology on behalf of all Russians who were not able to prevent this conflict. All of those who know what is happening fail to find any justification for this attack against Ukraine.” Some high-profile figures engaged in energy policy left the country, [including](#) Anatoly Chubais, the presidential envoy on sustainable development.

Following the invasion, some parliamentary representatives questioned Russia's continued participation in the Paris Agreement. Sergei Mironov, chair of the Federation Council and of the "A Just Russia" party, [suggested](#) withdrawing from Paris. Parliament member Georgy Arapov [argued](#) that Russia should reject environmental obligations that have "lost relevance," suggesting that Russia can protect its environment without international treaties. The Minister of Natural Resources, Alexander Kozlov, opposed withdrawal, emphasizing the country's significance to global climate policy, [stating](#), "The role of Russia in this process is huge. Our territory is 1/8 of the land, with more than 815 million hectares of forest cover. Russia, of course, is a global environmental donor." After some debate, the Duma decided against exiting the climate agreement.

Other varieties of climate cooperation have been suspended or called into question. The Umbrella Group, a coalition of non-EU developed countries operating under the Paris agreement, has [expelled](#) Russia. The Arctic Council, a key venue for cooperation on climate research, is not currently functioning as member states [refuse](#) to participate under Russia's current chairmanship. More broadly, in March 2022, the Ukrainian government [demanded](#) that Russia be excluded from a number of international environmental agreements, including the UNFCCC. International scientific cooperation also has been disrupted; the European Commission [decided](#) to "suspend the cooperation with Russian entities in research, science, and innovation," including through the Horizon Europe program. Russian scientists have begun to [lose access](#) to equipment and data necessary for continued climate monitoring.

Russia's participation has been halted in other global governance institutions that provide mechanisms that could incentivize more effective climate policies. For instance, Russia's expulsion from the Council of Europe has been widely discussed as a devastating break in its engagement with democratic and human rights mechanisms, but it also has implications for climate policy pressure. Recent litigation by activists in member states' domestic courts is working its way to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), which could require Council of Europe member states to take policy measures to prevent climate change harm to humans, including [halting](#) all further oil exploration. These decisions could have serious implications for any Council of Europe oil-producing states – of which Russia was by far the largest until its exit from the organization in March.

Increased Kremlin Repression Makes it More Difficult for Activists

Russia's lackluster and reluctant historical engagement with global climate action is [arguably](#) due in part to its resistance to engaging civil society actors. As we [show](#) in our research, climate activism has never been easy in Russia. As with many other areas of civic engagement the government considers threatening, climate activists have suffered from repressive legislation like the foreign agent and undesirable organization laws and from a lack of state receptivity to policy dialogue. During the 2021 UNFCCC meeting in Glasgow, the well-known Russian environmentalist Yevgeniya Chirikova, who has been

in exile since 2015, [noted](#) that “the authorities, unfortunately, continue to view climate action as de facto subversive” and that “activities to develop energy-saving technologies and reduce material consumption are seen as a ‘threat to the economic security’ of the country.”

Since the war began, these pressures have only increased, as they have for all forms of activism that could be seen as disagreeing with the government. With nearly all independent journalism and social media platforms restricted or fully blocked, and any critical statements about Russia’s role in the war criminally punishable, organizing becomes more dangerous, if not impossible. Like [many other](#) civil society activists, Arshak Makichyan, Russia’s most well-known youth climate activist, first [protested](#) the war and then left the country after being detained by the police. In an interview, Makichyan [described](#) how “It’s extremely difficult and dangerous to be an activist in Russia.” Prosecutors have [threatened](#) Makichyan with the loss of his Russian citizenship, which would leave him stateless.

Despite increasing state repression, many environmental NGOs and activists who have been actively working on climate change issued statements following the invasion. Greenpeace Russia [issued](#) a call for peace, and Vladimir Slivyak of Ecodefense [supported](#) sanctions against the country. The Council of the Russian Socioecological Union (RSEU), the largest national network of environmentalists, [issued](#) a statement expressing concern about “events in Ukraine,” stating: “War is the worst thing that can happen to people and to nature. Any military action takes human lives and has a profound negative impact on the environment.”

At the same time, international cooperation on climate change has become more difficult for activists as well, given the challenge of sharing financial resources and information. For example, the Norwegian environmental organization Bellona, which had been active in Russia for 30 years, [withdrew](#) from the country. WWF Russia [issued](#) a plea for financial support “in these difficult times” when they cannot easily access funding.

Energy Industry Hurdles and Damaging Alternatives

Sanctions on Russia’s economy in response to the war have created significant difficulties for Russia’s energy industry. Multinational energy companies have left Russia, meaning that many joint extractive projects are unlikely to proceed. Thane Gustafson, an expert on Russian energy and climate, [argues](#) that sanctions will deprive Russian energy companies of the foreign investment and technologies necessary to develop new, more challenging oil and gas fields and to drill offshore in the Arctic. The EU has [announced](#) a series of plans to reduce its dependence on Russian energy sources, and Russia has simultaneously [cut](#) gas supplies to some EU countries. While sanctions may reduce fossil fuel consumption, Russia also may [find](#) alternative customers in India and China. And thus far, the war-related sanctions have produced a [boom](#) in fossil-fuel income for Russia.

Sanctions may have other unintended consequences, however. As [we](#) and [others](#) have argued, the small improvements Russia has made to its environmental strategies to this point can be explained significantly by external pressures and incentives, such as import requirements of European markets. If Russia pivots from Western countries as targets for its oil and gas exports towards less carbon-stringent destinations like China and India (as [incomplete](#) as that pivot may be), it may have even fewer short-term material incentives to reduce its GHG emissions. As Angelina Davydova has [pointed out](#), corporate withdrawals from Russia in response to the war have also put much investment in renewable energy in Russia on hold.

Prompted by pressure from economic sanctions, Russian businesses have begun to ask for respite from environmental regulations. *Izvestia* [reported](#) that Russian businesses, including [Lukoil](#), have been asking the government to postpone the implementation of the country's greenhouse gas reduction strategy. Shortly after the invasion began, in early March 2022, the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RSPP) [requested](#) that the Russian government postpone the start of the Sakhalin regional pilot project for capping carbon emissions from this September to September 2023. The much-hailed program was to introduce gas emission quotas in the region from 2024 and serve as a case study for other areas. *Kommersant* reported that the Ministry of Energy [formulated](#) a plan to support the energy sector. Among many elements, the plan acknowledged that the current crisis means that the industry is not expected to meet the country's decarbonization plans.

For its part, RSEU released a statement in May on the effects of the domestic policies meant to alleviate sanctions pressures, such as de-bureaucratization and simplified licensing procedures across sectors. It [cautioned](#): "The trend of de-decolonization and restriction on the rights of citizens to participate in environmental protection in the country has emerged and is becoming more and more aggressive." It went on to say that some of the government's [efforts](#) have "a direct negative impact on ensuring the environmental security of the country and regions and the ability of citizens to exercise the right to a healthy environment." It notes that the reduced levels of state environmental reviews have created problems in construction, disposal of waste (including hazardous waste), drinking water sources, land use and zoning, and delays in current and planned ecological projects.

Conclusion

While the risks to Russia's domestic progress on addressing climate change are evident, more difficult to assess is the effect of Russia's war in Ukraine on climate policy in other countries. Sanctions against Russia's energy exports may speed up some countries' decarbonization efforts but slow them down for others. The disruption to global energy markets has reinvigorated debates about "energy security," which could mean less reliance on fossil fuels from Russia, but not necessarily fossil fuels overall, as some

European countries may seize the opportunity to accelerate decarbonization, while others will temporarily justify using other fossil fuels like replacement of existing natural gas with [imported LNG](#), or worse yet domestic [coal](#) despite its carbon intensity.

Climate change even appears to have become part of the information war between Russia and the West in recent weeks. The Russian Green Party critiqued the EU's decarbonization and sanctions policy simultaneously, [suggesting](#) that in the West, "some countries are trying to shift the fight for climate control to others or even just solve some of their problems at someone else's expense, hiding behind the climate threat." They argue that a shift in Europe from using Russian oil and gas to using dirtier fossil fuel sources from other parts of the world will lead to increased GHG emissions.

What is clear is that, in the Russian policy context, one of the casualties of the invasion of Ukraine is any prospect for climate action in the foreseeable future. This is a depressing turn of events, as there had appeared to be some potential for an improved policy just prior to the war, and the climate emergency in Russia and throughout the world is becoming ever-more urgent.

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Consequences of the War for Russia's Neighbors

Creeping Finlandization or Prudent Foreign Policy?

GEORGIA'S STRATEGIC CHALLENGES AMID THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 760

March 2022

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The implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine will affect global security architecture for decades to come as Moscow continues to escalate the conflict. Meanwhile, countries located in the EU's eastern neighborhood confront strategic dilemmas. As a frontline state in the "gray zone," outside the safety of NATO's security umbrella, Georgia faces the daunting tasks of pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration, strengthening its democratic resilience, preserving sovereignty, and avoiding Russian aggression at the same time.

Despite the show of Western resolve over Ukraine, officials in Tbilisi are forced to walk a thin line between being sensitive to Russian interests while not alienating the West. Georgia's allies in the United States and Europe were surprised by Tbilisi's rather passive foreign policy after the Russian invasion, especially considering that Moscow had demanded that NATO close the door on Georgia's future membership as well as Ukraine's. Georgia remains committed to its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, even formally [applying](#) for EU membership this year, although relations with its Western partners are cooling. This, along with its ambivalent position over the war in Ukraine, raises the question of whether the Georgian government is heading toward self-imposed Finlandization.

Tbilisi: Cautious or Accommodating?

The invasion of Ukraine illustrated that the Russian Federation is willing to use direct military aggression against its neighbors in order to restore its hegemony in the region. The Kremlin's revisionist politics have a significant impact on regional security as well as

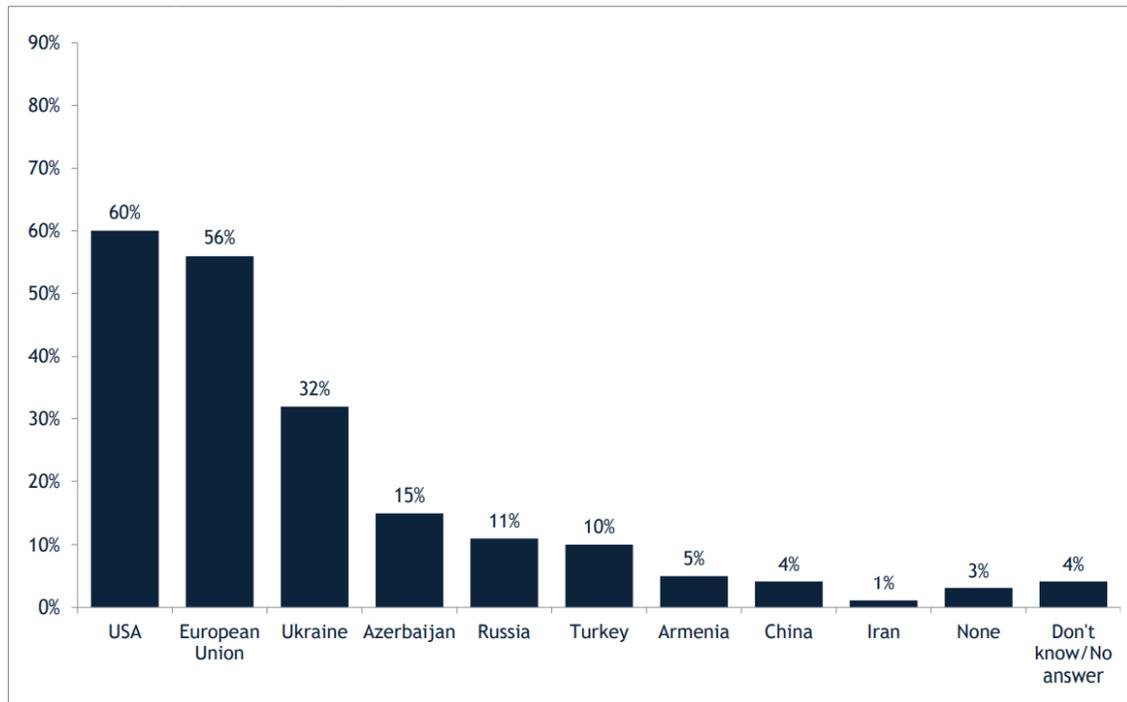
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Georgia's vital national interests. In the early days of the Russia-Ukraine war, the reaction from the Georgian government was extremely cautious and self-restrained. It refused to join any Western sanctions against Moscow, dismissing them as unproductive. Despite voting against Russia in the United Nations General Assembly and the Council of Europe, it exercised diplomatic self-constraint. The reaction amounted to mild appeasement of Russia and deepened Georgia's estrangement from the West.

It is puzzling why Georgian authorities, instead of actively working with Western partners not to get stuck on the wrong side of the new Iron Curtain, are self-imposing low-key foreign policy in this era of major geopolitical shifts. The [impression](#) that the Georgian government is seeking to improve relations with Moscow while being much more committed to solidarity with Ukraine is amplified by the presence of Russian troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. As they represent a constant threat to Georgia, Tbilisi tries to maintain a low profile in international politics and stay off of Russia's radar. Several analysts even [raised](#) concerns about whether some of the Georgian government's actions correspond to the "sincerity of the country's Western aspirations."

Another worrisome fact was that, unlike previous years, the Georgian Parliament failed to secure opposition support for a resolution passed in support of Ukraine. The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party single-handedly [passed](#) a resolution that did not even mention Russia and was [referred](#) to as a "blank piece of paper" by a Western observer. It seems that narrowly defined national interests based on party interests and short-term political gains threaten the standing consensus on foreign policy, making its key focus rather vague and creating strategic ambiguity. This positioning of decision-makers in Tbilisi also goes against the wishes of the absolute majority of Georgians, as 96 percent of those [polled](#) think that the war concerns Georgians as well, and 86 percent think it is their war too. It also needs to be noted that after the United States and EU, Ukraine is perceived by the Georgian population as its main political ally (**Figure 1**).

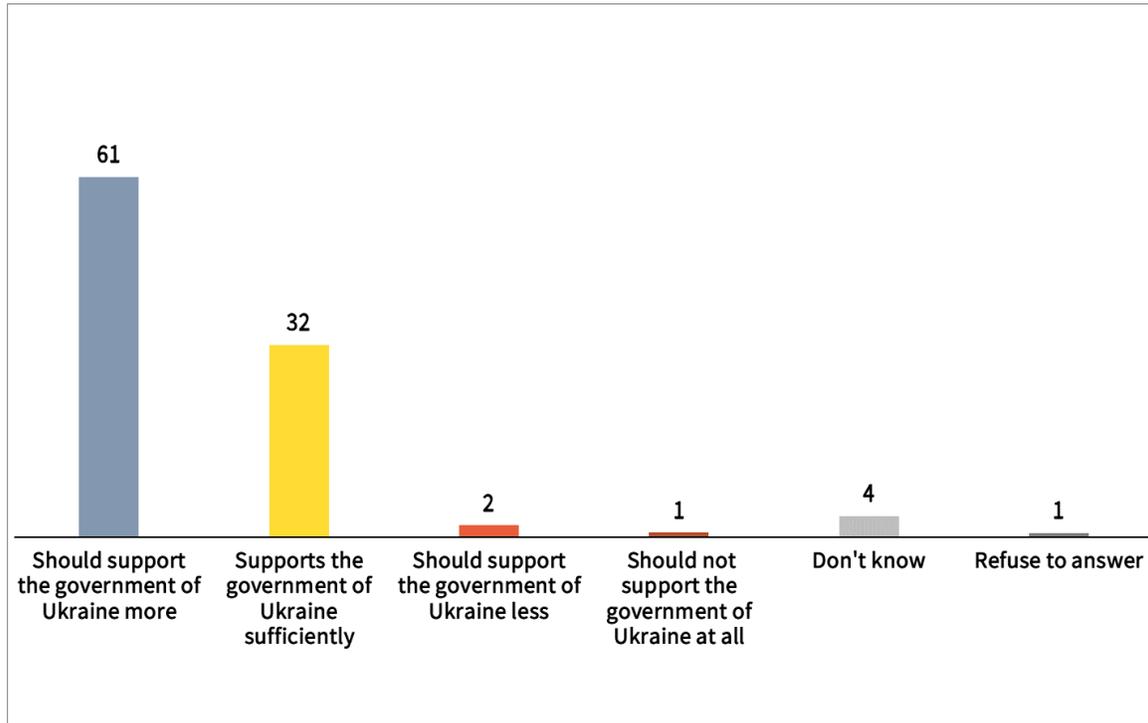
Figure 1. Georgia's Most Important Political Partners (June 2021)



"Which of these countries do you consider the most important political partners for Georgia?" Respondents were allowed to provide multiple responses. IRI Public Opinion [Survey](#) Among Residents of Georgia (USAID), June 2021.

Additionally, a recent opinion [poll](#) suggests 61 percent of Georgians think that their government should do more to support Ukraine (**Figure 2**), and 66 percent that Georgia should join all or at least some of the established sanctions on Russia. Strong support for Ukraine's cause among Georgians is also illustrated by the [existence](#) of the Georgian National Legion, comprised of volunteers fighting in the war zone.

Figure 2. Opinion of the Government of Georgia in Relation to the Government of Ukraine (Percent; March 2022)



“Do Georgians want their government to support Ukraine?” OC Media [Datablog](#), March 2022.

In this context, it seems counterintuitive that the Georgian government moves even further from its Western strategic partners instead of more active involvement to defend the national agenda on the international level. The government appears committed to a long-term political crisis, in parallel with democratic backsliding and troubling relations with the West. Moreover, the government’s passive stance in international affairs significantly increases the risks of the country’s irrelevance on the global political agenda as well as its gradual isolation. If Russia manages to achieve its geopolitical goal – ending NATO’s open-door policy – the government’s behavior would directly affect Georgia’s foreign policy and security.

Pragmatic Policy or Russian Informal Veto Over Foreign Policy

These puzzling developments in Georgian foreign policy can be attributed to the “normalization” toward Russia that started in 2012. Unlike the previous United National Movement (UNM) government, which used harsh rhetoric toward the Kremlin and continuously focused on the threats coming from Georgia’s northern neighbor, the Georgian Dream government chose a more “pragmatic” approach toward Moscow. The essence of the ruling party’s policy is to avoid irritating the Kremlin and to maintain Euro-Atlantic aspirations while also trying to restore and strengthen economic, humanitarian, and trade links with Russia. This policy also [aims](#) to reduce antagonism between the West

and the Kremlin when it comes to Georgia's foreign policy. In recent weeks this (foreign policy) strategy went as far as [accusing](#) the Georgian president of breaching the constitution by her unauthorized visit to France.

Nevertheless, the GD's foreign policy cannot be explained solely by external factors; internal political factors should also be considered. The change in rhetoric was [important](#) for the post-2012 ruling party to establish its political identity and distance itself from the previous government. As a result of this "pragmatic" approach, there was a noticeable [increase](#) in humanitarian and economic links between Georgia and Russia, especially in the tourism sector. Over the last few years, there is also a stable [growth](#) in Georgia's trade with Russia, including electricity imports and money [transfers](#), which intensifies anxiety in Georgian society over growing dependence on Russia. Georgians are unsure how this policy serves Georgia's security interests, although there is a strong awareness that increased economic dependency on Russia makes the country more vulnerable to Kremlin blackmail. Moreover, amid heavy economic sanctions and clampdowns on dissent, Russian citizens are massively fleeing their country, including to Georgia (visa-free for one year), which has [increased](#) concerns among Georgians over a variety of possible implications.

The GD's "appeasement" policy toward Russia could also be based on certain calculations that NATO would not be ready to militarily support Georgia in an armed conflict with Russia. President Zelensky's harsh [criticism](#) of NATO over not establishing a no-fly zone in Ukraine might support this argument, which is important for the ruling party to shore up its domestic support. GD representatives often [highlight](#) that the party's strategic governance managed to prevent adventurous politics against Russia, reducing the chance of future threats, as Georgia's Western partners are not ready to militarily support the country against Russian aggression. The Georgian government's position is further supported by the U.S. president's [stance](#) in the wake of the ongoing crisis, stating that the United States is not considering sending its troops to Ukraine.

Is Georgian Foreign Policy Consistent?

These developments raise questions about the Georgian government's decision to adhere to its pragmatic foreign policy. Although NATO and the United States might not [consider](#) direct military confrontation with Moscow over Georgia and Ukraine at this point, Tbilisi does not have any other security alternatives unless it reconsiders its foreign policy course. "Westward" is the only [option](#) for Georgia to maintain sovereignty and independence in the face of its aggressive northern neighbor.

The government's policy creates the impression that under "normalization" politics, Tbilisi's self-imposed restrictions would outweigh the benefits it would potentially receive under a more active "value-based" foreign policy. That impression is further strengthened by the fact that despite Georgia's pragmatic politics, the Russian

government has repeatedly [halted](#) direct flights to Tbilisi over the Russophobia argument, continued [borderization](#) along the administration lines of occupied regions, and done nothing to resolve the conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Simultaneously, Russian authorities are taking steps that might indicate their readiness to give “carrots” to Tbilisi in exchange for a “pragmatic” foreign policy (not joining sanctions, not providing assistance to Georgian volunteers, and forbidding entry to Georgia for some Russian opposition figures). To be more exact, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs made it clear that it was [expecting](#) “balanced” politics from Georgia. In parallel with its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian authorities [opened](#) the market for 15 Georgian and one Azerbaijani dairy companies, possibly as a reward for Tbilisi’s relatively neutral position in the conflict. It seems that by portraying Georgia as a situational ally, Moscow is trying to sow discord between Georgia and its strategic partners as this decision has political, not economic calculations.

These steps obviously go beyond the GD’s “normalization” politics. In addition to these developments, the Kremlin’s decision not to include Georgia in the [list](#) of unfriendly countries raises reasonable concerns in Georgia that Russia may already perceive the country as being under its indirect influence and hold an informal veto over Tbilisi’s foreign policy decision-making. If this is the case, regardless of whether President Vladimir Putin succeeds or fails in his bloody campaign in Ukraine, the Georgian government will face a strategic dilemma: give up its Euro-Atlantic course and exist with limited sovereignty and all the negative consequences that entails or face a military confrontation with Russia.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that there are no formal talks on Georgia’s Finlandization, the ruling party’s strategy, which focuses on very cautious and “pragmatic” foreign policy decisions, poses certain risks for the country’s Euro-Atlantic foreign policy choice. Those risks are further exacerbated by internal political crises, strengthened anti-Western political groups, and unstable relations with the West.

Inconsistency in Georgian foreign policy raises questions for the country’s strategic partners and gives Moscow hope since the neutrality of Georgia, as well as other Eastern Partnership countries, is an acceptable scenario for Russia. However, taking into consideration the Kremlin’s rhetoric toward Ukraine, one should assume that Moscow perceives Finlandization as a temporary step toward the gradual inclusion of Eastern Partnership countries in Russian-dominated organizations like the Eurasian Union, CSTO, etc. There is very little chance that Russia—a superior military power operating within its sphere of influence—is going to respect its neighbors’ neutrality.

Hence, the future status of Ukraine is a problem for Kyiv and [Tbilisi](#). If Russia manages to acquire an informal veto over NATO's open-door policy and halt eastern enlargement perspectives, it will lead to Georgia's regional and international isolation. It is crucial for Georgia to be as active as possible in the international arena and actively engage in different strategic formats that ensure Western involvement in regional security. This is more important now as a consolidated West is united against Russian aggression, which creates momentum for the Eastern Partnership countries, including Georgia, to finally acquire an EU membership perspective.

Regardless of the war's final outcome, its consequences will have a significant effect on regional and Black Sea security for decades to come. The Georgian government's policy of accommodating Russia will be difficult to sustain—as well as dangerous to Georgian sovereignty—when the West and Russia are locked in a major conflict over Moscow's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine. Tbilisi's position confuses its Western partners, alienates its closest allies (including Ukraine), and strengthens Russia's perception of Georgia deliberately returning to Russia's sphere of influence. If the Georgian government does not adapt to changing circumstances, it will risk being isolated internationally and left alone with Russia.

Nord Stream 2 Under Sanctions: A Silver Lining for EU Energy Security Policy?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 742
February 2022

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Late last year, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline seemed to be firmly heading to an eventual finish, but Russian aggression on Europe's eastern flank brought the issue back to the table and the pipeline is now among the targets of anti-Russian sanctions. This comes at a time when EU policymakers are conceptualizing and administering the recently completed 2050 Green Deal, a set of policies standing tall as contemporary encouragement for improving continental energy use. The project, circumventing Central and Eastern Europe and aiming to send Russian natural gas directly to Germany via the Baltic Sea, has been driving wedges between European states for years now. It has also become a thorny issue in transatlantic relations, even more so after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

After years of former President Donald Trump's erratic and confrontational attitude, President Joe Biden's milder, steady stance in his first year underlined a change in U.S. foreign policy style and priorities. Throughout, a lack of coherence has embodied the Nord Stream system. Its fate was effectively left to Germany's discretion, with the western part of the EU generally less concerned about it than their Central European counterparts. In the latest development, in reaction to Russian aggression, Germany halted Nord Stream 2's certification process, and on February 23, the United States imposed sanctions on the pipeline company and its corporate officers. While this might spell the end of Nord Stream 2, a silver lining could be that it prompts a more coherent and sustainable EU energy security strategy.

Nord Stream 2: A Litmus Test of EU Disunity

The pipeline has become symbolic of a particular energy project turned into an international issue and proof that unity in the EU energy realm is missing. The pipeline's

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history is not only a track record of EU members' clashing and often contradictory interests. It is a warning sign of how incoherent the EU is on the topic of energy security in the wake of its major long-term goal – securing climate neutrality by 2050. At the same time, the pipeline project provides yet another reason to stop thinking about energy supplies as being technical or purely state-specific and to recognize their far-reaching implications, especially in the rapidly integrating energy market.

Nord Stream 2 has been a contentious project from the very beginning. Unsurprisingly, Ukraine has been its most vocal opponent, as it will lose its transit role and, thus, its perceived lifeline if the pipeline becomes operational. However, the rest of Europe has been far from having the same opinion, and frictions have also emerged within the EU itself. While Germany has been supporting the pipeline from the beginning, Poland and the Baltics, in line with their traditionally strained relations with Russia, have been against it. The fact that other EU members, [including](#) the rest of the Visegrad group, have been much less concerned or even tacitly supported the pipeline does not help either. After briefly complicating the project by insisting on its compatibility with EU market rules, France eventually [washed its hands](#) of the issue, leaving it to Germany. Other major gas consumers, such as Italy and Spain, have not been particularly active in the dispute. Even though the EU formally shares responsibility for energy policy with member states, key features of this policy – mainly the energy mix or sources of supply – are determined at the state level. Unsurprisingly, it is hard to find unity in such a setting.

The role of the United States adds another layer of complexity. Trump's rift with Germany, hardline attitude toward the pipeline, and sanctions surely did not help US-EU relations during his presidency. The sanctions also impacted European entities working on the pipeline and [strained](#) relations with the EU as a whole. Biden's administration was perceived as a fresh start for the transatlantic bond. However, although the warming of relations was largely welcomed, alleviation of the pressure on Nord Stream 2, even though it helped to mend relations with Germany, did not fly well with European countries that were (often strongly) [against](#) the project. Despite marking the pipeline as a [bad deal](#) and even [appointing](#) a strong opponent of the project, Amos Hochstein, as an envoy for energy matters, the new U.S. president [waived](#) the sanctions previously imposed. Clearly, Biden did not want a particular infrastructural project to burden Washington's relations with Germany, Europe's largest economy and potential partner for future challenges.

However, turning a blind eye to Nord Stream 2 did not mark an abrupt change in U.S. foreign policy. Refocusing attention to issues outside Europe has been an ongoing process dating back to President Barack Obama's first term. Although U.S. security interests in Europe saw an apparent revival during Trump's presidency when the administration [supported](#) the Three Seas Initiative, in reality, U.S. attention had already [pivoted](#) toward China. The fact that U.S. foreign policy priorities for the future lie elsewhere has been a somewhat hard pill to swallow for some in Europe, particularly for

the Central and Eastern European countries freed from the USSR's dominance in the 1990s. These states do not take lightly any [changes](#) in U.S. foreign policy, and the current situation is no exception, especially now that the balance of power in Europe is being tested by Moscow. It is thus no wonder that Nord Stream 2 opponents were unhappy with the United States easing pressure on the pipeline last year. Poland and the Baltics hoped that the above-mentioned Three Seas Initiative might intensify U.S. involvement in the region; however, the initiative's future is rather unclear now. Many infrastructural projects listed under the initiative face feasibility issues, and the Biden administration does not seem keen to invest in the endeavor.

Combined with the U.S. pivot to Asia, countries in Central and Eastern Europe may invoke concerns about their future security. However, regardless of some of the region's countries' Atlanticism, instead of trying to [reverse](#) the trend of changing U.S. priorities, they should seek remedy to their security concerns on their home continent along with their EU counterparts. Helping the EU strengthen its position on the international stage should be their ultimate policy goal if they want to see a more secure eastern neighborhood and energy supplies. Ultimately, it would be a win-win policy for them as well as the EU.

An Opportunity for the EU to Step Up

A basic understanding of what energy security means has been missing among EU members in a broader perspective. For the western part of the EU, the security of supply is taken care of by market rules and well-developed infrastructure. But central and mainly eastern EU members are still, to a large extent, concerned with the geopolitical aspects of energy supplies. Such a lack of coherence hurts the EU internally and externally. To make matters worse, not only is there a rift between the central and eastern European countries and the western part of the Union, even the German-French leading tandem is not pulling in the same direction at the moment. While French President Emmanuel Macron has been [trying](#) to rise to the position as the EU's most important leader after Angela Merkel's retirement, Germany has been preoccupied with formulating its position amidst the current crisis. Maneuvering around the controversial pipeline while trying to define the country's foreign policy identity is a major task that will keep the new German government busy in the foreseeable future.

During new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to Washington in early February, Biden clearly stated there would be no pipeline if Russia [invades](#) Ukraine. Scholz, standing next to the U.S. president when he made those remarks, kept a restrained position and only [hinted](#) that such an option is possible. Clearly, the chancellor was unwilling to compromise Germany's long-standing careful attitude, wary of drawing any connections between Russia's wrongdoings and the pipeline even when Russian forces were amassing at the Ukrainian border. Shortly after events took a dramatic turn and Russian troops marched into the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, Germany [stopped](#) the

pipeline's certification, and Washington [sanctioned](#) it. The White House thus de facto returned to its pre-May 2021 position. The pipeline itself is currently finished and only waiting for certification, but it may take long now before the first gas molecule reaches the German grid. Although the sanctions create a significant obstacle, the project is still merely suspended, not canceled, but it will surely remain a frozen issue in the months to come.

There is a silver lining to the troubled project. Despite its divisive nature, the Nord Stream 2 controversy can serve as a springboard to a more coherent EU. The EU has set an ambitious task to become climate neutral by 2050, and this monumental challenge will require a concentrated effort from all EU members. At the same time, the process will have an impact both internally as well as on the EU's external relations. Despite the EU's push to decarbonize the energy sector, the import dependence will not fade anytime soon as the EU's indigenous sources are [running dry](#). That relates mainly to natural gas, which in the foreseeable future will be crucial for the transition to low-carbon or zero-carbon sources. Natural gas will play an important role, especially in power generation and heating, as it produces about half of the CO₂ emissions compared to coal. Given its dependence on physical infrastructure and way of marketing, natural gas is most often associated with politicization. Russia is poised to become an even [more important](#) energy supplier to Europe; therefore, concerns about natural gas being misused as a foreign policy tool are unlikely to go away anytime soon. Even though it is rather unlikely that Russia would compromise its position on the most important western European markets by politicizing its gas supplies, it is still necessary for the EU members to come to terms on energy security matters with regard to its future energy- and climate-related goals.

Energy policy is a complex area, determining economic development and often, as we have seen many times, including the current crisis, overlapping with the foreign policy sphere. On the plus side, given its over-arching nature, the energy sector is well-suited to become a platform for deeper interstate integration in the future. After all, today's EU is rooted in a post-war, energy-related [integration project](#), narrowly focused on the coal and steel [sectors](#) (which later branched). Ironically, the experience with the Nord Stream 2 project, which laid bare the lack of unity and thus rendered the EU unable to tackle both the project and its political consequences, can become the push the EU needs for reform.

The first steps should entail developing a consensus on the applicability of the EU energy market rules on infrastructure to and from third countries. The legislation [exists](#), but the will to universally apply and enforce the measures has been missing so far. The hypocrisy of [letting](#) Germany decide the matter while criticizing it for not doing enough should not be repeated.

Second, EU members should propose taking measures that could be activated in response to supply crises or curtailments. These may entail mandatory, minimum storage levels. Such measures would help alleviate the impact of supply irregularities like that in Europe

late last year when low storage levels and Russia's [unwillingness](#) to fill them up after last winter turned out to be among the reasons for the recent price hike.

Third, because it is apparent that an understanding of energy security differs widely among EU members depending on their geographical location and historical experience, a higher degree of solidarity and mutual understanding is needed. The Treaty on the Functioning of the EU ([TFEU](#)) enshrined the principle of energy solidarity in the Union's foundational documents, specifically in article 194. Therefore, the EU does have a fitting cornerstone principle to enhance its internal coherence in its very foundations. The article suggests that the EU should ensure the functioning of the energy market, promote interconnections, and ensure the security of supply of all relevant members in the given situation. Despite its vagueness, the provision can be used to enhance cooperation among member states if properly enforced. The provision can also serve as a negative delimitation of activities that are in breach of the principle.

A prime example of such application was last year's [decision](#) by the European Court of Justice when it upheld an earlier ruling that stated that letting Gazprom use the entire capacity of the OPAL pipeline (a follow-up pipeline bringing gas from Nord Stream 1 into the German grid) would breach the energy solidarity principle regarding the supply situation of central European countries. In essence, the court thus effectively put the principle on the same level as market rules, at least in terms of relevance for market functioning. The ruling effectively stated that EU countries have to consider the impact on other members as well as the energy security of the EU as a whole in decisions on infrastructural projects with potential cross-border implications. Building on the court's ruling along with [market rules](#), the EU currently has what it needs to tackle the issue of supply security. It has rules [securing](#) fair competition, turning former market creators into market subjects, and an applicable solidarity principle, making sure that all members are obliged to actively contribute to the energy security of other members if need be. Undoubtedly, the last missing piece is the will to apply these measures to their full extent.

Conclusion

Nord Stream 2 has been a troublesome issue for too long already. It has been progressing despite the worsening of relations between Russia and the West and despite a change in the White House. It could be that even the current dramatic development in Ukraine might not be the definitive end of it. But a silver lining endures, after all. As much as it is clear that the rift over Nord Stream 2 should not have gone this far, at least it can be used as a lesson now. The current crisis may be an opportunity for the EU to step up its position on the international scene. Agreeing on a joint attitude to external partners and the security of supplies should be the first steps. Without that, more supply-induced security crises can be expected as individual interests will keep prevailing over collective security. The time is ripe also because the EU is now on the brink of an era when energy-related

topics will dominate the agenda, with the 2050 climate goals being the main driver. A truly collective effort is essential more than ever before.

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Challenges for the Future



Rebuilding Ukraine: Pre-War Trends and Post-War Priorities Should Inform the Process

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No.768

April 2022

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A massive national reconstruction effort for Ukraine, guided by that country's government and popular will, must be launched even before Russian aggression is defeated. At this writing, with large-scale hostilities and widespread Russian attacks against civilians still underway, it might seem premature to begin thinking about the future course of Ukraine's re-development. But this is precisely [the time](#) when such thought needs to be given and initial steps taken in program and logistical planning so that rehabilitation can commence when the required capital is in hand from [European, U.S., Canadian](#), and other governments, [international organizations](#), private business [investments](#), and [reparations](#) from Russia. Reconstruction that will require [vast sums](#) should consider prior regional geo-economic tendencies, such as a westward realignment, and not the outdated notion of an agrarian west and industrialized east when selecting and rebuilding key civilian facilities.

Regional Recovery

The reconstruction plan should be seen as two-track. First, when peace is restored, rebuilding human security infrastructures such as hospitals and schools must be a high priority. Once areas are cleared of unexploded ordnance and de-mined, special attention must be paid to places where Russian forces have wrought severe damage through indiscriminate shelling and bombing of urban areas, a practice that has been [characteristic](#) of the Russian military in every conflict in which they have been involved since the 1990s. As a consequence, vast numbers of [apartments and homes](#) have been destroyed or rendered uninhabitable. These needs are pressing not only for those still living in heavily damaged zones but also to attract and accommodate returning refugees and internally displaced persons. Likewise, repairing economic infrastructures such as transportation

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lines and physical plant is vital to any restoration effort. As Cynthia Buckley and we [described](#) in an earlier PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo, when Russia first invaded Ukraine in 2014, it wrought heavy damage to civilian facilities in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (the Donbas). The devastation now is [far more](#) expansive and extensive.

Secondly, when it comes to restoring the Ukrainian economy, it is important to understand that there is a strong spatial aspect to how economies in general function, and Ukraine is no exception. In that context, we suggest that it is important to understand the regional pattern of economic growth (and decline) that manifested in Ukraine prior to and after Russia's invasion in 2014. The Ukrainian economy – like most others – experiences cycles wherein some regions have prospered while others have declined. These geographic trends do not occur randomly but rather happen on account of underlying spatial, social, and economic factors that can favor some areas over others for investment and growth during any given period. Assuming that government and private economic development capital will at some point be finite, it becomes crucial to prioritize where precious investment monies are directed to optimize limited resources.

The Past Might Be Prologue

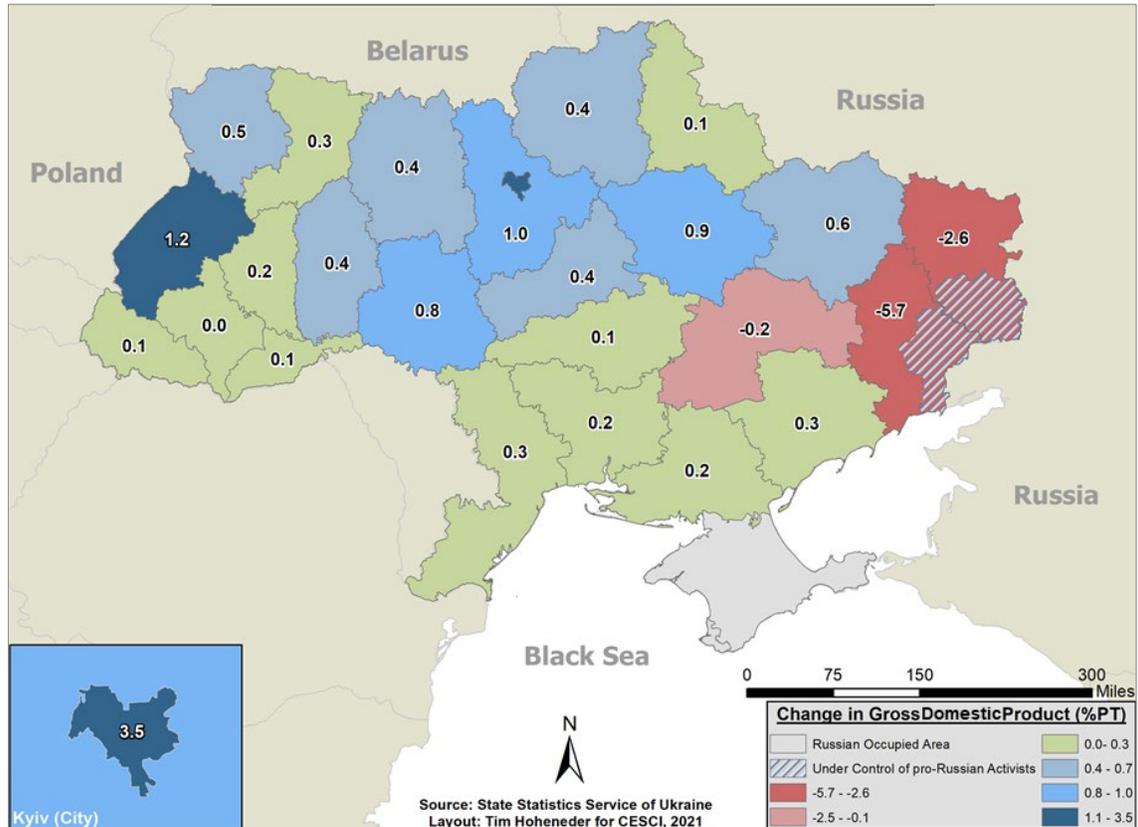
There are many facets of the geographic, economic, and societal conditions that interact to shape the manner in which development occurs over space and time. Dating back to foundational works on regional economic inequalities by [Gunnar Myrdal](#), [Jeffrey Williamson](#), and [I. S. Koropecykj](#), and including more recent [scholarship](#), it is reasonably well understood that within countries, regions ebb and flow according to changes in internal and external factors of production and consumption of various goods and services. Briefly, the spatial concentration of factors of production (agglomeration) at a given period typically leads to interregional inequalities, but those inequalities might then be mitigated, at least to some extent, as subsequent diseconomies of scale and changes in the composition of production create new possibilities for previously lagging regions.

Not unlike other large and diverse countries, Ukraine also manifests significant internal spatial variability in economic productivity, and these regional patterns have predictably changed over the years as the determinants of growth have shifted. The OECD [documented](#) and analyzed spatial trends in social and economic development in Ukraine and found that in 2014, despite having a relatively low index of regional gross domestic product (GDP) concentration compared to other OECD countries, economic growth had been much more geographically concentrated. But the specific regions that rose or fell in the years prior to the onset of war in 2014 had already [begun](#) to change significantly. According to the OECD, before 2010, regions (*oblasts*) in eastern Ukraine with economies based largely on mining, metallurgy, and machine building, and also the city of Kyiv (as the country's national capital and dominant urban financial and services centroid), were among the most prominent contributors to national GDP and the destination of most foreign direct investment (FDI). Indeed, the Donbas accounted for 14.4 percent of GDP.

But after that year, these previously more productive regions, with the exception of Kyiv, began a long-term decline relative to regions in the center and western parts of the country that were becoming relatively more productive.

In order to track regional variability within the Ukrainian national economy, we used data on the shares of Ukrainian GDP for 2013 by region as a baseline and compared those with 2019, the most recent figures available. As **Figure 1** illustrates, the Ukrainian economy was realigning geographically much more to the central and western regions and the city of Kyiv, with Kharkiv being the one eastern region that continued to show significant growth. Most noteworthy and not surprising given the Russian invasion in 2014, the major decline is in the Donbas. However, it is important here to note again that the economic decay in the Donbas was already [well underway](#) from 1999 to 2013, mainly owing to its older mining and industrial base and shifts in export trade relationships.

Figure 1. Changes in Share of GDP by Ukrainian Region (2013-2019)



The realignment of foreign trade away from Russia and toward Europe and [China](#) favors the more rapidly expanding regions post-2010. In terms of the increase in their share of national GDP, the top five growth regions comprise, in descending order: Kyiv City, Lviv, Kyiv, Poltava, Vinnytsya, and Kharkiv regions. Some particular examples stand out, but it is not always readily apparent how much of the change is unique to the given regions

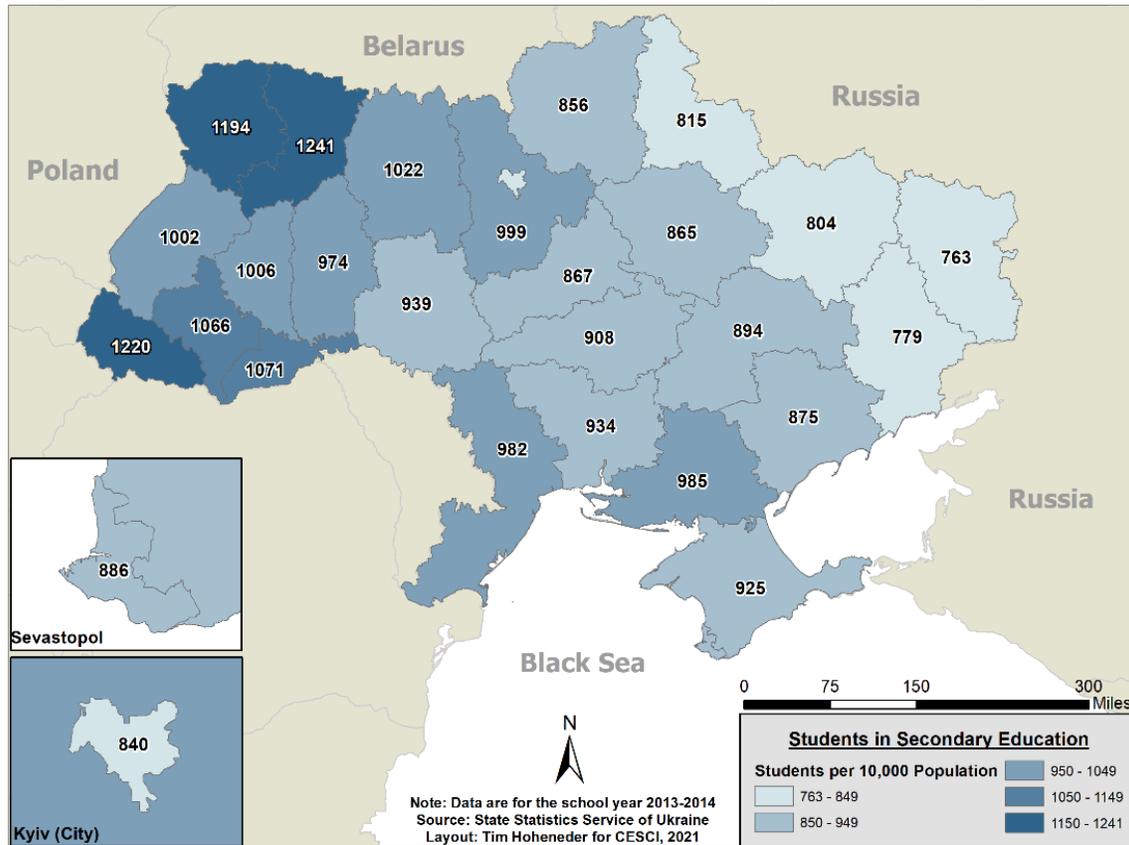
and how much can be generalized into a broader trend. For example, the Kharkiv region narrowly escaped the fate of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014, the former having been secured by swift anti-separatist action and the political adroitness of Kharkiv city's [then-mayor](#) Hennadiy Kernes. It has not been as fortunate in the new wave of Russian aggression.

Kharkiv, post-2014, illustrates how Ukraine's economy has changed. Despite having had its extensive cross-border commercial ties with Russia greatly reduced, the city and its environs adapted by focusing on production for the Ukrainian military and increasing exports to new markets. Similarly, the experience of the Lviv region is instructive, as its information technology sector has experienced rapid growth, illustrating the non-industrial track to higher levels of development, especially when fueled by FDI. The old stereotype of the industrialized east and agrarian west is long outdated.

Human Capital is Needed

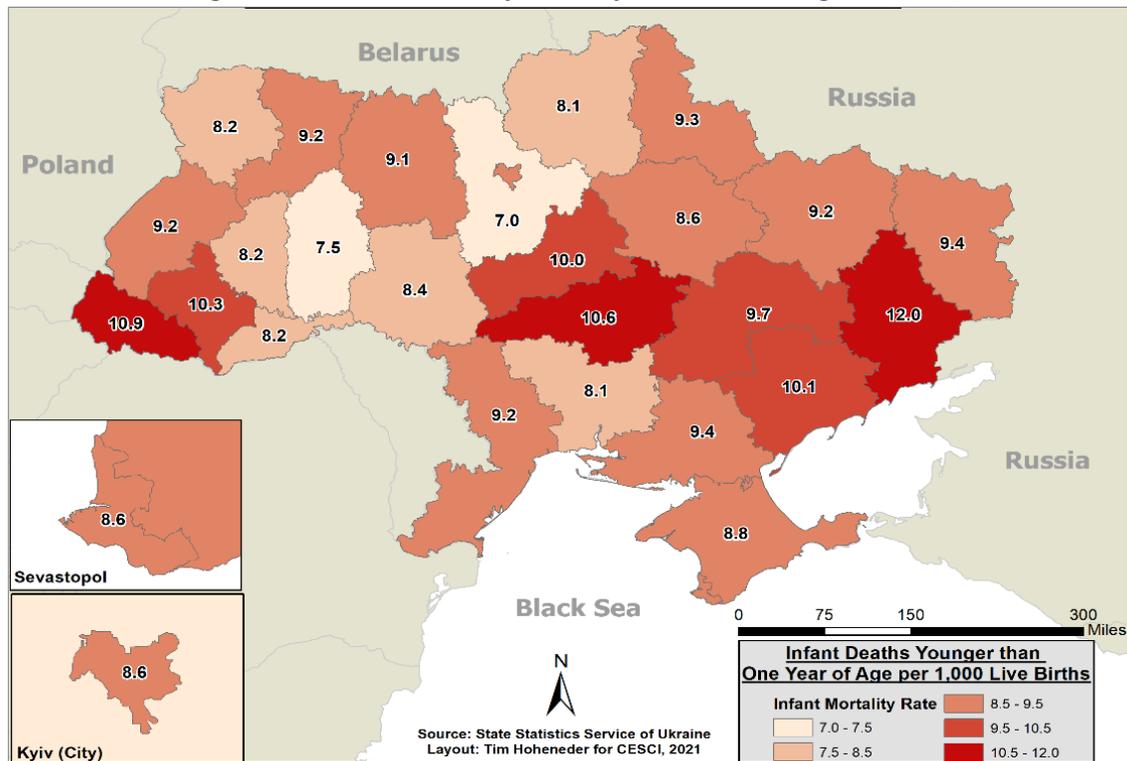
As economies increasingly decouple from extractive industries and move more toward skilled and export-oriented manufacturing, demand for a better educated, civic engaged, and healthier workforce grows commensurately. This has been shown to be especially important in [determining](#) the regional economic potential in Ukraine. We find major differences in human capital across Ukraine's regions. As **Figure 2** shows, in the last pre-war year (2013), regions in the western part of Ukraine were performing better in education, a vital component of a skilled workforce.

Figure 2. Students in Secondary Education per 100,000 by Ukrainian Region (2013)



Also, the health and well-being of the population across regions is an important aspect of human capital and labor force quality. In this regard, a key measure is the infant mortality rate, which is universally viewed as an important part of human security. Here again, data from 2010 show, in **Figure 3**, that before the outbreak of war in 2014, with some exceptions, regions west of the Dnipro River tended to have lower infant mortality and those in the more heavily industrialized regions in the east, higher rates. Note in particular that Donetsk region had the highest rate of infant deaths in the country.

Figure 3. Infant Mortality Rate by Ukrainian Region (2010)



Consequences and Conclusions

To date, the worst destruction wrought so far by the Russian armed forces has been in the Kyiv and Chernihiv regions in the northeast of Ukraine, along an arc stretching eastward through Sumy, Poltava, and Kharkiv regions and thence through the Donbas, and finally westward along the Black Sea coast, with the city of Mariupol all but leveled. As we showed in **Figure 1**, the Chernihiv, Poltava, and Kharkiv regions had been in the higher positive regional growth category; thus, the destruction in these areas has a disproportionate impact on the national economy, as does the damage being incurred in Kyiv and its region. On the other hand, the central and western regions where the fighting has not been as intense will, despite some attacks on key industrial facilities, be better positioned for recovery.

The toll being paid by the Ukrainian population is unspeakably horrific. Given their sacrifices, it is all the more important for post-war reconstruction efforts to proceed according to their priorities. But, the international community can begin planning for these efforts by paying close attention to how Ukraine had already been reorienting itself antebellum. Once the human security infrastructure has been repaired, capital investment to rebuild the country's economy might be better directed initially to areas in the center and western parts of the country that are best positioned to receive it and have recently been the focal point of Ukrainian-led economic development. Economic infrastructure in

these regions will be in much better condition to accommodate production by virtue of their greater distance from the heaviest fighting and thus more secure against any future Russian threat. As Ukraine's recovery proceeds, growth will return to the most severely damaged areas, but their role in Ukraine's overall economic landscape may change. Indeed, several dozen firms have already [re-located away](#) from the immediate battle zone.

Together with the Ukrainian government and research and development agencies there and abroad, engaging in the needed analysis required to guide Ukraine's recovery ought to be a priority now. Ukrainian decisions on regional economic development prior to Putin's escalation of the war show a pathway to post-war reconstruction. Recovery, if properly conceived and executed, will hasten the post-war renaissance and facilitate the new Ukraine that will emerge.

The Destruction of Academic Freedom and Social Science in Russia

HOW TO MITIGATE THE DAMAGE TO SCHOLARSHIP AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 766

April 2022

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The Russian government's recent domestic repressions and the sudden isolation of Russian scholars from international collaborators will likely destroy Russian academic communities, particularly in the social sciences. Since the Soviet collapse, Russian social science rose virtually from scratch to become an important source of scholarly research, ties to global academic networks, and insight into the workings of Russia's society, politics, culture, and economy. The anticipated loss of Russian social science will cut off a vital source of understanding about Russia. Therefore, although support programs for displaced scholars now (rightly) focus on assisting Ukrainian researchers and students, steps should be taken by Western governments, universities, and major donors to preserve and protect Russian social scientists in exile – not just for the short term, but until conditions in Russia change to allow social science there to resume.

The Development of Russia's Social Science Community, 1991-2022

Soviet-era censorship, ideological rigidity, and lack of academic freedom limited the development of Russian social science during the Soviet era, detaching Russian social science disciplines from their corresponding international scientific communities. Aside from some fields in economics and anthropology, and a nascent empirical sociological tradition emphasizing survey research, Russian social science (in contrast to many natural science fields) lagged far behind globally at the time of the Soviet collapse.

Over the past three decades, some Russian academic institutions, often with the support of collaborators and donors from abroad, gained international recognition and prestige. They established graduate-level programs in the social sciences, recruited foreign scholars to train students and form collaborative research partnerships with Russian colleagues,

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implemented incentives to publish in prestigious peer-reviewed journals, and forged reputations abroad for Russian researchers. In the 1990s, new institutions designed to house high quality educational and research programs were founded, such as the European University of St. Petersburg (EUSP), the New Economic School, the Smolny College for Liberal Arts and Sciences, the Institute for Independent Social Research, and the Moscow School for Social Sciences (“Shaninka”).

Most successful of these was the Higher School of Economics (HSE). Initially founded in Moscow in 1992, HSE enjoyed generous government financing and strong [leadership](#). After recruiting top-performing Russian scholars and some foreign researchers to its faculty, developing strong social science laboratories involving foreign scholars, and establishing affiliate institutions in three other cities, it is now Russia’s top-ranked university.

Russia joined the Bologna Process for streamlining educational degree programs in 2003 (though it was never fully implemented). In 2012 the Russian government announced plans to improve the international reputations of Russia’s universities by investing in a select set of institutions with the aim of placing 5 of them among the top 100 universities in the world by 2020.

Efforts to modernize Russian universities were contested, unevenly applied, and inconsistent. Within Russian universities, “[old guard](#)” faculty and administrators resisted changes in performance criteria and standards that left them unprepared to compete. Funding models relying on donations from foreign foundations in the 1990s and selective investments from the Russian government in the 2010s tended to promote excellence at a [few](#) prominent institutions, while the rest foundered. Nonetheless, successes at core institutions helped create a thriving social science community in Russia, staffed largely by a younger generation of Russian scholars committed to research excellence, high educational standards, and internationalization.

Countervailing Trend: Declining Academic Freedom

However, academic freedom, which had flourished in the 1990s and remained fairly protected in the early years of the Putin regime, came under increasing [attack](#) as Putin turned toward autocracy beginning in the late 2000s. In 2010 the Russian government established a commission against the “falsification of history” meant to impose penalties for publishing accounts of history that somehow cast Soviet actions in World War II in a negative light. The commission never really got off the ground, but it was a harbinger of more concerted efforts to bring to heel scholars who voiced critical perspectives on both contemporary and historical topics. After returning to the presidency in 2012, Putin steadily intensified a crackdown on civil liberties, with consequences for academic freedom. Laws on “foreign agents,” “undesirable organizations,” and “extremism” were offered tools to target independent research centers such as the Levada Analytical Center.

In 2015, two Russian authors opened an [article](#) by stating: “As Russian social policy analysts working in international academic networks, we are deeply alarmed about current developments in our country which make it harder and harder for us to continue with our work. We believe that if these trends cannot be stopped, Russian social scientists will become as isolated again as they were before 1989; by the same token, international scholars outside Russia might have lesser access to information about our country, or to do research here.” Others [wrote](#) of self-censorship and ethical dilemmas in conducting social science in Russia.

The assault on academic freedom accelerated in the last few years. EUSP had its license to teach [suspended](#) in 2017 (and Shaninka in [2018](#)), ostensibly for technical reasons behind which many saw political motives to quash research and teaching critical of the regime (both were eventually restored). Since 2019, Russian authorities have ratcheted up an overt campaign to crush dissent within the academy. Students have been [expelled](#) from Russian universities for participating in protests. Universities were pressed to monitor their students’ political activities and [provide](#) lists of those who protest, or even share information about demonstrations, with prosecutors.

HSE enacted controversial measures limiting open political speech. It stripped the student journal [Doxa](#) of student organization status, and four of its editors were eventually arrested for encouraging students to protest. In January 2020, the university enacted [measures](#) prohibiting students and faculty from engaging in certain types of political activities. Some HSE faculty had their contracts [terminated](#) in moves widely interpreted as retribution for oppositional political activities. More recently, additional HSE faculty have been [dismissed](#) for expressing critical views.

In April 2021, Putin signed a new “higher education” [law](#) requiring government approval of any collaboration by Russian scholars with foreign colleagues—even inviting them to give lectures—and banning all public educational activities that supposedly oppose Russia’s constitution or incite unrest, despite widespread public objections by Russian [scientists](#) and cultural figures. In June 2021, Bard College was [declared](#) an “undesirable organization” by the Russian prosecutor general’s office, shuttering its joint degree programs and exchanges. HSE’s founding rector resigned in July under clouds of [suspicion](#) that political pressures affecting the institution’s policies of late drove him out. Later that year, the rector of Shaninka was arrested on charges of embezzlement believed to be politically motivated; he is currently in detention.

Nails in the Coffin

Shortly after invading Ukraine, the Russian government passed laws criminalizing statements against the war, including [referring](#) to it as a “war.” In a speech on March 16, President Vladimir Putin [denounced](#) Russians sympathetic to “the West” as a “fifth column” of “traitors” and “scum” who must be purged from Russia. The Ministry

of Education announced sociology, political science, and cultural studies will no longer be [taught](#) in Russia's pedagogical institutes. In late March, Russia [forbade](#) its scientists to attend international conferences and declared a popular science journal, *Troitsky Variant*, a "foreign agent" after it published a letter by scientists and science writers opposing the war, with 8,000 signatories.

That is not to say that the entire Russian academic community opposes the war: like the rest of the country, it is [polarized](#), as the public [letter of support](#) for the invasion signed by more than 200 rectors of Russian universities attests. At the same time, [thousands](#) of Russian scientists and scholars have signed open letters protesting the war—an act now punishable with up to 15 years in prison.

The Russian academic community has not escaped international condemnation for their country's unjustified attack on Ukraine. Ukrainian scientists have [appealed](#) for a "complete boycott of the Russian academic community." Several countries have [enforced](#) blanket bans on academic collaborations with Russian scholars or [suspended](#) grant payments to them, and at least one university has [restricted](#) new applications from Russian students. Academic journals are refusing to consider [submissions](#) from Russian scholars and universities. A US Congressman has [called](#) for Russian students to be expelled from universities. *Times Higher Education* has [announced](#) "steps to ensure that Russian universities are given less prominence" in its World University Rankings. Shortly after the invasion was launched, MIT [terminated](#) its partnership with the Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology, which it helped found in 2011. Western institutions and individual scholars rushed to follow suit, cutting formal ties with Russian universities and institutes. These measures will surely sever Russian researchers from their respective international communities, further undermining their capacity to conduct research and train students.

Numerous professors, including both Russians and [foreigners](#), have [resigned](#) from Russian universities and left the country, often citing the end of academic freedom. Journalists [estimate](#) that 250,000 fled abroad within a few weeks, [many](#) of them academics, journalists, activists, and other professionals faced with likely persecution and isolation should they remain in Russia. Already, students are being expelled for [participation](#) in anti-war protests and [anti-war posts](#) on social media.

Scholars who remain in Russia will encounter financial, professional, and political roadblocks to conducting research that meets international standards. They will [continue](#) to face persecution for work that could be considered "political," a label potentially applying to most social science research. Thus, genuine research in those disciplines is no longer possible.

Consequences

Signs of the pending destruction of Russian social science were evident in the last few years, but the war and its aftermath have fully brought it to pass, at the very moment that social science research on Russia was beginning to [flourish](#), in large part due to the efforts of burgeoning younger cohorts of promising researchers. The dismantling of social science—and academic communities in general—within Russia has negative consequences for international social science and Western governments. It means losing a [significant](#) source of information on Russia and also research addressing scientific debates, including (but not limited to) studies that situate Russia within those debates. Although Western-based scholars conduct social science research on Russia, they have often relied on collaborations with Russia-based academics and students, as well as researchers at independent social research firms.

Putin's domestic crackdown effectively blocks foreign researchers from travelling to Russia to collect data through fieldwork, archival research, interviews, and surveys. Recent innovations driven by COVID-19-related travel restrictions, such as “bridge” firms, big data analysis, and virtual interviews, may remain feasible, but the [atmosphere](#) of anti-Western extremism and criminalization of activities deemed to support Russia's “enemies” could jeopardize Russian participants, heightening ethical issues about whether foreign social scientists should risk endangering their Russian partners and subjects. The impact of new government restrictions on social media will probably limit the utility of “big data” studies moving forward.

Western policymakers will thus lose knowledge and expertise on Russia that they need to craft policies to address the significant challenges to global security that Russian government policies will surely pose in the coming years, whatever trajectory the invasion of Ukraine and domestic politics in Russia take. Tacit knowledge about Russia's society and culture that comes from growing up and living there cannot be fully replaced with analyses conducted from afar. While it is debatable whether academic expertise truly influences policymaking, the loss of insights into Russia based on both evidence and intuition rooted in lived experiences and ongoing contacts with its population bodes ill for the ability of policymakers to address Russia as it evolves in the coming years.

Recommended Actions

To mitigate these adverse consequences, the U.S. government, universities, and private donors should attempt to preserve Russia's social science potential outside of Russia. The United States should make it easier for displaced graduate students and academics from Russia to get U.S. visas to study or work in their fields. For several years now, it has been exceedingly difficult for any Russian citizens, including academics and students participating in legitimate exchange programs, to obtain U.S. visas. These unnecessary

obstacles have already winnowed down the number of Russian social scientists and students currently working in the United States.

The U.S. government should also extend the visas of Russian scholars and students now working or studying here under temporary auspices: forcing them to return to Russia when “pro-Western” Russians face persecution exposes them to reprisals from the state. Calls for their forcible return so that they will feel compelled to take to the streets and protest Russia’s war on Ukraine must be roundly rejected. Beyond these humanitarian concerns, these individuals also can play a vital role in establishing a base of Russian social scientists in exile.

American universities should join forces with governments and private donors on a large-scale, multifaceted effort to create and support a Russian social science diaspora. Consortium-based programs could marshal funds to establish a substantial number of medium-term academic positions in U.S. universities—for example, 5-year visiting professor positions. While these would be short of tenure-track appointments, that will improve the likelihood of buy-in from university administrators reluctant to commit to tenured positions. They would also give displaced Russian social scientists enough stability and support to re-establish their research agendas, obtain teaching experience, develop and sustain networks, engage with U.S. policymakers, and potentially compete for tenure-track positions in Western institutions.

Funding should also be channeled to support enrollments of Russian graduate students in social science Ph.D. programs in the United States, cultivating new generations of promising young scholars by offering them the chance to complete training in the disciplines. Finally, networks that link Russian social science exiles to one another should be established, with governance procedures that help coordinate activities across institutions and give expatriate scholars a voice in the development of priorities and means of accessing resources, engaging U.S. constituencies, and maintaining ties with colleagues in Russia.

Conclusions

These proposed measures may be criticized as potentially diverting resources from the pressing need to assist Ukrainian students and scholars who have been displaced by Russia’s violent assault, rewarding some Russian social scientists who have provided Putin’s regime with ideological ammunition, or reifying a long-term bias within Eurasian area studies that privileges Russia above other former Soviet and Eastern-bloc countries. These are fair criticisms, but they can be addressed.

To begin, the proposed programs should be open to all scholars that have been affected by the war, including Ukrainians. Stakeholders should agree on a set of professional and political criteria that Russian participants in these programs should meet in order to avoid

supporting apologists for the regime. Although political litmus tests run contrary to academic freedom, it is reasonable to exclude open advocates for Russia’s war effort from consideration in these programs, just as Holocaust deniers and avowed racists are not welcome in U.S. university positions. Apologists for the Putin regime generally lack international scientific reputations, so strict academic criteria will help remove them from consideration.

In the longer run, Russia – with its 145 million people, vast nuclear arsenal, and massive hydrocarbon reserves – will remain a major geopolitical player and rival to the West. Therefore, the West should be considering measures to help counter not only Putin’s vicious assault on Ukraine but also Russia’s broader strategic efforts to undermine the international order. As roadblocks to social science research in Russia become insurmountable, the stock of “insider” knowledge about Russia that we have now must be protected and preserved, not alienated and discarded when it is needed the most.

Influencers, Echo Chambers, and Epistemic Bubbles

RUSSIA'S ACADEMIC DISCOURSE IN THE WAKE OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 777

May 2022

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National Defense University

Moscow's aggression against Ukraine and Russian troops' atrocities against the Ukrainian people have unleashed an outpouring of condemnation around the world. Sweeping economic sanctions imposed on Moscow have spilled over into the cultural, sporting, and educational realms. Some American universities [moved quickly](#) to cut their partnerships and financial ties with Russian academe. Others issued powerful statements denouncing Russia's war and expressing support for Kyiv. As more universities, professional associations, and academic journals consider some form of response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, questions about the Russian academic community's intent and the scope of educational boycotts have been [debated](#).

This memo sketches out the [relationship](#) between Russia's scholarship on international relations (IR) and Moscow's foreign policy decision-making to offer a background for these debates. It uses the concepts of "influencers," "echo chambers," and "epistemic bubbles" to describe the space where the mainstream academic discourse about Russia's foreign policy takes place. Much of the scholarship in the field of Russian IR takes place in an epistemic bubble that has been cut off from sustained interactions and funding from non-Russian sources. Echo chambers that deliberately amplify the government's assertions are maintained by an elite community of experts affiliated with select academic institutions connected to the Russian state. A smaller group of influencers has direct access to government decision-making, which it exploits to influence the political elite and public views. When top decision-makers release their claims about Russia's foreign policy, echo chambers entertain and develop these political positions. Validated in echo chambers and propagated by influencers, these ideas then re-enter foreign policy discourse. This dynamic leads to the dangerous transformation of ideological constructs into Russia's "truths" and "post-truths" about the world.

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A Comprehensive Study of Russian IR and Russian Foreign Policy

Conclusions presented in this memo are informed by a large-scale [study](#) of the co-evolution of Russian IR and Moscow's practice of international affairs. We examined Russian IR textbooks designed for university students and instructors as well as publications from the Institute of World Economy and International Relations ([IMEMO](#)) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), the [Valdai Discussion Club](#), the Russian International Affairs Council ([RIAC](#)), and the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies ([RISI](#)). In addition, we examined articles published by *International Trends: Journal of International Relations Theory and World Politics* and [Russia in Global Affairs](#). Only a handful of IR textbooks with national significance have been published in Russia. Their relative significance is thus much higher compared to the impact of individual textbooks in the US. All textbooks were produced by leading Russian IR scholars working under the auspices of elite Russian institutions—the Moscow State Institute of International Relations ([MGIMO](#)), the Lomonosov Moscow State University ([MGU](#)), and the Higher School of Economics ([HSE](#)), and all have been recommended by the Russian Ministry of Education for use across the Russian Federation. Almost two hundred public speeches delivered by top Russian policymakers were analyzed [using](#) Atlas-ti, a qualitative data analysis software package. We supplemented these data sources with the citation rates of the top Russian political scientists and international relations scholars by Russian media.

An Epistemic Bubble in Russian International Relations

Russian IR is a young discipline that emerged in the post-Soviet context, giving rise to a range of intellectual perspectives—from more conservative traditions of geopolitics and realism to liberal and constructivist views. Following the Soviet Union's dissolution, multiple Western foundations and the U.S. State Department funded programs to professionalize, train, and support Russian scientists. These efforts gave rise to prominent liberal thinking in Russia's international relations, which flourished in the 1990s but was soon supplanted by a variety of realist positions. Over time, the dominant conservative and geopolitical thinking metamorphosed into a sizable epistemic bubble characterized by a homogeneity of approaches and isolated from alternative views. The studies that have come out of this epistemic bubble produced conceptual innovations by fusing traditional realist concepts with cultural and civilizational arguments. Ultimately, however, they have been united around a foreign policy orientation aimed at [defending](#) Russia's national interests and prestige in global affairs.

Two developments have stimulated the emergence of an epistemic bubble in Russian IR. First, there has been a decade-long decline in academic freedoms in Russia and growing state control over its education and research. Following the [passage](#) of the infamous "foreign agents" law in 2012, the Russian government launched investigations into the universities and programs receiving funds from abroad and deported many Western scholars. The main financial sponsors of the liberal brands of international relations

research, such as the MacArthur and Open Society foundations, were [banned](#) (Open Society) or [closed down](#) their offices in 2015 in the midst of the legal crackdown on their operations (MacArthur). In 2014, the Russian government extended state control over the Russian Academy of Sciences ([RAS](#)), which lost the right to manage its property. State bureaucrats took leading posts in RAS research centers and other academic institutions.

If not under direct state control, many IR departments and programs in public universities have been led by “old-school” scholars professionalized and socialized in Soviet academe. This older generation of Russian scholars has been unable to rid themselves of the style of research practices that were characteristic of the Soviet scientific enterprise. They view the officialdom as an epistemic authority and uncritically embrace highly ideological explanations for foreign relations. Their leading positions enable them to exert considerable influence on the research and teaching practices at their home institutions.

State censorship and control of academia through funding mechanisms, a centralized process of textbooks’ approval, and policy orientations of Russian academic journals have curtailed the informational and resource landscape for a younger generation of scholars, leading to further coalescence of official positions and findings of academic research. Many scholars have tended to reproduce the types of knowledge that correspond to Russia’s foreign policies and official discourse. In Russian scholarship, they habituate the language of official claims, such as condemning NATO’s “encroachment” on Russia’s “sphere of influence” or referring to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine as a “crisis.”

The Government’s Echo Chambers

Russia’s international relations academic community is spread around several dozen major universities offering graduate and undergraduate degrees in international relations. Many academics are members of various university-based, private, and state-sponsored think tanks and research centers, producing a mixture of research, policy-related work, and advocacy.

The heavyweights in this infrastructure are three public universities – [MGIMO](#), [MGU](#), and [HSE](#) – and four think tanks – the [Valdai Discussion Club](#), the Russian International Affairs Council ([RIAC](#)), the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies ([RISI](#)), and the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy ([SVOP](#)). MGIMO, MGU, and HSE have several research centers, labs, and programs involved in applied foreign policy work. They supply government agencies with research products on all aspects of Moscow’s foreign policy. In addition to engaging with the Russian government and domestic audience, these institutions and think tanks have developed multiple international partnerships with research centers and universities around the world.

While these elite institutions house academics with a range of theoretical perspectives and political views, they have emphasized global issues and questions of importance to the

Russian government and, with the notable exception of HSE, stayed clear of serious criticism of the Kremlin's foreign policy. Celebrated as a stronghold of liberal views, HSE became [embroiled](#) in a series of political scandals in the years preceding the war that resulted in the curtailment of its academic freedoms.

With the end of the liberal era in Russia, many publications by leading scholars of these institutions and research products coming out of the think tanks have tended to amplify the government views (select examples of individual scholars' publications from these elite institutions are [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). For example, concerning Russia's war in Ukraine, publications from elite think tanks have [approached](#) what they call a "crisis" or "conflict" in Moscow's relations with Kyiv through the prism of post-Cold-War relations between Moscow and Washington. They have [placed](#) the onus of responsibility for the breakdown in Russia's relations with the West on the United States, which has been unwilling to listen to Moscow's security concerns and treat Russia as an equal. They have [blamed](#) the United States for seeking access to the Ukrainian security portfolio and viewed Russia's "conflict" in Ukraine as inevitable due to the failure of all parties to understand each other's positions.

Direct linkages between these elite institutions and the Russian government are the chief avenues for state influence on their work. MGIMO is both a public university and a think tank under the umbrella of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID). MID and the Russian Ministry of Education and Science are among the founders of RIAC. Various research centers and labs at MGU and HSE have been funded to work on government projects. The Valdai Club is managed by SVOP, RIAC, MGIMO, and HSE and is closely associated with the Russian president. RISI was part of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service but became directly accountable to the Russian president.

The status and very existence of elite institutions and think tanks in Russia [depend](#) on thriving interpersonal relations between the experts and political power holders, ensuring direct state funding and intellectual sponsorship. An affiliation with a major think tank is a mark of prestige and a guarantee of access to power holders who frequent the meetings and conferences organized by the elite institutions.

In contrast with scholars in epistemic bubbles, who merely reproduce government positions due to their limited exposure to other voices, echo chambers amplify and reinforce official positions and insulate them from criticisms. One of the prerequisites for membership in elite expert circles involves general agreement with a core set of beliefs. In addition, the experts trade their ability to criticize the official line of the Russian government for access to key decision-makers. By participating in an echo chamber, elite experts and policy-makers bounce information off each other, which, in turn, reinforces the pre-existing views resulting in the confirmation bias over the desired policy positions.

Academic Influencers

Influencers in Russian IR are a small group of elites who claim expertise on various topics of Russian foreign policy and global affairs. However, their academic authority has been inseparable from their proximity to the government. Access to top-level decision-making has turned these individuals into key media personalities, allowing them to make frequent appearances on TV and leave commentaries about Russia's politics in popular newspapers and journals. In 2021 Daily Moscow [prepared](#) the ratings of the most influential political scientists and international relations scholars cited my mass media sources. A similar rating effort was [carried out](#) by Medialogia in 2016.

Among key trends contributing to the emergence of influences in IR, which is neither new nor unique to modern Russia, has been the movement of academics into politics and politicians adding degrees and academic ranks to their government portfolios. Not only have these political functionaries-turned-academics begun disseminating their political views under the guise of academic publications, but they have also been able to join the faculties of leading Russian universities. This, in turn, has enabled them to influence Russian scholarship and teaching. Vladimir Medinsky is a point in case. An ultraconservative nationalist political figure and writer [accused](#) of plagiarism, Medinsky left a heavy imprint of his dubious scholarship on the teaching of Russia's history through his curatorship of the textbooks that [portray](#) Moscow's invasion of Crimea as "peaceful."

Trusted sources and transmitters of official positions, influencers have been instrumental in shaping and giving credence to government views. Sergey Karaganov, for example, who holds leadership positions in the SVOP and HSE, has had direct access to the Presidential Administration. A long-standing presidential advisor [involved](#) with the conceptual grounding of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Karaganov coined a new approach to Russia's foreign policy. Dubbed "constructive destruction," it [advocates](#) for "the collection of [Russian] lands," including Ukraine, as a necessary step in the creation of a new security order favorable to Moscow. Sergei Markov, who [leads](#) an institute of political research at MGU, compared Kyiv with a "loaded pistol" [aimed](#) at Moscow. Markov accused Washington of turning Ukraine into an "anti-Russian tool" and asserted that any means would justify transforming Kyiv into a Russia-friendly country. Vyacheslav Nikonov, who heads the Russkiy Mir Foundation and chairs the School of Public Administration at MSU, penned several articles [stoking fears](#) of violence against ethnic Russians in Ukraine and offering quasi-historical justifications for a single Russian-Ukrainian nation.

Conclusion

Looking at the state-academe nexus through the framework of influencers, echo chambers, and epistemic bubbles reveals a dangerous symbiosis of politics and a large corpus of IR scholarship in Russia. It also illuminates important differences in the

mechanisms connecting policy and research. If scholars in the epistemic bubble rely on limited training, resources, and information that leads to the reproduction of ideologized knowledge, academics in the echo chambers may do so deliberately for reasons of prestige and access. Influencers offer direct support to the Kremlin in an effort to shape, legitimize, and publicize political views. In the end, though, all these social structures are spaces for excluding, minimizing, or undermining alternative and critical views.

The different mechanisms that bring about and sustain epistemic bubbles, echo chambers, and influencers call for distinct interventions to break ties between the state and academia. Epistemic bubbles often form with no malevolent intent through processes of community formation facilitated by state censorship and resource limitations. Removing obstacles to accessing, using, and reproducing alternative information may pop the epistemic bubble but will have little impact on echo chambers and influencers of academic knowledge. The members of echo chambers are dependent on the state for their reputation. To break an echo chamber requires delinking the well-being and prestige of academic elites from the state. It is rather difficult, if not impossible, to change the beliefs and practices of influencers, though can be done through a [process](#) known as a “social epistemic reboot.”

For the time being, Western institutions should deny every opportunity to the propagandists of Russia’s aggression by severing ties with academic and private educational establishments that openly support the war or provide a professional home to influencers exalting its purpose. Academic journals and online platforms that accept contributions from Russian scholars should single out one-sided research emerging from the academic bubble and require this group of scholars to take alternative perspectives and counterpoints seriously. And all scholars of Russian politics and foreign relations should continuously self-reflect on how their research and public statements may inadvertently give credence to the logic of Russian foreign policy that can provide justifications for real-life expressions of imperialism and ethnonationalism, and, ultimately, war.

Time to Question Russia's Imperial Innocence

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President Vladimir Putin has successfully mobilized a sense of militant patriotism in the Russian public to wage war in Ukraine. The Kremlin's propaganda builds on seeing Russia as both victimized by the West and entitled to regional dominance in the former Soviet territories. In such Russian imperial imagination, enforcing the Russian language, culture, and rule on non-Russian populations is not colonialism but a gift of greatness. Critics among intellectual and liberal elites in Russia condemn the regime but tend to shy away from questioning Russia's imperial identity. To solve Russia's antagonistic relations with its neighbors, both the Russian state and society need to confront their country's imperial identity.

The Public Largely Buys Putin's Worldview

Even after the massacre in Bucha and the destruction of Mariupol, many in Russia continue to support the war in Ukraine. Polls [find](#) that most Russians accept Putin's rhetoric of "denazification" and "demilitarization" of Ukraine, despite facing economic uncertainty, lost savings, and food shortages due to Western sanctions. Putin has banned independent media, cut access to social media, and criminalized opposition to the government to propel the Kremlin's view unobstructed by critical voices. Russian TV channels broadcast the same Kremlin disinformation about the war, praising the Russian military and vilifying Ukrainian resistance.

Yet it is wrong to assume Russian citizens support the war only because of the Kremlin's tough media control. When the Russian government banned Western social media sites, most users in Russia [continued to access](#) Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. In the past, powerful voices have uncovered and spoken out about corruption and political manipulation in the Putin regime. But in the case of the war, many choose not to listen to

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alternative perspectives. Instead, they submit to Putin's worldview – even the Russian liberal opposition that criticizes the regime avoids questioning the Russian identity as an empire. What is it about the Kremlin's national ideology that convinces millions to support a belligerent Russia?

The Victim and Victimizer

Putin's propaganda builds on seeing Russia as both victimized by the West and entitled to regional dominance over Ukraine, Belarus, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus. Russia's sense of its lost greatness in 1991 after the demise of the Soviet Union [fuels a sense](#) that it is the innocent victim of outside powers. Its shrunken geography and collapsing economy made post-Soviet Russia economically poor compared to the wealth accumulated by Western colonial metropolises. Soviet socialism as a global anti-capitalist force had failed to bring the same level of prosperity. Russian intellectuals [became preoccupied](#) with their own imagined marginal position vis-à-vis the West fueling the denial of the true colonial nature of the Soviet regime.

At the same time, Russian political elites expect loyalty from former Russian colonies that includes knowledge of the Russian language and political loyalty, and unity in opposition to Western influence. According to such an imperial view, Russian rule over non-Russian populations is not colonialism but a gift of modernity. It is a deeply altruistic act for the sake of backward people. Rejection of Russian cultural dominance, including building independent foreign policy and contesting the Russian view of Soviet history, is an act of political disloyalty. In Central Asia, for instance, Russian ambassadors [routinely condemn](#) states' prioritization of indigenous languages as attempts to limit the rights of the ethnic Russian population. Such search for independence triggers a sense of victimhood in Russia, as if disagreement with the Russian imperial self-image is an attack on Russian cultural greatness.

Putin coupled Russia's innocent victim narrative with a historical self-image of a civilizing power against former Soviet republics that sought closer ties with the West. The Russian imperial myth allows identity mobilization around militant patriotism while also helping the state keep the public passive and uncritical. Putin recently spoke about Russia's imperial identity when [announcing](#) the military attack on Ukraine: "It was necessary to immediately stop this nightmare – the genocide against the millions of people living there, who rely only on Russia, hope only on us." Western leaders' naming atrocities in Bucha a genocide further deepened the Russian regime's sense of victimhood. The Russian Defense Ministry [stated](#) that the West is collectively attacking Russia. Feeling humiliated by the West, the Russian public was simultaneously supporting Russian aggression in former Soviet territories. Economic hardships can be reframed as a burden unjustly borne by a victim-savior or as an imperial duty of those who humanely seek to liberate the world from evil.

Putin's View of History

Longing for Soviet-scale influence, Putin has praised Stalin, revived the Soviet national anthem as the Russian one, and recently banned a review of Soviet atrocities, including a project by the Memorial human rights organization. He [renewed](#) the Stalinist mythology of a "great Russian people" destined to "balance" against Western imperialism on the world stage. He questioned the rightful independence of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Georgia. Likewise, Russian political elites have highlighted the "progressive" sides of the Soviet regime and Russia's role as a supreme power, especially during World War II.

Russia's dual self-perception as a victim of the West and an entitled defender of former Soviet territories was rarely critically discussed in Russia or internationally. In Russia, reviews critical of Russian Soviet history came out for roughly a decade, starting during perestroika and ending with Putin's ascent to power. Granted, the 1990s were plagued with economic uncertainty, reducing the space for political debates on Russia's imperial identity. Most Russian academics still shy away from classifying the Soviet regime as a colonial project. Russian academia perpetuates the notion that Bolsheviks [brought modernity](#) to non-Russian Soviet people. For its part, the liberal Russian intelligentsia avoids confronting Russia's acceptance of its brutal colonial history by [blaming](#) the "barbaric Asiatic legacy" for contemporary authoritarianism. In short, a racist view of their own political reality prevents Russian elites from facing the truth of Russia's colonial and illiberal past.

Writers such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Joseph Brodsky were not sufficient in reassessing the Soviet past. As a leading cultural figure criticizing Stalinism, Solzhenitsyn was also a prominent imperial nationalist who called for the annexation of northern Kazakhstan and denied Ukraine's cultural autonomy. Likewise, Brodsky, the intelligentsia's spiritual idol, refused to recognize Ukraine as a sovereign nation.

Global scholarship and political elites, too, have largely failed to see Russia from a decolonial perspective. Most Western academic literature [still views](#) Central Asian countries as benefitting from the Soviet presence, including redrawing the region into national republics, imposing Soviet schooling, and building the region's physical infrastructure. In the meantime, scholarship from Central Asia often has [difficulties being heard](#) in the West because of power hierarchies in knowledge production. Since the Soviet collapse, policymakers in the West saw Russia as cementing sovereign rights of ex-colonies, especially in Central Asia. The West accepted Russia as the regional leader in Eurasia and negotiated for Ukraine and Kazakhstan to transfer nuclear missiles to Russia.

Activists in the Global South, too, still see the Soviet Union as an anti-Western, anti-capitalist power. Many associate it with Marxism and communism and as an alternative to capitalism. The countries of the Global South make up the bulk of the opposition in the UN General Assembly against condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine. Such views

ignore the fate of non-Russian nationalities who suffered mass starvation, purges, and [genocide](#). Recently, Black intellectuals in the United States have begun [comparing](#) the Soviet Union to a variant of settler colonialism with the Russians as the settler nation. A critical review of the Russian colonial experience is necessary in the Global South as well.

The Rise of Decolonial Thinking

The Russian state carefully polices how history is written and taught in the states formerly under Soviet rule, especially in the Central Asian republics. Russian embassies regularly intervene in school curricula, insisting on a positive portrayal of Russia's role in the region. In Kyrgyzstan, the Russian embassy [planned](#) to screen propaganda films on the "real events" in Donbas. Following opposition from local NGOs, the plan was abandoned. Russian diplomats also pressure countries to support Russian security initiatives in the region. Shortly before the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian ambassador in Nur-Sultan [insisted](#) that Kazakhstan would need to cut military ties with the United States and firmly align with Russia.

Nations formerly under Soviet occupation increasingly oppose Putin's longing for Soviet order. From Ukraine to Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, decolonial discourse is rapidly expanding into the mainstream. In Ukraine and Kazakhstan, the horrors of mass starvations that killed millions reveal the unimaginable human cost of the Soviet regime. Academics in [Georgia](#) and [Kyrgyzstan](#) are reexamining the purges of elites, increasingly calling both Tsarist and Soviet Russia imperial powers. The war in Ukraine accelerated decolonial discourse. The renewed interest in the past has revealed the unpleasant hierarchies of the Soviet regime and eroded the Soviet construct of Russia as an altruistic nation, sacrificing itself for the sake of non-Russian republics. Instead of seeing the Soviet regime as a gift of modernity, more people are inclined to see Soviet Russia as a brutal colonizer.

The deeper the awareness of Soviet devastation, the stronger the grassroots resist a resurrection of a Russian-led empire in former Soviet territories. An appreciation for freedom from ideological totalitarianism and Russian dominance has already taken root in these countries. Mass pro-Ukraine rallies in [Tbilisi](#), [Almaty](#), and [Bishkek](#) point to how a reexamined understanding of the Russian imperial and Soviet past further undermines Putin's untenable geopolitical goals.

Undoing Imperialism

The Russian invasion of Ukraine could start the painful process of [decolonizing](#) Russia. Much depends on whether Russian intellectuals let go of the ideals of a great Russian people and the friendship of "brotherly" nations. This requires accepting the sovereignty and equality of other countries and cultures and admitting responsibility for the Soviet genocidal colonial past. Decolonizing Russian political discourse and culture will debunk

the myth of Russian imperial innocence and victimhood and restore the dignity of the colonized.

Today, Russia's political elites and intellectuals face two monumental tasks. First, Russian studies must be [unwoven](#) from understanding Russian imperial ambitions. This includes listening to non-Russian scholars from countries formerly under Soviet control and from within Russia instead of speaking for them or about them. It is necessary to allow the victims of Russian and Soviet colonialism – from Chechens and Buryats to Ukrainians and Kazakhs – to participate in amending the Russian past. An honest confrontation of the past would allow for the realization that places like Chechnya, in its current structure, are a product of modern Russian colonialism and that Ramzan Kadyrov is not a Chechen leader but a Russian colonial officer.

Second, it is not enough just to condemn the totalitarian legacies of the Tsarist, Soviet, and Putin regimes. The Russian state must also accept responsibility and repentance for historical atrocities in Russia and neighboring countries. Truth and reconciliation committees focusing on both Soviet Russian and contemporary atrocities can be the necessary pathway to engage sides in an equal dialogue. The experience of post-apartheid South Africa in uncovering human rights violations can be a model for Russia as well.

Decolonizing Russia and challenging its imperial innocence will not be easy regardless of how the war in Ukraine ends. But as much as decolonizing Russia is important for the territories it formerly occupied, reprocessing its history is also key for the survival of Russia within its current boundaries. By seeing its colonial subjects on its territory as equals and reforming to avoid future mass atrocities at all costs, Russia can finally become a strong federative system built on the shared values of political representation, pluralism, and inclusion.