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Cluster Section "Origins of the Russo–Ukrainian War"

Origins of the Russo–Ukrainian War: Russian Imperialism in the Authoritarian Regime

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A wide range of arguments has been advanced to explain the onset of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine in February 2014 and, in particular, Russia's multifront invasion launched in February 2022.[1] The West's policy toward the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been framed as an incentive for Russian military intervention in Eastern Europe.[2] Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine can also be attributed to the West's policy of appeasement in response to Russia's occupation of parts of Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014).[3] Another argument is that Vladimir Putin, the aging autocrat beset with multiple governance failures, is bent on subverting democratic processes in the neighboring country.[4] Furthermore, Russia's longing for the reinstatement of its great power status in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse underpins the incumbent's fixation on the political, socioeconomic, and cultural domination in the region.[5] However, the roots of Russia's bellicose foreign policy lie in the persistence of the Russian imperial mentality among politicians of different stripes, and the widespread appeal of imperial narratives within the Russian populace. In addition, the entrenchment of authoritarianism under Putin's presidency provided favorable conditions for the pursuit of Russian imperialism through conventional warfare.

1 Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Julia Kazdobina, Jakob Hedenskog, and Andreas Umland, "Why the Russo–Ukrainian War Started Already in February 2014," *SCEEUS Report* 2 (Stockholm: The Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, 2024) [https://sceeus.se/en/publications/why-the-russo-ukrainian-war-started-already-in-february-2014/] (URLs below are current as of September 2025, unless otherwise noted); Taras Kuzio, *Russian Nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian War* (London: Routledge, 2024); Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo–Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2023); Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Diverging States* (Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press, 2023).

2 John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014), pp. 77–89.

3 Lasha Tchantouridzé, "The Aftermath of the 2008 Russo–Georgian War: Appeasement of Russia and the War in Ukraine," *Journal of Peace and War Studies* 4 (2022), pp. 77–94.

4 Robert Person and Michael McFaul, "What Putin Fears Most," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 2 (2022), pp. 18–27.

5 Yamazoe Hiroshi, "Russia's Classical Notion of Great Power and Waning Sphere of Influence," in Masuda Masayuki, ed., *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition* (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2023), pp. 65–85.

Russian politicians, ranging from Vladimir Zhirinovsky, chair of the ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), to Sergei Udaltsov, leader of the Left Front movement, rejected the notion of Ukraine's statehood and trumpeted the idea of a Russia-centered union comprising former Soviet republics.[6] In December 1998, Zhirinovsky argued against ratifying the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Speaking in the State Duma, the obstreperous politician declared that "the Ukrainian state had never existed" and that "our people" (*nash narod*) should "live in one country with Russia."[7] In a public address on February 21, 2022, Putin reiterated these false claims, stating that "modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia."[8] At a press conference in December 2023, Putin alleged that the southeastern parts of Ukraine were "historically Russian territories."[9] Likewise, Dmitry Medvedev, deputy chair of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, asserted that "Odesa, Dnipro, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Kyiv are Russian cities, temporarily occupied, like many other towns [in Ukraine]."[10] Amid the government's proclamations to "liberate" these cities from the Ukrainian forces,[11] Russian propagandists advanced the idea of encircling and blockading the city of Kharkiv.[12]

Remarkably, many Russian politicians who positioned themselves as opponents of Putin's reign were reticent in denouncing Russia's annexation

6 Emily Ferris, "How Extreme Views on Ukraine and the West Went Mainstream in Russia" 16 June 2022 (London, UK: The Royal United Services Institute) [https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/how-extreme-views-ukraine-and-west-went-mainstream-russia].

7 Komsomol'skaia Pravda, "Zhdite pogranichnye stolby i koliuchuiu provoloku — Zhirinovskii 17 let nazad predskazal sobytiia na Ukraine" [https://www.kp.ru/daily/26382/3261422/].

8 The Kremlin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation" [http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828].

9 TASS, "Putin nazval Odessu russkim gorodom" [https://tass.ru/politika/19534505].

10 This essay spells Ukrainian geographical names based on the transliteration from the Ukrainian language. The original post by Medvedev was in Russian. For details, see Nataliia Vasilieva, "Medvedev nazval Odessu, Kiev, Dnepropetrovsk i Kharkov russkimi gorodami," *Parlamentskaia gazeta*, 28 December 2023 [https://www.pnp.ru/politics/medvedev-nazval-odessu-kiev-dnepropetrovsk-i-kharkov-russkimi-gorodami.html].

11 TASS, "Lavrov: RF ne mozhet ostavit' Donbass i Novorossiiu pod gnetom Kieva" [https://tass.ru/politika/21388299].

12 The Insider, "Na *NTV* predlozhili ustroit' blokadu Kharkova. Gibel' mirnogo naselenia pomozhet 'osvobodit' gorod, kak Mariupol, govoriat propagandisty" [https://theins.ru/news/271616].

of Crimea and campaigning for Russia's military defeat in the brutal war.[13] In October 2014, Aleksei Navalny stated that Crimea was not "a sandwich" to be passed back and forth, and Maria Pevchikh, the head of the Investigations Department at the Anti-Corruption Foundation, declined to comment on this issue in January 2023.[14] Encapsulating the mood of his compatriots, the Russian journalist Oleg Kashin, known for his investigative reports about corruption, referred to the annexation of Crimea as "the restoration of historical justice."[15] Leader of the 2011–2012 protest movement against fraudulent elections, Udaltsov called for "a new integration in the post-Soviet space."[16] In 2013, the left-wing politician imagined Ukraine's subjugation without military force:

> This thesis about a new integration is articulated even by Putin. Even they [the incumbent government] have an understanding that the Eurasian Union is a must. It is beneficial for the economy. Integration is also beneficial from the cultural standpoint, for socioeconomic and geostrategic reasons … nobody proposes right now to get into tanks and drive into Kyiv, then Minsk, and then Astana. There are [other] means of persuasion.[17]

Russia's expansionist policies were considerably facilitated by the consolidation of authoritarianism during Putin's presidency. According to the Russian media and human rights defense group *OVD-Info*, 935 people became defendants in criminal anti-war lawsuits between February 24, 2022, and May 20, 2024, 177 of whom were prosecuted for discrediting the Russian armed forces (Article 280.3 of the Criminal Code).[18] Moreover, at least 650,000 Russians

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13 Roni Greenfield, "Navalny's Policy Shift on Crimea May Be Too Little, Too Late," *The Moscow Times*, 7 March 2023 [https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/03/07/navalnys-policy-shift-on-crimea-may-be-too-little-too-late-a80396]; Tomasz Kamusella, "The Imperial Mentality of Unapologetic Russian Oppositionists," *New Eastern Europe*, 26 August 2022 [https://neweasterneurope.eu/2022/08/26/the-imperial-mentality-of-unapologetic-russian-oppositionists/]; Mustafa Nayyem, "Rossiiskuiu oppozitsiiu kosit krymskii virus," *Ukrainska Pravda* (blog), 11 June 2015 [https://blogs.pravda.com.ua/authors/nayem/5579d5ce996aa/].

14 Carole Cadwalladr, "'We Do Our Work because We Are Angry': Navalny's Right-hand Woman Maria Pevchikh on Taking on Putin," *The Guardian*, 22 January 2023 [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/22/navalny-deputy-maria-pevchikh-putin-opposition-corruption-foundation].

15 Aleksandr Bobrakov-Timoshkin, "Kashin i 'Krymnash': nespravedlivaia "istoricheskaia spravedlivost,"" *Radio Svoboda*, 11 June 2015 [https://www.svoboda.org/a/27066378.html].

16 Reuters, "Russian Pro-War Leftist Charged with 'Justifying Terrorism': TASS Cites Lawyer," 11 January 2024 [https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-pro-war-leftist-charged-with-justifying-terrorism-tass-cites-lawyer-2024-01-11/].

17 Sergei Udaltsov, "Poka est' shans vyiti mirno iz etogo krizisa, nado ego ispol'zovat," in *Anatomiia protesta: Oppozitsiia v litsakh, interv'iu, programmakh* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2013), pp. 5–14.

18 OVD-Info, "Persecution of the Anti-war Movement Report. May 2024" [https://en.ovdinfo.org/persecution-anti-war-movement-report-may-2024#1].

left the country within the first two years of Russia's launch of the so-called special military operation.[19] Wartime émigrés, albeit young and well-educated, represented less than one percent of Russia's labor force. The silent majority appears to yearn for Russia's victory in the war and to extract economic benefits from the significant growth of the military-industrial complex.[20]

Cross-time opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center suggest that the majority of the Russian population steadily supports Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Eighty percent of the survey respondents in March 2022, as well as 77 percent in November 2024, reported their support for "the action of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine."[21] Moreover, the proportion of Russians who approved the use of nuclear weapons during the ongoing war increased from 29 percent in April 2023 to 39 percent in November 2024.[22] The use of such survey techniques as list experiments confirms that the majority of Russians genuinely support the war, albeit at a lower level.[23] An avalanche of state propaganda partly explains the mass support for Russia's brutal war.[24]

Russia's disinformation campaigns have extended beyond its borders.[25] As shown in an essay by Hiroaki Kuromiya (2025), a legion of Russian propagandists, subversive operatives, and their collaborators fomented regional divisions in Ukraine.[26] The Russian propaganda machine was formidable in its efforts to magnify Ukrainian Donbas' ties with Russia and efface the industrial

19 Denis Kasyanchuk and Alexandra Prokopenko, "Russia's 650,000 Wartime Émigré," *The Bell*, 19 July 2024 [https://en.thebell.io/russias-650-000-wartime-emigres/].

20 Ekaterina Kurbangaleeva, "Wartime Boom: Which Regions and Industries Are Profiting from Russia's War?" *Carnegie Politika*, 30 April 2024 [https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/04/wartime-boom-which-regions-and-industries-are-profiting-from-russias-war?lang=en].

21 Levada Center, "Konflikt s Ukrainoi v noiabre 2024 goda: Vnimanie, podderzhka, otnoshenie k peregovoram, trudnosti i uspekhi SVO, stolknovenie Rossii i NATO, primenenie iadernogo oruzhiia" [https://www.levada.ru/2024/12/04/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-v-noyabre-2024-goda-vnimanie-podderzhka-otnoshenie-k-peregovoram-trudnosti-i-uspehi-svo-stolknovenie-rossii-i-nato-primenenie-yadernogo-oruzhiya/].

22 Levada Center, "Konflikt s Ukrainoi v noiabre 2024 goda."

23 Philipp Chapkovski and Max Schaub, "Solid Support or Secret Dissent? A List Experiment on Preference Falsification during the Russian War against Ukraine," *Research and Politics* 9, no. 2 (2022), pp. 1–6 [https://doi.org/10.1177/20531680221108328].

24 On the role of propaganda in autocracies, see Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

25 See, for example, Jon Roozenbeek, *Propaganda and Ideology in the Russian–Ukrainian War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

26 Hiroaki Kuromiya, "The Russo–Ukrainian War and the 'Enigma' of the Donbas," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 46, no. 2 (2025), pp. 149–163.

region's pre-Soviet connections with Western Europe.[27] Through a meticulous analysis of the history of the Donbas, Kuromiya shows that the Donbas is "a supremely Ukrainian land."[28] A nuanced understanding of the history of the Donbas, along with an astute assessment of Russia's subversive policies, sheds light on the origins of the Russo–Ukrainian War.

The West's response to Russia's military intervention is another important factor explaining the escalation of Putin's pursuit of expansionist policies. Serhii Plokhy's essay revealed similarities in the West's policies toward Hitler's Germany and Putin's Russia.[29] Based on a cross-time comparison, Plokhy argues that incumbent governments in Western Europe failed to draw lessons from the policy blunders of their predecessors at the beginning of World War II. This incisive analysis offers a scathing critique of the policy of appeasement used to maintain peace and stability on the continent.

At the time of this writing (December 2024), the war was still raging, causing colossal human losses and massive destruction in Ukrainian towns and villages.[30] According to conservative estimates by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 11,743 civilians were killed and an additional 24,614 were injured from February 2022 to August 2024.[31] Numerous human rights reports have demonstrated that civilians in territories under Russian occupation have been systematically subjected to arbitrary

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27 Tetiana Bots, "Kornii Hrytsiuk: Donbas zavzhdy buv Evropoiu, nas prosto zmusyly pro tse zabuty," *Tyzhden'*, 25 June 2021 [https://tyzhden.ua/kornij-hrytsiuk-donbas-zavzhdy-buv-ievropoiu-nas-prosto-zmusyly-pro-tse-zabuty/]; Fedorchuk, Stanislav, "'Stal' u stepu': Bel'hiitsi pryishly u Donbas ranishe za Akhmetova," *Istorychna Pravda*, 17 December 2010 [https://www.istpravda.com.ua/reviews/2010/12/17/9380/].

28 Kuromiya, "The Russo–Ukrainian War and the "Enigma" of the Donbas," p. 153. See also Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s–1990s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

29 Serhii Plokhy, "Appeasement: The Road to the Russo–Ukrainian War," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 46, no. 2 (2025), pp. 133–147.

30 Human Rights Watch, *"Our City Was Gone": Russia's Devastation of Mariupol, Ukraine* (New York City: Human Rights Watch, 2024) [https://www.hrw.org/feature/russia-ukraine-war-mariupol/report]; Krzysztof Nieczypor, "Ukraine: The World's Biggest Minefield," *OSW Commentary*, 22 November 2023 [https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-11-22/ukraine-worlds-biggest-minefield]; UNICEF, "Nearly 2,000 Children Killed or Injured since the Escalation of War in Ukraine" [https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/nearly-2000-children-killed-or-injured-escalation-war-ukraine].

31 The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *40th Periodic Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: Treatment of Prisoners of War and Update on the Human Rights Situation, 1 June to 31 August 2024* (Geneva: OHCHR, October 2024), p. 17.

detention, torture, enforced disappearance, and sexual violence.[32] In Bucha, a town located 30 km from Kyiv, the youngest victim of Russian atrocities was less than two years old and the oldest one was ninety-nine.[33] Overall, the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine registered over 140,000 war crimes committed by the Russian military on the territory of Ukraine within the first 1,000 days of Russia's full-scale invasion.[34] Among other consequences, the Russian invasion caused an environmental catastrophe in Kherson Oblast because of the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam.[35] The Russian military also deliberately targeted Ukraine's critical facilities and damaged its energy infrastructure to undermine resistance to Russian aggression during the winter period.[36] Nonetheless, despite the unbridled brutality of the Russian forces, Ukrainians persevered in their struggle for national independence, democratic development, and European integration.

One implication of the findings presented in this section is that the policymaking community must commit resources to developing country-specific expertise to implement more robust policies that maintain peace and uphold international law. Many analysts have underestimated the prevalence of the imperial mindset in Russian society and downplayed Russia's adversarial behavior in the international arena. Furthermore, given the heavy reliance on Russian sources, many policymakers have underestimated the Ukrainians'

32 Crimean Tatar Resource Center, "Analiz porushen' prav liudyny v okupovannomu Krymu za 2024 rik (prezentatsiia)" [https://ctrcenter.org/uk/activities/analiz-porushen-prav-lyudyny-v-okupovanomu-krymu-za-2023-rik-prezentacziya]; Maryia Kvitsinskaya, Eugenia Andreyuk, and Charlotte Mancini, *"You're Loyal to Ukraine – Are You a Nazi?" Torture and Other Violations as Crimes against Humanity by the Russian Army in Ukraine* (Geneva: The World Organisation against Torture, 2024) [https://www.omct.org/site-resources/files/Ukraine-Report-18.07.2024_English.pdf]; Onysiia Sinyuk and Yelyzaveta Sokurenko, *"Torture Chamber at School": An Analysis of the Testimonies of Detainees in the Village of Bilyayivka, Kherson Region* (Kyiv: The Human Rights Center Zmina, 2023) [https://zmina.ua/en/publication-en/torture-chamber-at-school-an-analysis-of-the-testimonies-of-detainees-in-the-village-of-bilyayivka-kherson-region/].

33 Halya Coynash, "The Youngest Victim of Russia's Bucha Atrocities Was Less than Two Years Old," *Human Rights in Ukraine* (the information portal of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group), 1 April 2024 [https://khpg.org/en/1608813541].

34 Ukrinform, "V Ukraini za 1,000 dniv viiny zafiksuvaly ponad 140 tysiach voennykh zlochyniv" [https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3929322-v-ukraini-za-tisacu-dniv-vijni-zafiksuvali-ponad-140-tisac-voennih-zlociniv.html].

35 Richard Stone, "Laid to Waste: Ukrainian Scientists Are Tallying the Grave Environmental Consequences of the Kakhovka Dam Disaster," *Science*, 4 January 2024 [https://www.science.org/content/article/ukrainian-scientists-tally-grave-environmental-consequences-kakhovka-dam-disaster].

36 Kyiv School of Economics, *Report on Damages to Infrastructure from the Destruction Caused by Russia's Military Aggression against Ukraine as of January 2024* (Kyiv: KSE, April 2024) [https://kse.ua/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Eng_01.01.24_Damages_Report.pdf].

determination to resist Russian aggression. Contrary to Kremlin narratives, people in oblasts with sizable Russian-speaking populations joined the Territorial Defense Forces and launched various civic initiatives to repel Russian attacks.[37]

A fertile area for future research is the impact of Russia's disinformation campaigns on global politics. With the political ascendancy of Donald Trump, the U.S. media has become increasingly vulnerable to Russian propaganda, which has influenced public attitudes toward the Russo–Ukrainian War and the U.S.–NATO relationship.[38] Data from the American Trends Panel, created by the Pew Research Center, reveal widening partisan differences in views on U.S. foreign policy. In April 2024, for example, 75 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, along with 43 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, held favorable views of NATO.[39] The survey also showed that Americans with greater knowledge about NATO were more likely to view the alliance favorably. These survey findings underscore the importance of being knowledgeable about international history and politics for crafting effective foreign policy.

Another promising avenue for further research is a new set of policy instruments that democracies should employ to challenge the resurgence of authoritarianism worldwide and uphold international law. Twentieth-century history, along with recent developments, serves as a grim warning that appeasement is unlikely to stop an aggressor state. In April 2008, out of fear of antagonizing Russia, NATO refrained from offering membership to Georgia and Ukraine.[40] Following Russia's war against Georgia in August 2008, the Obama administration opted to "reset" U.S. relations with Russia and focus on areas of mutual interest. More recently, Western governments were slow to supply Ukraine with a wide arsenal of heavy weaponry out of concern

37 Olga Boichak and Brian McKernan, "Narratives of Volunteering and Social Change in Wartime Ukraine," *Cultural Sociology* 18, no. 1 (2024), pp. 48–71; David Kirichenko, "Ukraine's Nerds Join Rambos to Repel Russia," *Europe's Edge* (Washington, D.C.: The Center for European Policy Analysis, 4 September 2024) [https://cepa.org/article/ukraines-nerds-join-rambos-to-repel-russia/]; Natalka Pozniak-Khomenko, ed., *Bez rotatsii* (Kyiv: Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, 2023) [https://uinp.gov.ua/elektronni-vydannya/bez-rotaciyi].

38 On the penetration of the Kremlin-style rhetoric into U.S. media, see Sarah Oates and Gordon Neil Ramsay, *Seeing Red: Russian Propaganda and American News* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

39 Richard Wike, Moira Fagan, Sneha Gubbala, and Sarah Austin, *Growing Partisan Divisions over NATO and Ukraine* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, May 2024) [https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/08/growing-partisan-divisions-over-nato-and-ukraine/].

40 For details, see the Bucharest Summit Declaration issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm].

that it would provoke an escalation in Russia's military strategy.[41] Yet, such inept Western policies emboldened the Russian government and its allies to destabilize the global order.

41 Christoph Trebesch, "Ukraine Support Tracker: Despite Military Offensive, New Pledges of Support Remain Low" (Kiel: Kiel Institute for the World Economy, July 2023) [https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/news/ukraine-support-tracker-despite-military-offensive-new-pledges-of-support-remain-low/].