Russia's War in Ukraine

Identity, History, and Conflict

By Jeffrey Mankoff

Russia's invasion of Ukraine constitutes the biggest threat to peace and security in Europe since the end of the Cold War. On February 21, 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin gave a bizarre and at times unhinged speech laying out a long list of grievances as justification for the "special military operation" announced the following day. While these grievances included the long-simmering dispute over the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the shape of the post–Cold War security architecture in Europe, the speech centered on a much more fundamental issue: the legitimacy of Ukrainian identity and statehood themselves. It reflected a worldview Putin had long expressed, emphasizing the deep-seated unity among the Eastern Slavs—Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, who all trace their origins to the medieval Kyivan Rus commonwealth—and suggesting that the modern states of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus should share a political destiny both today and in the future. The corollary to that view is the claim that distinct Ukrainian and Belarusian identities are the product of foreign manipulation and that, today, the West is following in the footsteps of Russia's imperial rivals in using Ukraine (and Belarus) as part of an "anti-Russia project."

Throughout Putin's time in office, Moscow has pursued a policy toward Ukraine and Belarus predicated on the assumption that their respective national identities are artificial—and therefore fragile. Putin's arguments about foreign enemies promoting Ukrainian (and, in a more diffuse way, Belarusian) identity as part of a geopolitical struggle against Russia echo the way many of his predecessors refused to accept the agency of ordinary people seeking autonomy from tsarist or Soviet domination. The historically minded Putin often invokes the ideas of thinkers emphasizing the organic unity of the Russian Empire and its people—especially its Slavic, Orthodox core—in a form of what the historian Timothy Snyder calls the "politics of eternity," the belief in an unchanging historical essence.

The salience that Putin and other Russian elites assign to the idea of Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian unity helps explain the origins of the current conflict, notably why Moscow was willing to risk a large-scale war on its borders when neither Ukraine nor NATO posed any military threat. It also suggests that Moscow's ambitions extend beyond preventing Ukrainian NATO membership and encompass a more thorough aspiration to dominate Ukraine politically, militarily, and economically.

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It also helps explain Russia's military strategy. Moscow appeared to calculate that enough Ukrainians, at least in the eastern part of the country, would accept some form of reintegration into a Russian sphere of influence because of shared cultural, linguistic, religious, and other ties with Russia. Despite pre-war polls showing large numbers of Ukrainians willing to take up arms to defend their country against a Russian invasion, Moscow's wager was not entirely implausible given the recentness of the shift and the persistence of family and other ties across the Russian-Ukrainian border. Nonetheless, Russia's war has become bogged down in no small part because this calculation about Ukrainian identity has proven dramatically wrong.

The past three decades—and especially the years since the 2014 "Revolution of Dignity" and ensuing Russian annexation of Crimea and intervention in Donbas—have witnessed a significant consolidation of Ukrainian civic identity. This Ukrainian civic nation encompasses not just Ukrainian speakers in the western part of the country, but much of the Russian-speaking but increasingly bilingual east as well. A generation has grown up in an independent Ukraine that, for all its flaws, has maintained a robust democracy and is becoming increasingly European in its outlook (thanks in no small part to Russia's aggressive meddling), even as Putin's Russia remains fixated on quasi-imperial great-power aspirations. If anything, the current war has further united Ukrainian citizens from all regions and linguistic and religious backgrounds while reinforcing the split between Ukrainian and Russian identities. Thus, whatever happens on the battlefield, Russia is almost certain to fail in its bid to establish lasting control over its neighbor.

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Putin and Russia's Imperial Identity

While his February 21 speech was particularly vitriolic, Putin has long claimed that Russians and Ukrainians comprise "one people" whose common history implies that they should also share a common political fate today. During a 2008 meeting with then-U.S. president George W. Bush, Putin reportedly remarked that "Ukraine is not even a country." He also described Russians and Ukrainians as "one people" in his March 2014 speech to the Russian parliament (Duma) announcing the annexation of Crimea and has come back to the theme in subsequent years, notably in a 6,000-word article titled "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians" published in July 2021. In his pre-invasion address, Putin further claimed that the current Ukrainian state was a creation of the Soviet Union and should be renamed for its supposed "author and architect," the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin.

Putin's historical excursions tend to provoke bewilderment in the West—when they are not dismissed as outright disinformation. Yet his claim that Ukrainians and Russians (as well as Belarusians) are "one people" has a long pedigree in elite Russian circles. It continues to shape not only elite discourse but political practice as well. As Ukraine has become increasingly "Ukrainified" in recent years, Russian officials and analysts (few of whom have ever bothered to learn Ukrainian) were oblivious to the changes.

With some Soviet-era variation, what the historian Zenon Kohut calls the "unity paradigm" has been the default view of Russian statesmen and intellectuals since the early modern era, when the Grand Princedom of Moscow (Muscovy) began bringing the disparate East Slavic lands and peoples under its control. During this period of imperial conquest, Russian publicists such as the cleric Innokenty Gizel redefined the Ukrainian lands and their people as part of Russia's own history. They emphasized the existence of a

tripartite "all-Russian" people comprised of Great, Little (Ukrainian), and White (Belarusian) Russians, a view promoted in the educational system of the nineteenth-century Russian Empire. Committed to the idea of the "all-Russian" people, imperial elites believed that rival powers were deliberately promoting Ukrainian and Belarusian nationalism as a geopolitical tool for weakening Russia—the same theme Putin has long emphasized.

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While the inhabitants of modern Ukraine have maintained political and linguistic identities distinct from Russia for centuries, Ukrainian nationalism—the belief that Ukrainians constitute a distinct nation that should have its own state—emerged during the nineteenth century, when what is now Ukraine was partitioned between Russia and Austria-Hungary, which controlled the western Ukrainian regions of Galicia, Bukovina, and Transcarpathia. The comparatively liberal Habsburgs tolerated the Ukrainian national movement—even providing support for Ukrainian forces who fought against Russia during World War I and helping Ukraine achieve a brief independence after the Russian Empire collapsed.

The Russian Empire, on the other hand, persecuted Ukrainian activists and organizations. Russian authorities argued that Ukrainian nationalism was an artificial creation of Vienna aimed at what a senior diplomat termed "disruption of the Russian tribe [*plemeni*]." The minister of internal affairs issued a decree in 1863 banning publication and instruction in the Ukrainian language that remained in force until 1905. Ukrainian writers and activists, such as Taras Shevchenko, regarded as the father of Ukrainian literature, were arrested and exiled.

With the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires at the end of World War I, Russian suspicions about Ukrainian identity transferred to other targets. During the Paris Peace Conference, former foreign minister Sergei Sazonov, a man generally sympathetic to Slavic national movements, remarked, "As for Ukraine, it does not exist. Even the word is artificial and a foreign import. There is a Little Russia, there is no Ukraine . . . The Ukrainian movement is nothing but a reaction against the abuses of the bureaucracy and of Bolshevism."

This divide between the Austro-Hungarian and Russian territories continued to matter long after the two empires fell. Ukraine secured a brief period of independence during the Russian Civil War, with nationalist, anarchist, and other groups fighting both Polish and Russian armies—and among themselves.

By the early 1920s, the regions in the west formerly controlled by Austria-Hungary passed under Polish or Romanian rule until Stalin seized them at the start of World War II. Despite a vicious campaign of communization, western Ukraine remained a crucible for nationalist sentiment. Western Ukraine was the base of operations for Stepan Bandera's Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), who attempted to set up a puppet state under German protection during World War II. It was the site of some of the war's worst atrocities—including the German-led annihilation of the Jewish population, Ukrainian-led ethnic cleansing of Poles, and Polish retribution attacks on Ukrainian civilians. In the Russian narrative, Bandera

became a figure of particular hate, his willingness to collaborate with the Nazi invaders held up as evidence of the link between Ukrainian nationalism, ethnic cleansing, and foreign manipulation. Putin and other officials claim that Ukraine's post-2014 governments have pursued a "Banderite" policy of purging Russian influence under the direction of foreign sponsors.

Despite a period of "indigenization (*korenizatsiya*)" of education, culture, and politics in the 1920s, Ukraine ultimately experienced a high degree of Russification, owing to the persecution of nationalist intellectuals under Stalin, thin linguistic and ethnic boundaries between Russians and Ukrainians, and the opportunities for advancement available to Ukrainians who professed a Russian identity. During the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* ("openness") provided an opportunity for the mobilization of nationalist movements pushing for the breakup of the Soviet Union, including the People's Movement (*Rukh*) of Ukraine. Gorbachev sought to keep Ukraine within a Moscow-centric confederation he hoped would replace the Soviet Union.

While then-Russian president Boris Yeltsin supported Ukrainian independence in the context of his effort to overcome Gorbachev and bring down the Soviet Union, he and his advisers clung to the belief that an independent Ukraine would continue to remain closely bound to Russia. Yeltsin's adviser Gennady Burbulis remarked that "It was inconceivable, for our brains, for our minds, that [Ukraine's independence] would be an irrevocable fact." Yeltsin therefore resisted calls from senior military officials and politicians such as then-mayor of Moscow Yury Luzhkov to "recover" Crimea or otherwise pursue territorial revisionism toward an independent Ukraine.

Much of the Russian political and intellectual elite nevertheless continued to doubt the legitimacy or viability of the Ukrainian state. One of the most influential voices in the *glasnost*-era debate over the future shape of the Russian imperium was that of the Nobel Prize–winning novelist and philosopher Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who acknowledged being "well-nigh half Ukrainian by birth" but echoed imperial Russian officials' claim that "talk of a separate Ukrainian people existing since something like the ninth century . . . is a recently invented falsehood." A figure who had long criticized the Soviet system for inflicting violence upon traditional Russian culture and identity, Solzhenitsyn called for the formation of a "Russian Union" composed of the Soviet Union's East Slavic core—Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and northern Kazakhstan—while the Baltic, South Caucasus, and Central Asian states would become independent. He regarded the standardized Ukrainian language as the "distorted" product of Austro-Hungarian intrigues, "unrelated to popular usage and chock-full of German and Polish words." Solzhenitsyn therefore condemned the "cruel partition" of Ukraine from Russia, warning of further waves of separatism within Ukraine itself.

A leader who consciously portrays himself as embodying Russia's imperial tradition, Putin adopts similar language to his imperial predecessors' to describe Ukraine and the Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian relationship. Putin accuses NATO and the European Union of manipulating Ukrainian national sentiment as part of their own geopolitical competition with Russia, employing "the old groundwork of the Polish-Austrian ideologists to create an 'anti-Moscow Russia'" in Ukraine—in other words, attempting to pry Ukraine away from its "authentic" identity and alignment with Russia. Similarly, Putin's February 21 speech emphasized how post-Soviet Ukraine's leaders have "attempted to build their statehood on the negation of everything that unites us" with the assistance of "external forces."

This rejection of Ukrainian identity and the claim that Ukraine's desire to separate itself from Russian influence was the product of "external forces" seem to be not just Russian talking points, but a claim that Putin himself (and, presumably, other high-placed Russian officials) believe. It contributed to the Kremlin's

confidence that the war could be won easily and quickly—that ordinary Ukrainians would welcome Russian forces as liberators once they had removed the "fascist junta" in Kyiv, even though president Volodymyr Zelensky won 73 percent of the vote in Ukraine's April 2019 presidential runoff. Russian hubris rested on a basic failure to grasp not only the deep roots of Ukrainian identity, but also the extent to which Ukraine itself has changed in the years since the Soviet collapse.

The Making of Ukraine and Ukrainians

Though the relationship between Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians remains an object of contention in all three countries, Ukraine has made enormous strides in consolidating a shared civic identity, which includes the bulk of Russian speakers in eastern and southern Ukraine. The relative success of this project of "making Ukrainians" has accelerated Ukraine's decoupling from Russia, feeding concern in Moscow that time is running out to restore influence over its neighbor and justify a series of increasingly risky gambles to pull Ukraine back into Moscow's orbit.

The story of the more than three decades since the Soviet collapse centers on the gradual diffusion of "Ukrainianness" across an ever-wider swathe of the country and its people. In a pattern familiar from both interwar Europe and the postcolonial Global South, the independent Ukrainian state became instrumental in forging a shared national identity among its inhabitants through education, official memory, the media, legislation, and other tools. Measured by language use, religious affiliation, ethnic self-identification, and political outlook, a much higher percentage of Ukrainian citizens today see themselves first and foremost as Ukrainian, including in parts of the country where Russian remains the predominant language.

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A key element of the process of "making Ukrainians" underway since the late Soviet era is a blurring of the historical divide between western and eastern (and southern) Ukraine. Though *Rukh* and similar groups' stronghold lay in western Ukraine, a 1991 referendum on independence from the Soviet Union was approved by 92.3 percent of voters; even in Russian-speaking regions of eastern Ukraine, large majorities supported independence.[1]

In the last years of the Soviet Union, Russian speakers outnumbered Ukrainian speakers in most of Ukraine's eastern oblasts; by 2001, the number of Ukrainian speakers was higher everywhere except in Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk. Today, more than two-thirds of Ukrainian citizens claim Ukrainian as a native language; even in eastern regions, a plurality is bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian. The shift reflects both state policy (as in education), as well as individual decisions. A language law signed by

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1. Votes in favor of independence by oblast included: Dnipropetrovsk/Dnipro (91 percent), Zaporizhzhia (81 percent), Kherson (90 percent), Mykolaiv (89 percent), Kharkiv (76 percent), Odesa (85 percent), Donetsk (77 percent), Luhansk (84 percent), Crimea (54 percent), and the city of Sevastopol (57 percent).

former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko in 2019—and frequently referenced by Putin as an element in the "genocide" perpetrated by the Ukrainian state—promises to further "Ukrainify" education, media, and administration. It designates Ukrainian as the official state language and requires all media outlets to publish in Ukrainian (they may also publish parallel versions in other languages). Some of the shift is politically driven, as individuals increasingly use Ukrainian in protest against Russian intervention—especially in the wake of the 2022 invasion. It is also the natural result of over 30 years of Ukrainian independence.

Voting patterns provide another indicator of Ukrainians' emerging sense of national unity. The first several presidential and parliamentary elections held after independence saw stark divides between western and eastern Ukraine—starker even than the divides between blue and red states in the United States. In the 1994 election, Leonid Kravchuk, one of the signatories to the Belavezha Accords dissolving the Soviet Union, won 90 percent of the vote in several western oblasts (with a high of 94.8 percent in Ternopil oblast)—while his rival, Leonid Kuchma, who favored a policy of pragmatic balancing between Russia and the West, racked up 88 percent of the vote in Luhansk oblast and 79 percent in Donetsk oblast (together, Donbas). Since the Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas, however, pro-Western candidates Petro Poroshenko (2014) and Volodymyr Zelensky (2019) have won comfortable majorities in all oblasts.[2] Moreover, voting behavior in recent elections was shaped by bread and butter considerations and hopes for ending the conflict in Donbas, issues that cut across Ukraine's geographic divides.

Religious affiliation similarly suggests Ukrainians' increasing distinctiveness from Russians. Until 2014, a plurality of Orthodox Ukrainians maintained allegiance to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), established in the last days of the Soviet Union as a self-governing branch of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). However, soon after independence, clerics aligned with president Kravchuk set up a rival Orthodox Church headed by its own patriarch in Kyiv, which the ROC and most of the global Orthodox community regarded as illegitimate.

Adherence to the UOC-MP peaked in 2010 at 23.6 percent of Ukraine's Orthodox Christians; last year around 12 percent profess adherence to it, while just under a quarter belong to the Kyiv-based Orthodox Church of Ukraine (and almost 20 percent of Orthodox Ukrainians say they are "simply Orthodox"). The UOC-MP has steadily lost adherents over its ties to the ROC, which actively promotes the idea of a "Russian world" and claims as its "canonical territory" the whole of the former Soviet Union. The 2018 decision by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople granting recognition and autocephaly (independence) to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine remains a sore spot in Moscow—as Putin noted in his pre-invasion speech—but represents another step in Ukraine's progressive disentanglement from Russia.

Political outlooks in Ukraine and Russia are diverging as well. Calls for Ukraine's integration with the European Union and NATO have grown substantially—in no small part in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donetsk and Luhansk. Support for NATO membership, which hovered below 50 percent prior to the 2014 Russian invasion, has greatly risen, reaching 62 percent in early 2022. Meanwhile, more than two-thirds of Ukrainians (68 percent) support membership in the European Union. Regardless of the willingness of either organization to admit Ukraine, these attitudes reflect a seismic shift that makes the idea of reintegration with Russia harder to imagine. They also have implications for Ukrainian foreign policy, insofar as leaders such as Poroshenko and Zelensky, who have come to power in the shadow of war and occupation, prioritize deepening ties with the Euro-Atlantic West as a hedge against further Russian intervention.

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2. Poroshenko won a majority in Lviv oblast in 2019.

Despite the development and consolidation of Ukrainian national identity over the past three decades, a certain "all-Russian" or post-imperial consciousness still lingers in corners of Ukrainian (and especially Belarusian) society. Some politicians, militants, and ordinary people aligned themselves with Russia, including the deposed former president Viktor Yanukovych and Belarusian leader Aleksandr Lukashenko, both Russian speakers who identify more with the supranational Soviet Union than with the post-Soviet national states they ruled. Both promoted Russian as a lingua franca, supported religious institutions linked to the ROC, and favored close economic and even political integration with Russia—but struggled to maintain their legitimacy in the face of rising national consciousness, especially among a younger, post-Soviet generation. Moreover, during the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas, some Ukrainian citizens sided with the separatists, including members of the Ukrainian army and security services.

Preparations for Russia's current invasion likewise centered on mobilizing collaborators from among the population, including some still serving the Ukrainian state—a stratagem that failed due to corruption and more general rejection of the "all-Russian" nation. While some pro-Russian fighters no doubt have financial or other reasons for fighting, others, especially in 2014–15, appeared motivated by genuine support for the idea of an imperial Russian nation or belief in the Russian claim that "fascists" in Kyiv are determined to drag Ukraine away from its historical identification with the Orthodox, Russian world. Others, perhaps, are willing to support whichever side can bring peace and stability—particularly in Donbas, whose inhabitants remain deeply ambivalent about their political future. Significant support for the Russian-backed Opposition Platform – For Life (the remnants of Yanukovych's Party of Regions) in eastern Ukraine may have helped convince Moscow of lingering pro-Russian sentiment. For that reason, the extent and intensity of resistance to a Russian invasion in eastern Ukraine remained an open question at the start of the current war.

The evidence of the past few months suggests that Russian calculations turned out to be wrong. Indeed, Russia's continued intervention in Ukraine appears to be one of the main factors accelerating this consolidation of a Ukrainian national identity at odds with the idea of an "all-Russian" nation based in Moscow. A similar pattern has held throughout the Putin era, as Moscow's repeated interventions in Ukraine have themselves helped drive the emergence of a Ukrainian national consciousness. Amid Russia's resurgence as a major power, its most glaring failure—and the most significant "unfinished business" for the aging Putin—are the repeated failures to keep Ukraine within the fold. Putin's risky invasion therefore seems to be a last-ditch effort to reverse the legacy of previous failures—though if the historical record is any guide, it is likely to accelerate rather than reverse the process of nationalization and decoupling.

How Russian Meddling Accelerated Ukraine's Decoupling

Russian efforts to slow Ukraine's Westward drift date to the first years after the Soviet collapse. Though Yeltsin accepted Ukraine's post-Soviet borders, concern about the potential for Russian irredentism was instrumental in Kyiv's 1996 decision to align with Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova—three states that did face Russian-backed separatist conflicts on their territory—in the Western-leaning GUAM group.[3]

This dynamic has been far more pronounced under Putin. In 2004, Putin's Kremlin inserted itself into Ukraine's electoral politics by openly supporting Yanukovych, outgoing president Kuchma's handpicked successor. Putin traveled to Ukraine ahead of the vote and campaigned on Yanukovych's behalf. Pro-Western opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko was poisoned in an assassination attempt widely blamed on the Russian security services. When exit polls indicated that the official results showing a narrow

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3. The group was known as GUUAM from 1999–2002, when Uzbekistan was also a member.

Yanukovych victory had been falsified, Moscow doubled down on its support, even as masses of orange-clad protestors took to the streets in Kyiv and other cities demanding that the election be re-held under international supervision. After Yushchenko won a comfortable majority in the new election, Moscow responded with various forms of pressure—including politically motivated gas cutoffs in 2006 and 2009.

Paying renewed attention to Ukrainian language and culture, the bilingual Yushchenko pushed for international recognition of the Stalinist famine (*Holodomor*) as an anti-Ukrainian genocide. He also raised the question, which his predecessors had avoided, of receiving a Membership Action Plan from NATO. While Yushchenko's presidency was a failure in political terms, he and his "orange" allies won substantial sympathy in the West with their portrayal of Ukrainians as a European nation who had long suffered from Russian oppression.

The 2010 return of Yanukovych and his eastern-based Party of Regions in a free and fair election appeared to offer Russia an opportunity to recover from the setbacks of the Yushchenko era. Once again, Moscow overstepped. Despite their interest in maintaining close ties with Russia, Yanukovych and his supporters favored signing an association agreement with the European Union. The agreement called for establishing a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area that would boost Ukraine's overall trade and give Ukrainians greater access to Europe—including courts and banking systems that would help the oligarchs surrounding Yanukovych protect their assets. The ambition to sign an association agreement was incompatible with Putin's call for creating a Eurasian Union that would be "a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world" and allow Moscow to deepen its political and economic influence across much of the former Soviet Union. After Yanukovych rejected membership in this planned union, Moscow employed a mixture of carrots and sticks to convince him to change his mind. Though Yanukovych agreed at the last minute to abandon the EU association agreement, neither he nor the Kremlin reckoned on the fury of millions of ordinary Ukrainians who believed Yanukovych had betrayed their aspiration for a European future.

The initial demonstrators on Kyiv's Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti) in late 2013 were mostly young people calling on Yanukovych to sign the agreement. Waving Ukrainian and EU flags, they embodied the idea of a Western-oriented Ukraine and rejection of Russian influence. Moscow, however, claimed the Maidan protests were part of a U.S.-backed coup attempt, pointing to the presence of U.S. officials and statements of support for the protestors.[4] It also urged Yanukovych to suppress the demonstrations.

Violence by Yanukovych's security forces only radicalized the protests, which expanded beyond Kyiv and took on an increasingly intransigent tone. Even in Russian-speaking parts of eastern Ukraine, demonstrators targeted symbols of Russian domination—notably statues of Lenin, as well as of General Aleksandr Suvorov, who oversaw the conquest of southeastern Ukraine from the Ottoman Empire. By February 2014, even the Kremlin recognized that Yanukovych could not remain in power and participated in negotiations for a managed transition. Yet Yanukovych's hasty flight derailed the transition agreement and resulted in snap elections, limiting Moscow's ability to influence the outcome. The May 2014 presidential election resulted in a comprehensive victory for the pro-Maidan, pro-European Petro Poroshenko. His signing of the EU association agreement closed the door on Ukraine's potential inclusion in the renamed Eurasian Economic Union, which was left a shell of what Putin had hoped it would be.

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4. In his pre-invasion speech, Putin bizarrely claimed that the U.S. embassy provided the Maidan protestors financial assistance to the tune of a million dollars a day.

Having failed to coerce Ukraine back into the fold, Moscow pivoted to partition. Even before Yanukovych fled the country, pro-Russian demonstrations had broken out in the Crimean port of Sevastopol; within days, Russian special forces ("little green men") began seizing government buildings and military assets across Crimea. Just over three weeks later, following a hastily organized referendum, Putin announced the annexation of Crimea in a speech to the Duma. The rapidity with which Russia swallowed Crimea (where a majority of the population is ethnically Russian) reinforced Russian assumptions about the weakness and artificiality of the Ukrainian state and encouraged Moscow to undertake a similar effort across many of the Russian-speaking regions of eastern and southern Ukraine.

To Moscow's surprise and frustration, however, the Crimea playbook had limited success in other parts of the country. Pro-Russian demonstrators in the Dnipro (Dnipropetrovsk), Kharkiv, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Odesa, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts failed in their efforts to secure control of government buildings and communications infrastructure. Police in Kharkiv arrested dozens of protestors who had seized the regional administration building; in Odesa, counter-protestors set the occupied Trade Unions building on fire, killing nearly 40 pro-Russian activists.

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Only in Donetsk and Luhansk did pro-Russian demonstrators manage to gain control of the local administration and launch an insurgency. Attempts to use Crimea-style referenda as a pretext for annexation were scrapped, however—likely because too few voters supported annexation by Russia. Poroshenko responded to the rebels' seizure of Donetsk and Luhansk by launching an "anti-terrorist operation." By the summer of 2014, the Ukrainian military was on the verge of surrounding the separatist forces in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" (DNR and LNR), cutting them off from supply lines linking them to Russia and leaving them vulnerable to annihilation. Facing the prospect that its proxies would be wiped out, Moscow responded by invading Ukrainian territory in force in August 2014. While the Donbas War has been costly for Ukraine, Russia was unable to translate its victory in the field into a favorable political settlement. Military occupation and control of the border merely allowed Russia to supply the separatist regions and secure them from reconquest.

Moscow also failed in its larger ambition to use the breakaway regions as a cudgel to force Ukraine to abandon its aspiration for integration with the West. Neither Poroshenko nor Zelensky made a serious effort to implement the provisions of the February 2015 Minsk II ceasefire agreement requiring the Ukrainian legislature (Verkhovna Rada) to adopt a "law on special status" for the occupied regions and to implement a constitutional provision on decentralization. Both understood that these steps would entrench the Russian-backed separatists within the federal structure of the state, compromising Ukrainian sovereignty and providing Moscow a veto over Ukraine's foreign policy—and that no democratically elected Rada would vote in favor of these provisions.

Though he came into office promising a more pragmatic approach to Russia and the conflict in Donbas, perceptions of Russian intransigence and bad faith led Zelensky to adopt a harder line on Minsk II. By the end of 2021, he was even suggesting Kyiv should seek to modify or abandon it should negotiations fail to progress. Zelensky also started chipping away at the pillars of Russian influence. He ordered the closing of pro-Russian television networks, and his government arrested oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, who funded several of these channels and is regarded as the Kremlin's main proxy in Ukraine, on treason charges. Zelensky also pushed to reform the security services, aiming to root out the Russian sympathizers

who proved integral to the takeover of Crimea and have subsequently interfered with investigations into Russian influence. Despite significant pressure from Moscow, the bilingual Zelensky also left in place the language law signed at the end of Poroshenko's term.

The Road to War—and Beyond

The conflict in Donbas left Russia facing escalating economic penalties from the United States and the European Union that stifled its economy. In 2016, NATO responded to the fears of member states along Russian borders by reinforcing its military capabilities in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania and standing by its 2008 pledge that Ukraine and Georgia "will become" members. In 2019, the United States also abandoned the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty after accusing Russia of noncompliance, a step that would allow for nuclear deployments in Central and Eastern Europe as well as around the Russian periphery in Asia.

Faced with this deteriorating security environment and calculating that the West was too divided and distracted to respond forcefully, Putin gambled on an all-out invasion in February 2022. Even with the reported 190,000 troops massed on the Ukrainian border when the invasion began, Moscow lacks the manpower to carry out a sustained military occupation, especially in the face of an insurgency sustained by foreign support. The failure of assaults on Kyiv, Kharkiv, and other cities in spring 2022 extracted heavy casualties and forced Moscow to pivot back to Donbas. U.S. and EU sanctions have hit Russia hard, with most of its banking sector cut off from access to the dollar-denominated financial system and the prospect of default looming. While the war has boosted Putin's standing in opinion polls, it has also prompted a mass exodus of educated Russians and prompted draconian crackdowns at home.

Putin's decision to use force, particularly to carry out a large-scale invasion rather than the more limited incursions Russian forces conducted in Georgia (2008) and Donbas (2014–15), smacks of desperation. Putin's February 21 speech, as well as a subsequent address announcing the start of Russia's "special military operation" on February 24, effectively denied the very idea of a separate Ukrainian identity and the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state. Faced with such demands, Ukrainian resistance was almost guaranteed. Zelensky's promise that the invaders "will see our faces, not our backs" was, in effect, a call for resistance, including partisan warfare of the kind Ukrainians waged against both Nazi and Soviet occupation forces (and which took the Red Army and Stalin's secret police years of vicious combat to defeat). Russian atrocities will only reinforce the imperative to resist. This time, Western powers are preparing to support an insurgency as well.

Since before the Orange Revolution, Putin has assumed that many, if not most, citizens of Ukraine remain committed to the idea of the "all-Russian" nation, and that it is only their "Banderite" leaders and the manipulation of foreign powers that have pushed Ukraine away from Russia. For years, that belief has underpinned Russia's campaign to halt Ukraine's drift toward Europe. In 2004 and again in 2013–14, this campaign was met with disaster. Today, Putin is wagering that military force can succeed where various other forms of intervention have failed.

However, the current invasion rests on the same assumptions about Ukrainian identity that have led Moscow astray in the past. Ukrainian resistance has already far surpassed what Moscow was expecting. Russian forces have suffered tens of thousands of casualties and failed in their initial objective of marching on Kyiv. Meanwhile, even politicians from the eastern-based Opposition Platform – For Life have come out against the Russian invasion, as have leading oligarchs. Opposition Platform – For Life leader Yuriy Boiko, perhaps the most prominent pro-Russian voice in post-Yanukovych Ukraine, threw his support

behind Zelensky and declared in the Rada, "We have one country—Ukraine, and we must defend it!" Even if Russian forces take Kyiv, an occupation regime will be unable to count on even a modicum of legitimacy among Ukrainian citizens in most of the country, especially following revelations of widespread atrocities and other war crimes in occupied regions.

Thus, a month or so into the conflict, Putin's gamble already appeared to have backfired spectacularly. Today, over five million Ukrainians have fled the country, and thousands more have been killed or wounded. Yet Russia has failed to achieve any of its stated military objectives and has itself suffered significant losses of both troops and materiel. Even apolitical Ukrainians—or those like Boiko, whom Moscow suspected would line up on its side—have fought back or denounced the invasion. Others, like Medvedchuk, fled. The flood of collaborators Moscow was counting on to run occupation administrations in places like Kherson has not materialized. The consolidation of Ukrainians of all linguistic and regional backgrounds behind the government is not only a testament to Zelensky's unexpected courage and political acumen (Zelensky's approval rating has soared since the start of the war), but also consistent with the historical experience of foreign invasion as a catalyst for nation- and state-building.

Russian determination to bring Ukraine back into the fold despite the enormous economic price it is paying—not to mention the prospect of a grinding, bloody conflict that it could well lose—suggests that the current crisis goes beyond the question of Ukraine's relationship with NATO. For all the Kremlin's angst, Ukrainian membership was never a near-term possibility. And it was Yanukovych's aspiration to sign a trade agreement with the European Union (not NATO) that precipitated the Maidan protest movement and Russia's first invasion. Promises of neutrality, or "Finlandization" of Ukraine, are therefore unlikely to resolve the crisis unless they also provide for a much more comprehensive Russian protectorate than any the Soviet Union ever exerted over Finland.

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Despite the unimpressive performance of its military thus far and the potentially crushing impact of the sanctions it now faces, Russia could still emerge victorious on the battlefield—but only at a very high cost. Its odds of maintaining a long-term protectorate appear to be plummeting with each day Ukraine holds out. The ultimate outcome of the conflict will depend on the West's response and, above all, on Ukrainians' willingness to fight for a nation Putin believes does not and should not exist. ∎

Jeffrey Mankoff is a senior associate (non-resident) with the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., and a distinguished research fellow at the U.S. National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies. He is the author of Empires of Eurasia: How Imperial Legacies Shape International Security *(Yale University Press, 2022).*