



Geopolitical and Historical Motivations Behind the War in Ukraine

Ben Henschel

In February 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine with the goal of annexation. War has been ongoing since, as Ukraine attempts to defend its sovereignty with the help of western allies, the most prominent of which, in terms of amount of aid given, is the United States. Ukraine and Russia have interconnected histories dating back centuries that explain Putin's motivation for reunification. Geopolitical conflict within the past decades also elucidates the present situation. Considering Russia's relentless pursuit of the full integration of Ukraine into its state and the previous ineffectiveness of diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and peace agreements, it is recommended that continued military aid be given to Ukraine with the hope of defeating Russian forces, ending the war, and reaffirming the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Putin identifies the shared history between Russians and Ukrainians as originating in the late ninth century with the creation of Kyivan Rus, a medieval state. It was ruled by the Rus people, Scandinavian Vikings whose modern-day descendants are Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian nationals. The focal point of the state was the Principality of Kyiv, now Ukraine's current capital city. It notably opted to establish itself as Orthodox Christian, rejecting Roman Catholicism and paganism, which Putin claims to be significant point of shared differentiation from other societies.¹ Furthermore, Prince Vladimir, the founding ruler of

Kyivan Rus who pioneered the adoption of Orthodox Christianity, was baptized in Crimea, which, in Putin's view, gives that land sacrality for the Russian people.²

In 1240, Kyvian Rus was defeated by the Mongols, and with its decline as an empire, the land eventually split into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the east and the Grand Principality of Muscovy in the west. Modern-day Ukrainians commonly identify their distinct national history and identity to have begun in this era, particularly when the Cossacks—ruralists who banded together militarily within the Polish- Lithuanian

state—successfully rebelled and created their own state, Hetmanate, which occupied what today is mostly Ukraine. Moreover, the land belonging to the Cossacks was often referred to as Ukraine, which means “borderland” in the Slavic language of the time. This independence lasted less than a decade, as the Hetmanate soon chose to integrate with their Russian neighbors to the east in 1654 amidst the potential threats from the Poles and Ottomans. Thus, the Cossacks came under the rule of the tsar in the Principality of Muscovy, where the modern-day city of Moscow, Russia’s capital, is located.³

Religious ties were made soon thereafter. In 1686, the Ecumenical Patriarch—the spiritual figurehead of all member churches belonging to the Eastern Orthodox Church—proclaimed that Moscow would oversee Ukraine’s church, thus making its title the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. Despite the symbolic significance of falling under the rule of the Russians, it nonetheless retained a “strong sense of Ukrainian national identity” and enjoyed “extensive autonomy.”⁴ This system was upheld for centuries until 2019, when the Ecumenical Patriarch formalized Ukraine’s split from the Russian Orthodox Church after former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and 200 bishops had decided to do so. This monumental shift established the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine.⁵

The Cossack state did not last long. The land that is currently Ukraine continued to be ruled by different powers, until the latter half of the 18th century when Russia seized power of most of present-day Ukraine, having taken swaths of land from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Crimea from the Ottoman Empire. But Ukraine’s nationalist sentiment did not disappear. Ukraine’s independence was finally resurgent in 1917 when an opportune time arose due to Russia experiencing two revolutions: the first, in February, overthrew the tsardom, and the second, in October, brought about Bolshevik rule headed by Vladimir Lenin.⁶ Given this tumultuous time in Russia, the Ukrainian People’s Republic (UPR) declared its independence in January 1918.⁷

The Bolsheviks in power did not approve of this. They invaded, claiming to do so to create a new Bolshevik

Ukrainian state. This ended up being a deception — their invasion was a part of a larger civil war effort to regain and maintain Bolshevik control over several territories under a unified government.⁸ The Bolsheviks’ victory of the war ultimately brought about the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922, which included Ukraine. Recognizing the power of Ukrainian nationalist sentiments, the Soviet Union’s founding constitution granted Ukraine the ability to secede at any time.⁹ Lenin took further action to ensure Ukraine’s compliance with Bolshevik rule. He put a halt to the government’s acquisition of peasants’ grains and permitted trade without restriction on the market, which appeased farmers, who constituted 80 percent of Ukraine’s population at the time. Lenin was also intentionally accepting of Ukraine’s cultural rebirth throughout the 1920s.¹⁰

By the time Joseph Stalin seized power of the USSR, Ukrainian identity was flourishing, much to the alarm of the Soviets. Ukrainian art openly embraced western culture, its new literature gave rise to a distinctively Ukrainian style, and young students in Ukraine were not fluent in Russian and viewed it as a foreign language. Even the political sphere joined the bandwagon and welcomed this movement. Mykola Skrypnyk, the leader of Ukraine’s communist party at the time, viewed his role in the USSR as equal to that of Stalin as the head of a distinct nation and made territorial demands for regions that had majority Ukrainian populations.¹¹

Unlike Lenin, Stalin did not have sympathy for any form of deviance in the USSR. As a part of the Great Purge, he arrested thousands of Ukraine’s intelligentsia and cultural elite. Most devastatingly, there was a concerted effort to use starvation as a tool to inflict retribution on Ukrainians in the Holodomor famine in the early 1930s. Ukraine had always been home to an abundance of fertile land and produced a great deal of grain. However, under Stalin, much of this grain was shipped to Moscow and used to supply food to other regions of the USSR. Mass starvation and death ensued, with the death toll estimated to be in the millions. The Soviet secret police guarded the borders of Ukraine to not allow emigration or external aid, which was offered by Poland and denied. Many believe this famine to be punishment for Ukraine’s previous open display of nationalism.¹²

Ukraine was formally established as a sovereign state during the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. This was supported by the vast majority of Ukrainians—92 percent voted in favor of the referendum for independence.¹³ However, internal and external tensions concerning Russia did not come to an end. In addition to the previously discussed conflict with religion, many political disputes took place. Some Ukrainian politicians supported strengthened ties with western nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Association (NATO), and the European Union (EU), and other politicians encouraged strengthening ties with Russia.

This debate came to a head in the 2004 presidential election, when Viktor Yushchenko, a supporter of an orientation towards Europe, and Viktor Yanukovich, an authoritarian, pro-Russian politician, ran against each other. The campaign trail was fraught with attacks on the democratic process—Yushchenko was poisoned, removing him from the public sphere for approximately one month, and the government sponsored advertisements in support of Yanukovich’s candidacy. As for the election itself, Yanukovich was the initial winner, but it was discovered that votes were illegally awarded to Yanukovich, and his campaign team altered other results by secretly accessing the election commission’s portal.¹⁴

This electoral corruption sparked one of two significant series of demonstrations in 21st century Ukraine that illustrated the internal weakness of the Ukrainian state. Citizens took to the street in what became known as the Orange Revolution. Upward of one million Ukrainians participated in protests at the peak of activity. It accomplished its goal in forcing a recount to take place, and pro-Europe Yushchenko was rightfully granted the presidency.¹⁵ Yushchenko experienced economic difficulties during his time in office, particularly worsened by the decision of Gazprom, Russia’s state-controlled energy organization, to terminate its supply of gasoline to Ukraine for a brief period. In addition to the acute financial losses, this revealed a broader issue—Ukraine’s reliance on Russia’s contributions to natural gas repositories for prices cheaper than what others on the market paid.¹⁶

Yanukovich went on to win the presidency in 2010, and it was during his rule when the second major

upheaval within Ukraine took place. From the end of 2013 through the beginning of 2014, protests occurred with increasing violence as a part of Euromaidan. It was sparked by Yanukovich’s decision “not to sign an agreement that would have integrated the country more closely with the European Union.”¹⁷ In response to the progressively belligerent nature of the movement in the streets, the Ukrainian government implemented legislation limiting civilians’ rights to protest, and police arrested and murdered many demonstrators. Parliament eventually decided to remove Yanukovich’s title as President after he left the country. Elections were held, and Petro Poroshenko was voted into the presidency, and he went on to pursue pro-Western and anti-Russia policies.¹⁸

This instability within Ukraine allowed Russia to carry out a successful invasion. On February 20, 2014, when Euromaidan saw the height of police-civilian clashes and murders, Russia entered Crimea.¹⁹ They took over the peninsula and held a referendum, which, per Russian officers, revealed that over 95 percent of voters agreed with Russia’s annexation.²⁰ However, the voting sites were infiltrated with Russian personnel equipped with weapons, and no outside observers were present to validate the process. A member of Putin’s government later leaked that only about 30 percent of citizens participated in the referendum, and half of voters did not vote to join Russia.²¹ The ballot itself was fundamentally flawed, as it did not include an option for voters that would keep Crimea a part of Ukraine.²² In addition to the annexation of Crimea, Russia also intervened in the Donbas region in 2014. Pro-Russian protesters took over Ukrainian government personnel during Euromaidan, and Russia sent resources in support of these revolutionaries. In 2015, Russia became more directly involved and sent troops to the region.²³

The response of the international community exemplifies a broad trend that has continued to the current conflict: most of the world aligns itself in the protection of Ukraine’s sovereignty. In March 2014, soon after the referendum had taken place, the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) passed resolution 68/262 to condemn the actions of Russia, with 100 voting in favor, 11 against, and 58 abstaining.²⁴ The UN has continued to approve resolutions that

denounce Russia's repeated violations of international law. Other member states and organizations—namely the United States, Canada, and the European Union—went beyond diplomatic pressure and enacted sanctions against Russia. They were successful in part in that they negatively impacted Russia's economy—the price of the oil they were selling fell, and their GDP decreased in the short term—but they did not stop Russia's aggression.²⁵ Many of the same states also attempted to bring about peace by calling for a ceasefire under the Minsk Accords, but were largely unsuccessful in de-escalating the armed conflict.²⁶ Collectively, these actions have collectively worked to further anger Putin. Recently, he decried that cancel culture was being inflicted on the entire Russian population, and his policies and militaristic actions have shown no ideological shift, demonstrating that deterrence of Russian aggression has not been possible.

It is also important to contextualize this conflict in relation to larger trends of Russian imperialism and the US's funding of militaristic conflicts. Russia has consistently been a dominant force on the world stage in acquiring new territories. On top of the pursuit of the

annexation of Ukraine, Russia unsuccessfully invaded Georgia, which used to be part of the USSR, in the year 2008.²⁷ Putin has also suggested the possibility of future invasions, seeing as though he sees the fall of the Soviet Union as “the biggest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century.”²⁸ That the United States has given a significant amount of funds to Ukraine to support its militaristic efforts to defeat Russia fits in with a recurring geopolitical theme, as well—the US has sought to advance their global interests by giving financial aid to several other countries, such as Israel and Egypt, and by sponsoring military coups throughout Latin America, Iran, and other parts of the world.

In sum, Russia's aggression and future goals pose a large threat to the future of Ukraine and the world. Putin has shown that he will not back down in the face of retaliation, and it is therefore imperative that the global community contributes to Ukraine's military success in the current war. History has shown a deep interconnectedness between Russia and Ukraine dating back many centuries, but now is the time to champion Ukraine's future prosperity free of Russian influence.

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Ben Henschel is an undergraduate student pursuing a BA in Spanish and Communication Studies with a minor in History. On campus, he is a peer tutor, a session leader with the Northeastern Culture and Language Learning Society, and a member of Sigma Delta Pi, a national collegiate Spanish honors society.

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