

RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE: SECURITY DILEMMA OR WHAT?

Russia blames NATO enlargement for the escalation of tensions in its relations with the West. For Moscow, NATO's eastward expansion poses a threat to Russia's national security. In fact, Russia indicates the unipolar international order as the source of the escalation.

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In the spring of 2021, particularly in March and April, international news agencies began reporting Russian military build-up along Ukraine's borders and in the Crimean Peninsula, which was annexed by Russia in 2014. It is estimated that Russia has deployed about 80,000 - 120,000 troops on the Ukrainian border in the spring of 2021.¹ Russia's military build-up led to a phone call between US President Joe Biden and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin.² Nevertheless, the phone conversation between the leaders did not yield any tangible results. Yuri Ushakov, Putin's foreign policy adviser, for example, noted that there was little reason to be optimistic. Likewise, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the negotiations were not easy.³ Meanwhile, US officials claimed that most of the soldiers remained in their positions, even though Russia's Ministry of Defense announced that it had ordered its soldiers to return to their bases by May 1st.⁴ Although the war rhetoric in news agencies relatively softened over the summer, it has begun to escalate once again starting from October 2021 which led to Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

This article seeks to answer the following questions: Why did Russia decide to invade Ukraine despite its upper hand in the peace negotiations with Kyiv? What is

Russia's endgame in Ukraine? Should we focus on relations between Russia and the United States, bypassing Ukraine, to find out a plausible explanation for the war? To what extent do Putin's personal desires play a role in escalating tensions? To answer these questions, we need to divide our way of thinking into at least three levels of analysis: systemic, state, and individual. To do that, it would be useful to begin with examining the enigma through the systemic level of analysis.

Was It Related to NATO Enlargement?

Even in the early 1990's when liberal euphoria reigned in the country, the Kremlin had begun to voice its dissatisfaction with the West's attitude towards Russia. NATO's Operation Deliberate Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina alerted the Russian authorities in 1995. Regarding the operation, Yeltsin stated: "NATO expansion would mean the return of 'the flames of war' to Europe".⁵ Russian complaints about NATO's eastward expansion intensified dramatically under the Putin administration. In his well-known speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy in 2007, Putin stated: "I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious



provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?"⁶

Regarding Russia's military build-up on Ukraine's borders, Russia initially demanded a highly controversial list of security guarantees, including a ban on Ukraine's membership in NATO and a demand to limit troop deployments to NATO's eastern flank. In essence, the Kremlin demanded that NATO forces be returned to the positions where they were deployed in 1997. The Kremlin's proposed agreement clearly demanded: "All member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization commit themselves to refrain from any further enlargement of NATO, including the accession of Ukraine as well as other States."⁷

All in all, Russia blames NATO enlargement for the escalation of tensions in its relations with the West. For Moscow, NATO's eastward expansion poses a threat to Russia's national security. In fact, Russia indicates the unipolar international order as the source of the escalation. In his abovementioned speech in 2007, Putin blamed the USA for its attempt to design a unilateral world order. According to Russian officials, NATO en-

largement is not independent of the unipolar world order that the USA has forced the whole world to accept. On the contrary, the Kremlin emphasizes that it has no choice but to take countermeasures against the insecurity created by the unipolar world order. In this sense, it can be deductively asserted that the crisis in Ukraine, from Moscow's point of view, stems from an 'unfair' international order.

This reasoning can be simplified under the heading of the international systemic level of analysis and can be concluded that, for the Kremlin, the current world order poses a threat to Russia's national security and therefore its response is reflective. The systemic level of analysis provides an explanation for international outcomes in relation to the impact of the international system on

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international actors. In other words, the systemic level of analysis elucidates the relationship between the international system and state behaviors. Advocates of the systemic level of analysis, the frequency of the outbreak of wars in international relations varies depending on the types of the international system (unipolar, bipolar, multipolar, etc). For instance, John J. Mearsheimer, in his often-cited article published in 1990, claimed that a multipolar world would be more violent than a bipolar one.⁸ Looking at the war in Ukraine from a systemic perspective, the crisis stems from the transformation of the international system from bipolar to unipolar. According to Moscow, post-cold war NATO's eastward expansion caused a 'security dilemma.' The situation in which the measures taken by State A to ensure its own security cause the insecurity of State B, and therefore the countermeasures of state B, is called the 'security dilemma' in international relations. In this respect, Russia's actions can be justified and even called defensive rather than offensive actions.

However, considering only the international systemic level of analysis would be inadequate to finalize our argument on recent Russia's war against Ukraine. It would be insufficient because, first, NATO's expansion into Russia's borders does not take place with Ukraine's possible NATO membership. Since its inception, NATO has been on the borders of Russia, as Norway is a founding member of the organization. In addition, NATO enlargement to the Russian borders took place with the membership of the Baltic states in 2004. Second, although NATO follows an open-door policy, it did not give any sign of Ukraine's membership in the organization. Even at the Bucharest NATO Summit in April 2008, NATO leaders avoided offering Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Ukraine which is the first step to enter NATO.⁹ The MAP for Ukraine has been off the NATO agenda since the notorious August 2008 War between Russia and Georgia. Just before the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz made it clear, once again, that Ukraine's NATO membership was practically not on the agenda.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Kremlin, as mentioned above, demanded security guarantees from the West, including the prevention of Ukraine's NATO membership. Consequently, NATO enlargement alone hardly

explains Russia's war against Ukraine, and further explanations are therefore needed.

Was It about Putin?

Alongside the international systemic level of analysis, the individual level of analysis is worth considering to broaden our understanding of why Moscow launched a war against Ukraine. Proponents of the individual level of analysis argue that war arises from human nature or behavior. Those who think that violent conflict is embedded in human nature tend to generalize human action. In contrast, advocates of the individual level of analysis, blaming human behavior as a source of warfare, mainly pay attention to human psychology, characteristics, worldview, or environment to shed light on the causes of war.¹¹ Regarding Russia's war against Ukraine, the focus will be on Putin's worldview rather than human nature, which cannot help us to explain this particular war. It is worth considering this level of analysis because few can deny the significance of Putin in the recent war between Russia and Ukraine. For instance, in his July 2021 article, Putin explicitly states that Russians and Ukrainians are 'one people' and the sovereignty of Ukraine depends on its relations with Russia. "I am confident that the true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia."¹² Moreover, Putin considers Ukraine as an artificial country created by Lenin during the establishment of the Soviet Union.¹³ He claims that Ukraine has never had a tradition of genuine statehood. Putin alleges that modern Ukraine was founded on the historical territory of Russia.¹⁴

According to some experts, Putin seeks to re-establish Moscow's control over Ukraine for his reputation. For instance, Mark Galeotti, a London-based scholar on Russian security affairs, pointed out that the tension between Kyiv and Moscow (before the war) was not about Russia but Putin.¹⁵ Galeotti claimed that Russians see Ukrainians as part of the 'family.' In other words, a possible war between Ukraine and Russia would be unpopular among Russians and may even damage Putin's credibility. Galeotti added that Putin is very curious about his historical legacy. For Galeotti, "The last thing he [Putin] wants is for his legacy in the history books to be the guy who lost Ukraine".¹⁶ In short, Putin wants to consolidate his place in history by re-establishing Russian control over its neighbor.

Commenting on the crisis, Taras Kuzio, professor at the National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy, stated: "The roots of this artificial crisis lie in Putin's pan-Russianist obsession that Ukraine is a 'Russian land' and Ukrainians are a branch of the pan-Russian nation. Everything else flows from that. If Ukraine is 'Russian' it has no

right to decide a destiny separate from Russia.”¹⁷ Alexander Baunov, a senior researcher at the Carnegie Moscow Center, drew attention to the relationship between the Kremlin's control over Kyiv and Putin's political career. Baunov underlines: “It appears that what he manages to achieve in Ukraine will be the deciding factor in whether or not Putin stays on after 2024.”¹⁸ Others argue that Putin wants Ukraine back to Moscow's orbit to “correct what he has long viewed as a catastrophe of the 20th century: the disintegration of the former Soviet Union.”¹⁹

The individual level of analysis suggests that the recent Russia's war against Ukraine stems from Putin's worldview to secure his position in the history books as a leader who brings the ‘stolen’ Ukraine back into the Russian orbit. Nevertheless, the individual level of analysis would be too narrow to provide a genuine understanding of the war. The individual level can hardly ensure a satisfactory explanation to, for example, the foreign policy of Russia towards Ukraine prior to Putin's presidency since the relations between Moscow and Kyiv were not easy even in the 1990s. The former one was not very eager to recognize Ukraine's independence and explicitly restricted Kyiv's sovereignty through its military base at Sevastopol, in Crimea.

If systemic and individual levels of analysis fail to provide a full account of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, then we must approach the issue through the lens of state-level analysis, which will be the focus of the following section.

State-level of Analysis and Russia's War Against Ukraine

The state-level analysis focuses on political or economic models of states to understand their foreign policy orientations. In other words, those who try to explain the main driving force behind the origin of the war in the context of state-level analysis argue that certain political or economic models are more likely to cause war, regardless of the behavior of individuals or types of the international system.²⁰ Besides, the sociological structure of a society can be taken into account in addition to the political and economic models of states, to reveal the source of the war. In short, the state-level of analysis suggests opening the ‘black boxes’ (as the structuralists see the states) to comprehend the origin of war. In this study, the state-level analysis will be considered as a guide to understanding the final phase of Russia's war against Ukraine. The state-level analysis will not be considered as a guide because it explains any war better than other levels of analysis. In essence, each level of analysis may be more revealing than other levels of analysis for a particular war, depending on the circumstances. State-level analysis was

adopted as the main point of view of this study, as it is more in line with the developments that led to the war.

Let's start with the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. In 2004, the Ukrainian people managed to say ‘no’ to Russia's favorite candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, during the presidential election. Instead, pro-European candidate Viktor Yushchenko became the new president of Ukraine. Although at first Ukrainian-Russian relations were negatively affected by the victory of the pro-European candidate, its influence did not last long as Yanukovych remained a decisive figure in Ukrainian politics; he became the prime minister in 2006 and the president in 2010. However, the Euromaidan Revolution, which began at the end of 2013, turned everything upside down for Moscow. The Kremlin-backed Yanukovych was ousted, and a new era commenced in Ukrainian politics that determined relations with Moscow. In return, Moscow illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula and destabilized Eastern Ukraine in 2014.

Although Kyiv managed to ensure stability in Kharkiv and Odesa, it could not fully regain control over Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts (Donbas region) due to Russia's direct and indirect involvement in the war. In Moscow's view, despite all the negative developments in relation to Kyiv, the situation was not so bad. It is no secret that neither the EU nor NATO has offered Ukraine membership, even after Russia's war against Ukraine since 2014. Although previously someone could claim that Ukraine could become a member of these organizations, obviously, after the destabilization of the Donbas, there was no serious prospect of any membership. Moreover, by calling the conflict a civil war, the Kremlin succeeded to design itself as a mediator in the context of the Minsk Agreements, the first of which was signed in September 2014 and the second in February 2015. The agreements evidently showed that Moscow authorities were plotting against Kyiv. The agreements were aimed at granting autonomy status to the Donbas region, which, in other words, meant the federalization of Ukraine. In the meantime, it should be noted that Kyiv signed the agreements because it had no choice to prevent further casualties first, in the August 2014 war, and second, in the February 2015 war.

It is vital to understand why Russia put its advantageous position at risk by escalating the situation since Russia held the upper hand in the peace negotiations, in which the process itself guaranteed Moscow's interests along with its consequences if implemented. The straightforward answer to this question is *time*, and connected to both the Russian and Ukrainian political systems. From the beginning of the Orange and then Euromaidan revolutions, Russian officials, media, and elites developed a specific political discourse on the developments of Ukrainian politics. The newly elected government in

Ukraine's attempts at the path of democratization similar to the Western model constituted an antinomy for the Russky Mir (Russian World), which claims Ukraine to be a part of it. In this regard, Ukraine's attempts had to fail either on their own or through other means for the sake of the Russian model.

Ukraine was labeled a junta regime, while Euromaidan proponents were called fascists. They viewed the Ukrainian political formation as illegal and a puppet of the West.

Either propagating or truly believing that Ukraine is not a real state, the Russians thought that the collapse of Ukraine would happen very soon. The Russian authorities, elites, and media that make up the Russian political structure hoped very much to see Ukraine's failure in the post-Euromaidan era because it is directly related to the existence of their political regime. Russian political discourse is based on the assumption that they have a distinctive civilization and thereby a *sui-generis* political model. For them, their model is incompatible with the Western model but it deserves equally to be respected. However, Ukraine's attempts at the path of democratization similar to the Western model constituted an antinomy for the *Russky Mir* (Russian World), which claims Ukraine to be a part of it. In this regard, Ukraine's attempts had to fail either on their own or through other means for the sake of the Russian model. In essence, the Russian authorities assumed that Ukraine would fall to pieces on its own, which could reinforce Russian discourse. However, Ukraine has continued to exist by getting stronger, far from disintegrating. Over time, Kyiv has modernized the Ukrainian Army in cooperation with countries such as the USA, England, and Turkey, and this process was accelerating depending on the Russian threat. In this respect, *time* was working in favor of Kyiv.

Meanwhile, some developments in Ukrainian politics paved the way for the Kremlin to make its final decision on Ukraine. Russia first hoped to achieve its objectives when Russian-speaking Volodymyr Zelensky became the new president of Ukraine in 2019. The newly elected president promised to revive the Normandy Format negotiations in the context of the Minsk Agreements to resolve the Donbas Conflict. As he promised, Zelensky relaunched the three-year stalled negotiations in Normandy Format in December 2019. Following the negotiations, the parties decided to create an Advisory Council which allowed for a direct dialogue between Kyiv officials

and the leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR) in March 2020.²¹ However, the council could not be formed, as Ukrainians objected, seeing the format as a concession. Upon the backlash of Ukrainians, the Kremlin understood that any attempt to implement the Minsk Agreements would be blocked by Kyiv.

After the Normandy Format negotiations and an attempt to form an Advisory Council, the politically inexperienced Zelensky realized that the Minsk Agreements were designed as a trap for Ukraine. Therefore, Zelensky began to pursue the path of the former president, Petro Poroshenko. In February 2021, Zelensky issued a decree to shut down three TV channels owned by Viktor Medvedchuk, a pro-Kremlin politician. These developments further reinforced the perception in the Kremlin that the Zelensky administration was returning to Kyiv's previous policy. Moreover, Medvedchuk was placed under house arrest in May 2021. Realizing that it could not prevent the modernization of the Ukrainian Army and the consolidation of the Ukrainian identity, the Kremlin activated the hard power option. The first attempt at the military build-up along the Ukrainian border took place in March-April 2021. Although not hampering Kremlin to have high-level negotiations with the United States, the first attempt at military build-up did not yield tangible results for Moscow.

Ukraine maintained its cooperation with the international partners to modernize its army throughout 2021. Understanding the long-term risk, Moscow began a new phase of military build-up along Ukraine's borders, including the border between Ukraine and Belarus, and demanded an impracticable deal from the West. Escalation initially led to the Kremlin's recognition of the 'Luhansk People's Republic' and 'Donetsk People's Republic,' after which the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022.

Conclusion

This article aimed to analyze the reason behind Russia's decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To this end, three levels of analysis (system, individual, and state) were chosen to seek an answer to why the Kremlin chose to go to war despite its leverage on Kyiv in the context of the Donbas Conflict. Despite their explanatory advantages, this study suggests, systemic and individual levels are insufficient to shed light on the war.

The final phase of Russia's war against Ukraine, above all, took place under conditions that many experts would consider irrational. It was irrational because Russia achieved its goal in Ukraine in the context of the Minsk



Agreements, regardless of its implementation. The conflict in Donbas itself was a guarantee that Ukraine would not become a member of either NATO or the EU. Moreover, these organizations did not show any signs of an affirmative view of Ukraine's membership. Besides, NATO enlargement to the borders of Russia took place in 2004, even if Ukraine was granted membership, this would not be the first time. In this view, NATO eastward enlargement, which can be translated as a 'security dilemma' from Moscow's point of view, could not be the main reason for the immediate war against Ukraine. Therefore, the international systemic level of analysis fails to provide a meaningful explanation for Russia's war against Ukraine. However, the Kremlin deliberately used this narrative to persuade its people to invade Ukraine. Otherwise, it would not be easy to explain the invasion to the Russians, as they have very special relations with the Ukrainians.

Although Putin's view of Ukraine contributes to explaining Russia's war against Ukraine at the level of individual analysis, (he sees Ukraine as an artificial state founded by Lenin on the historical lands of Russia during the establishment of the Soviet Union) it would be a very superficial argument to explain the full-scale war. It is a known fact that Russia aims to maintain its influence on post-Soviet countries in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this sense, one of the most important instruments of Moscow is the conflicts in the post-Soviet

geography. Since Russia secured its military presence on the Crimean peninsula and denuclearized Ukraine in the 1990s, it had already restricted Ukraine's sovereignty. This means that Russia's intentions towards Ukraine were not limited to Putin's worldview. Moreover, recent polls conducted by a group of independent Russian sociologists show that 71 percent of Russians support Russia's war against Ukraine (Special Operations as they call it).²² Therefore, the individual level of analysis is inadequate to shed light on the war.

As this article suggests, the main reason that motivated Russia to initiate the war was *time*. Examining the time factor within the scope of state-level analysis assures a better understanding of the cause of war. The Kremlin officials realized that Kyiv has no intention to implement the Minsk Accords and tries to prolong the negotiations to gain time. Time was working in favor of Kyiv, allowing the country to modernize its army, consolidate its identity and follow a democratization path similar to the Western model. In this context, the strategy of Kyiv evoked the strategy of Baku which waited patiently for a long time in order to liberate its occupied territories. For almost three decades, Azerbaijan has sought favorable conditions for going to war with Armenia, while modernizing its military, participating in peace negotiations, and maintaining a balanced foreign policy. Needless to say that the two cases contain a number of dissimilarities and therefore can not be compared with each other directly but in the sense

of time factor, both countries were in an advantageous position.

Realizing the long-term risk, Moscow decided to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine to weaken the country's military and undermine Ukrainian identity. The Kremlin officials thought that the cost of not commencing the war would be greater in the following years. In short, contrary to the Kremlin's previous expectations, Ukraine was getting stronger day by day and solidifying itself as a sovereign state. In essence, when Vladimir Putin announced that they were launching a 'special operation'

against Ukraine, he specifically highlighted the two factors mentioned above. He stated that the main goal of the operation is the 'demilitarization' and 'denazification' of Ukraine.²³ These two concepts are perfectly compatible with the assertion put forward in this study that Moscow, perceiving the long-term threats from the modernization of the Ukrainian Army and the consolidation of Ukrainian identity, launched a war against Ukraine. Ukraine was getting stronger in the process of time, which the Kremlin perceived as a great danger and therefore the process had to be halted which began to be put into action in the form of a war against Ukraine.

Endnotes

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