

# Russia's war in Ukraine: A brief historical and geopolitical analysis

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**Abstract.** History shows that relations between Russia and Ukraine are strongly intertwined, once these two countries come from a common origin back in the medieval times. The "Kievan Rus" gave birth to three nations in Eastern Europe that are nowadays passing through a hard moment since the war burst out on February 24th in that region. By calling the memories shared between these countries and historical narratives created to serve as political weapons, the president of Russia launched an attack against its neighbor, alleging that it should not exist. By doing so, he also affirmed he was protecting the Russians who live in Ukraine, setting them free from a Nazi government. This brief analysis aims to interpret the geopolitical and historical ties that connect the two countries in order to understand better what he has used as justifications for this war.

**Keywords.** Ukraine, Eastern Europe, Russia's foreign policy, War.

## 1. Introduction

On February 24th, 2022, the world saw perplexed on the news, the scenes of a difficult-to-imagine scenario of war in Europe that since the 1990s was not expected to happen any longer. After years of bloody conflicts that burst out since the beginning of the 20th century, Europeans were exhausted enough with the long way of tragedies they went through. Consequently, they did not expect anything like that to happen again in the modern times. (perfect, it's easier to read now.

With the end of the Soviet Union and the Cold War, a unipolar order was established, once there was not anymore a country, or a set of countries, able to defy the power of the United States of America. That was the scenario well-marked by Francis Fukuyama as a moment where the "end of history"[1] had arrived. In such a manner, given the power that the US accumulated since World War II, no one would be able to confront it economically, militarily and politically in the upcoming decades. The "end of history" would be, then, a moment in which no wars would be provoked between puissant nations, as it happened in the past, and only one power would rule the system with no confrontation. However, losing the position of a *hegemon* was a reality that Russia did not really accept since the end of the Soviet Union, and was ready to fight for this status again in the upcoming years. Moreover, besides the

fact of going through a decade in which its power was dismantled by economical and political crisis [2] the Russians also were not capable of facing their political opponents militarily and had their power diminished over more than ten years.

Thus, they have been seeking since 1995 [3], a position as a "balancing force against US and Western dominance in international security aiming to push back NATO" [4]. Considering how the Atlantic alliance increased its power around Russia after the end of the Cold War, its existence became a dilemma that Russians, occasionally, would take harsh attitudes to stop its increasing power and influence around its borders.

It was difficult to imagine, in the western part of the globe, that there would be a strong and powerful player, in the international community, willing and seeking to launch military attacks against another sovereign nation, like did the men of war in the past centuries. That was not the case for the commander in chief of the Kremlin in Russia. Since the end of 2021 he started to put into action his plans of expanding the territories of the former soviet powerful nation. On the news, people heard about the Russian troops being moved throughout the Ukrainian borders in what the western powers expected to be a preparation for an attack against this old neighbor and closest country.

It is true that such a movement was somehow awaited by the western policy-makers, once

Vladimir Putin, in 2014, ordered the military annexation of Crimea and showed his intentions concerning the country. All of these maneuvers were likely to happen because of the cultural and ethnic ties Russia had with Ukraine and how Putin dealt with these issues. Recurrently, he encouraged and supported separatists movements in the most strategical and political important regions in Ukraine, which are the Crimean Peninsula and the region of Donbass.

However, the question that puzzled people everywhere since February 24th, 2022 was: Why, in the modern times, he is doing that? What is his motivation and where he intends to go with such an overpriced political move?

With this short analysis, I aim to go through some geopolitical, historical and security aspects that are involved in this conflict in order to have a keen understanding of the problem. After one year of war, we have seen tremendous changes in Europe and in the world concerning to security, geopolitics, economy and other areas that we keep on asking ourselves why such an old-fashioned way of doing "politics" is still being used by some politicians?

## 2. Methodology

The debate presented in this paper is based on what researchers of International Relations, History, Geopolitics and related areas are producing in the most recent studies concerning the attack against Ukraine in 2022. Since the connection between Russia and Ukraine became so complex and led to the recent war, it became of great significance to understand why the aggression against a sovereign nation is happening. By reading through the papers, articles, and other works dedicated to this issue, I would like to contribute my part to future research and studies concerning the subject.

## 3. Results

The research showed that the ongoing war in Ukraine, launched under the command of Vladimir Putin, has either historical reasons, that go back to medieval times, as geopolitical motivations. The Russian government also started the conflict as a matter of survival of his government and to preserve the political tradition in Russia, not allowing his nation to be invaded by western political ideologies.

## 4. The importance of Russia according to classic geopolitics' theories

The theory developed by Halford Mackinder at the beginning of the 20th century (1904) about the significance of the "heartland", [5] strongly marked the geopolitical debate during the whole century,

inspiring scholars and military strategists until nowadays. According to him, the nation that dominates Eastern Europe, controls the "Heartland". Who controls the "Heartland" also controls the "World Island" and who dominates the "World Island" controls the entire world. [6]

The heartland, as stated by him, would be a region of a nation in the world with the biggest area, with a big population, able to work for the country to build it up and with a great quantity of natural resources like minerals, oil, etc. This land because of its location and resources, was Russia. In such a way, controlling the "Heartland" became a great ambition for some strategists and expansionists. A good example of this happened during World War II, when Adolf Hitler launched an attack against Russia to conquer it and dominate the most strategic region [7], as stated Halford Mackinder. In short, controlling the "Heartland" became an objective pursued for some powerful nations.

Later, in 1942, Nicholas Spykman considered the importance of some areas in the globe to geopolitics differently. For this theorist, controlling the areas around the "Heartland" was of greater importance than dominating the "Heartland" itself. He would call, then, the areas surrounding the pivot lands, the "Rimland" [8]. Basically, the countries around Russia, in accordance with what Spykman postulated, were the most significant to be controlled.

When we look back to history books, we see that his ideas were greatly applied by the United States in regard to Russia during the Cold War. The Containment policy, introduced by the US at the start of the Cold War, aimed to stop the likely to happen spreading of communism to other nations. Countries around the communist power, that were struggling with various internal economical and political dilemmas, could, because of this, become part of the USSR. That was a scenario the US did not want to see and, thinking about of how important it was to rule the "Rimland", they fought to bring to their sphere of influence, as many as possible nations when the Cold War started, back in the 1950s.

In the context of the Cold War, the military alliances – NATO and the Warsaw Pact – were created to provide safety and stability to partner nations. In such a manner, an attack perpetrated by a member of NATO against a country of the Warsaw Pact or vice-versa would pull the trigger and start a war of great proportions. No one did it, as history shows, but efforts in both sides were made in order to expand the influence and power of the USA, on one side, and the Soviet Union, on the other side. When the Cold War was over and the Soviet power collapsed, it was natural to ask the following question: "Why should NATO continue existing?" That was what the Russians asked themselves. During the 1990s, they saw that beyond the intention of preventing big conflicts between

alliances that owned nuclear weapons, the expansion of NATO represented a clear purpose of diminishing their power. The western alliance increasingly expanded its dominance and brought former Soviet Republics to the political, economic and military sphere of influence led by the United States of America.

With the aforementioned, it is crystal clear that NATO's growing power towards the borders of Russia after 1991 continued to be what Nicholas Spykman theorized in 1942. Going further Eastern Europe was the continuation of the Western eagerness to dominate the "Rimland". However, there was a price to pay for this.

According to what says Jonh J. Mearsheimer in his article "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's fault" , Vladimir Putin warned in a conversation with George Bush, that "if Ukraine was accepted into NATO, it would cease to exist". [9] This warning came in a moment in which conversations were going on, and the following years showed he was not lying by any means.

## 5. Historical ties between Russia and Ukraine

When conflicts and wars emerge between countries, historical narratives concerning the contestants, can become powerful weapons that nations recurrently use them to justify their military maneuvers. In the case of the two countries analyzed in this paper, understanding how they are historically intertwined is essential, as it is understanding the geopolitical aspects mentioned above. Once they share the same ethnic, religious and cultural origins, it is crucial to go to the past in order to try to understand the justifications that Vladimir Putin gives – from his perspective of the situation – to his decision of launching an attack against Ukraine if February 2022.

Vladimir Putin declared in 2013: "Kievan Rus was the nucleus of the Russian Empire and since then Russians and Ukrainians had a common history and culture". [10] The debate concerning the origins of Ukraine and Russia as nations go back to the formation of Kievan Rus in the Middle Ages. According to what history tells us, it was from this "arrangement" composed by Slavic tribes that grew over the passing time that Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians emerged. That was the core of the three nations, and historians from these countries recurrently debate about what peoples played the most important roles there, concerning the heritages they left to the countries nowadays.

Vladimir Putin, as well as some Russian historians — advocates that Kievan Rus' represents and had more Russian cultural elements and characteristics than Ukraine says it has. For this reason, when Ukrainians try to define themselves and use the

memory of that medieval state saying that it was mostly composed by Ukrainian elements, conflicts of historical narratives arise. Defending this position is part of the efforts of Ukraine to create its own nationality. To do so, a set of traditions, myths, historical records, fantasies are commonly put together in order to serve as the basis of their founding moment. This way, politicians and historians can look back and say, "our nation came from that state, that configuration or arrangement of things.

The problem is that Russians do the same and do not agree with the Ukrainian attempt of creating their own identity and nationality since they were under the Russian subjugation in the Tsarist times. When intellectuals started to think about and develop what would be the roots of Ukrainian nationalism in the 19th century, the Russian emperor reacted harshly.[11] A defection of an important part of the empire would signify a danger for the "Russian nation" regarded as the union of the "All Russian" East Slavic Nation. [12] In other words, the secession of Ukraine was not going to be accepted that easily and the future of attempts of doing so would be eventually costly.

The years passed and the intention of being independent persisted. Since Ukrainians conceived their national narrative separated from Russians and considered Kievan Rus their state [13] , there were no reasons to continue under the Russian mandate. In such a manner, they became independent in a brief period of time between 1917 – 1920, with the objective of no longer suffering under other people's rule. [14] At that moment, it was agreed that they could have an autonomous State. However, in the following years, that became part of the Soviet Union and passed through another period of manipulation of its biggest Slavic neighbor that will be discussed in the next section.

## 6. Why the war, then?

During the years Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, it kept on pursuing the objective of maintaining its independence from the Russians and reinforcing their basis as a nation. However, in the 1930s, they fell again under the power of that powerful Slavic neighbor, going through a process that was called "Russification of Ukraine". That was, basically, a policy with which the Russians tried to diminish the Ukrainian culture, language, and national historical narrative imposing and stimulating the use of their language, religion, and narratives.

There were, in general, moments of more autonomy and moments of more subjugation in the history of these countries. After 1991, however, all the scenario was about to change. With the bankruptcy of the Soviet Union and its consequent economic crisis during the whole 90s, the former Soviet Nations sought, yet more, to pave their own ways towards independence and sovereignty. That was

when the European Union and NATO, led by the US, constructed the background for the Russian actions against Ukraine in 2014 and specially in 2022.

According to Jonh J. Mearsheimer, in his article entitled "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the west's fault?", much of the problem that led to such a tragic war at the present time, was caused by this expansion that is ongoing since the 90s. Besides the fact that this analysis was written after the Russian invasion in Crimea in 2014, the reasons that motivated the new attack are the same.

If, back in the 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Empire, Russia was not able to prevent countries like Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia to become NATO's members, in the 2000s that started to change concerning other countries that wanted to get membership. A good example of the developments of this was Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. Conversations with that country were being held, as well as with Ukraine, about EU's and NATO's membership since the 1990s. By that time, the Kremlin could act more incisively and suffocated the attempt of the Georgian president of reincorporating two separatists regions – Abkhazia and South Ossetia – to his country. [15] This military action was a clear message to the west. Audibly, the Kremlin was saying; "Do not come any further or try to influence the countries that once were part of Soviet Union".

At this point of this brief examination, connecting the geopolitical information explained above with the historical ties between Russia and Ukraine in the previous section, we can understand better what kind of threat Russians feared with NATO knocking on its doors. They considered a risk to themselves the possibility of being also manipulated by the democratic propaganda coming from the USA and from the EU.

The western powers have been stimulating the spreading of their democratic values to the whole world and when they can do it more incisively, they do not hesitate. An example of this can be found with the support that the USA and Europe gave to groups in Ukraine in the Orange Revolution that changed the results of the election in 2004. [16] The election of Viktor Yanukovitch was considered illegal and, supported by the USA and the EU, political groups of the opposition put in power Viktor Yuschenko. For Russia, that interference represented a crystal clear threat, and they were not willing to tolerate it any longer.

The United States and the European leaders started immediately after the end of the Cold War to spread and stimulate democratic values and institutions towards the countries of Eastern Europe. According to Victoria Nuland, a former U.S. assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, the USA had invested more than \$5 billion since 1991 to help Ukraine achieve "the future it deserves".

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude the analysis, Russia considered the western interference in Ukrainian business and internal politics as a direct abuse and threat to itself. Once they have so close historical, religious and cultural ties, Vladimir Putin thought, supported by Russian elites, he should take control of the situation caused by NATO's expansionism, invading Ukraine. For him and his supporters, Ukraine is still part of Russia and should not exist as an independent country. He has always encouraged separatism in the Donbass region and recognized in 2022, a few days before the beginning of the war, the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk to destabilize the country. A similar movement was taken in 2014 when he ordered the Russian army to take control of the peninsula and since then, Crimea is back to Russia's dominance.

The present war, then, was also or maybe just possible because he feared the fact that the western civilization's values and institutions were coming significantly closer to his country and that represented a threat to Russian society.

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