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The Structural Factors Behind Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*

Strukturalne powody rosyjskiej inwazji na Ukrainę

Summary

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, took the world by surprise. Although it was a continuation of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine, the scale of this invasion was of paramount importance. Why did Russia risk an open invasion instead of continuing its tactics of aggression in the "gray zone" between war and peace? Why is the Kremlin so desperate to conquer Ukraine at any cost? Why has this war become a modern-day version of Lenin's "who whom" principle? This article attempts to answer these questions by analyzing the deep, structural factors behind Russian aggression in Ukraine, such as geographic (the Russian approach to space, buffer zones, the "near abroad," and territorial expansion), cultural (the Russian belief in its own exceptionalism, messianic "defensive imperialism," and the cult of militarism), historical (the "Russian World"; from Rus' to Russian), systemic (authoritarianism versus democracy; neo-Sovietism, and patronal presidentialism), and ideological (revanchism, revisionism, and anti-Americanism). These factors, combined with the failure of Moscow's initial plans for a quick victory, have created the reality of a war of attrition. Its outcome will be of immense significance for Russia, Ukraine, and the world.

Keywords: Russia; Ukraine; Russo-Ukrainian War; war in Ukraine; Russian invasion of Ukraine; Russian exceptionalism; Russkiy Mir

Streszczenie

Rosyjska inwazja na Ukrainę 24 lutego 2022 roku zaskoczyła świat. Chociaż była kontynuacją wojny hybrydowej Rosji przeciwko Ukrainie, to tym razem skala inwazji miała główne znaczenie.

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Dlaczego Rosja zaryzykowała otwartą inwazję, zamiast kontynuować taktykę agresji w szarej strefie między wojną a pokojem? Dlaczego Kreml tak desperacko pragnie podbić Ukrainę za wszelką cenę? Dlaczego wojna ta stała się współczesną wersją leninowskiej zasady „kto kogo"? Artykuł próbuje odpowiedzieć na te pytania, analizując głębokie, strukturalne czynniki stojące za rosyjską agresją na Ukrainę, takie jak: geograficzne (rosyjskie podejście do przestrzeni, stref buforowych, „bliskiej zagranicy" i ekspansji terytorialnej), kulturowe (rosyjskie przekonanie o własnej wyjątkowości, mesjanistyczny „obronny imperializm", kult militaryzmu), historyczne (ruski mir; od ruskiego do rosyjskiego), systemowe (autorytaryzm kontra demokracja; neosowieckość, patronacki prezydentyzm) oraz ideologiczne (rewanżyzm, rewizjonizm, antiamerykanizm). Czynnik te, w połączeniu z porażką pierwotnych planów Moskwy, zakładających szybkie zwycięstwo, stworzyły rzeczywistość wojny na wyniszczenie. Jej wynik będzie miał ogromne znaczenie dla Rosji, Ukrainy i świata.

Słowa kluczowe: Rosja; Ukraina; wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska; wojna na Ukrainie; rosyjska inwazja na Ukrainę; rosyjska wyjątkowość; ruski mir

Russia's invasion of Ukraine shocked the world. Although the aggression, which started on February 24, 2022, was a continuation of the hybrid warfare dating back to 2014, the scale of the invasion marked a significant shift. Why did Russia risk an open invasion instead of continuing its previous gray-zone tactics? And why is the Kremlin so desperate to conquer Ukraine regardless of the consequences? Why did the war become a contemporary version of the Leninist "Who-Whom" principle?

To understand these developments, one must understand Russia and grasp its cultural codes, as no foreign policy takes place in a vacuum; the domestic context determines the decision-making process in foreign policy. Such domestic aspects as historical tradition, heritage, and mentality – which influence political culture, interests, decisions, and the political system – are crucial to understanding Russia.

1. Russian Exceptionalism and Messianism

Russia is an exceptional country, hard to decipher. It is a hybrid entity,[2] European but not Western, Eurasian but not Asian; colonial in the past and neocolonial today in the post-Soviet sphere, and yet globally anticolonial, both in the past and today, when it comes to combating Western (neo)colonialism. Russia knows it is exceptional and knows how to play this card: it excels in camouflaging itself and deceiving others (nowadays especially the Global South) about its plans and actions.

2 Kevork Oskanian, *Russian Exceptionalism Between East and West: The Ambiguous Empire* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

The most important aspect of Russian cultural is the conviction of its own exceptionalism, or uniqueness.[3] It was most famously expressed in the 19th century in a poem by Fyodor Tyutchev, a romantic poet, which begins with the words "Russia cannot be understood with the mind alone … in Russia, one can only believe."[4] This poem, along with other texts, helped Russians in their mythmaking about their own country, just as many foreign observers used this "cloud of mysticism" to claim that Russia cannot be explained in rational categories.[5] Winston Churchill was perhaps the most famous of these authors, describing Russia as "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma."[6] But Tyutchev's and other similar texts are important for a different reason: they reveal a deep Russian conviction regarding its own uniqueness. This can be found it the term "Russian idea" (*Russkaya ideya*), a vague term that indicates the distinctiveness of Russian culture and, at the same time, a sort of ideal socio-political system that should be constructed based on this uniqueness. It is based on the assumption that Russia has its own independent and unique tradition, different from the Western one, and that this allows for Russia's distinct development.[7] Consequently, Russia presents itself as a unique and specific type of civilization, not just a nation-state,[8] and is very proud of it: "Russia's historic pride was more grounded in distinctiveness than in claims of superiority."[9]

All this is based on an opposition to the West.[10] A hostility toward Western civilization "had mixed cultural exceptionalism, insistent on the uniqueness of Russian civilization, claims to Russia's special role in international affairs, and the dismissal

3 Some of these examples were already shown in: Michał Lubina, *Russia and China: A Political Marriage of Convenience*, Successful and Stable (Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2017), https://doi.org/10.3224/84742045; Michał Lubina, *Niedźwiedź w objęciach smoka: Jak Rosja została młodszym bratem Chin* (Szczeliny, 2022).

4 "Russia cannot be understood with the mind alone. No ordinary yardstick can span her greatness: She stands alone, unique – In Russia, one can only believe" (Original: Умом Россию не понять, Аршином общим не измерить: У ней особенная стать – В Россию можно только верить).

5 Bobo Lo, *Russia and The New World Disorder* (Chatham House, 2015), 3.

6 Winston Churchill, "The Russian Enigma," BBC Broadcast, https://www.bbc.com/historyoftheb bc/anniversaries/october/winston-churchills-first-wartime-broadcast.

7 Алексей [Alexei] Комаров [Komarov], "О 'российской национальной идее' [O rossiiskoi natsionalnoi idei]," *Обозреватель – Observer* 5 (2001): 6, http://old.nasledie.ru/oboz/N04_01/4_02.HTM.

8 James H. Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself* (John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 51–77.

9 Gilbert Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order: National Identities, Bilateral Relations, and East Versus West in the 2010s* (Stanford University Press, 2014), 41.

10 Dmitri Trenin, "Russia Leaves the West," Foreign Affairs, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2006-07-01/russia-leaves-west.

of freedom at odds with Russian ideas of community."[11] Although Russia defined itself in opposition to the West, it never belonged to other civilizations either. This contributed to a chronic feeling of discomfort based on a constant sense of threat; contradictory influences from the West and East made Russia an alienated country that does not belong to any great "family of nations."[12] Russia is in a way "a torn country"[13] or a "lonely power."[14] This was most aptly summarized by Benjamin Disraeli in the 19th century: "Russia has two faces: an Asiatic face that always looks towards Europe, and a European face which always looks toward Asia."[15]

The Russians responded to these anxieties by claiming their own uniqueness. According to their self-narrative, Russia "is a civilization unto itself … it may pick and choose as it sees fit, thereby preserving its independence."[16] Accordingly, Russians tend to perceive their country as something very special, unlike any other, "as possessing a special status and aura, no longer an empire in the traditional sense, but certainly more than an 'ordinary' nation-state."[17] This pretense to uniqueness was vividly summarized by the former editor-in-chief of the BBC Russian Service in Moscow, Konstantin von Eggert: "All people are unique, but Russians think they are more unique than the others."[18]

The Russian sense of exceptionalism gave birth to Russian political messianism.[19] For many centuries, different Russian states (the Great Duchy of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union) claimed to have "missions" that combined metaphysical and theological features with great power ambitions and imperialism. The Duchy of Muscovy claimed to be a successor to the Roman Empire ("the Third Rome"), while the Russian Empire announced its mission of saving Slavs ("the Slavs'

11 Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order*, 121.

12 "Russian Exceptionalism: Is Russia Different?," *The Economist*, June 15, 1996, 19–21.

13 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order* (Penguin Books, 1997), 39.

14 Lilia Shevtsova, *Lonely Power: Why Russia Has Failed to Become the West and the West Is Weary of Russia* (Carnegie, 2010).

15 Anna Matveeva, "Return to Heartland: Russia's Policy in Central Asia," *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs* 42, no. 1 (2007): 43–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932720601160344.

16 Lo, *Russia and The New World Disorder*, 17.

17 Quoted in Lo, 17.

18 Lo, 17.

19 Alicja Curanović, *Sense of Mission in Russian Foreign Policy: Destined for Greatness!*, Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series (Routledge, 2021).

Defender"). This sounds ridiculous to Polish or Ukrainian ears but less so to Serbs or Bulgarians, who were liberated by Russians from the Turkish yoke in the 19th century.

The Soviet Union continued this messianic tradition by seeking to establish a universal communist world under its governance. The current incarnation of the Russian state, the Russian Federation, also follows this messianic path, although its current ambitions are more modest. This is unsurprising, given that Russia's power is much weaker than it used to be in imperial or Soviet times; today Moscow is only a regional power, no longer a superpower. Today, Russian ideological messianism is called *russkiy mir*, imperfectly translated into English as "the Russian world."[20] *Russki mir* is a defensive ideology, however bizarre it may sound to Ukrainians or Poles, as Russians feel they are a besieged fortress of "traditional values." In its own eyes, Russia is a *katechon,*[21] a force that defends the world from evil. This does not imply pacifism, as the Soviet saying goes, "we shall fight for peace until the last drop of blood." To phrase it metaphorically, the defenders of the besieged fortress must from time to time occupy strategic heights around their fortress to enhance their defensive capabilities. Or, to put it in simpler, contemporary words: without controlling Ukraine, Russia would never feel secure enough to defend itself against the West.

2. From Defensible Expansion to Imperialism

Understanding space plays a pivotal role in Russian expansionism. As it has been said, Russia existed not so much in time as in space.[22] The historical process of creating Russian identity made it inseparably tied to the imperial expansionist tradition. The Russian concept of nation-building was a concept of expansion: Russians cared more about conquering more lands than about economic, political, or cultural development.[23] This imperative is deeply rooted in the instincts of the Russian people; it is derived from a specific understanding of geography.

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20 This world cannot be translated adequately into English, as *russkiy* (*русский*) means both "Ruthenian" and "Russian," while *mir* (*мир*) means both "world" and "peace." I will elaborate on this further.

21 A term derived from Christianity. It refers to someone or something that defends the world against the comings of Antichrist; once *katechon* is removed, the world is doomed. This interpretation is derived from the Bible, 2 Thess 2:6–7.

22 Monika Nizioł, *Dylematy kulturowe międzynarodowej roli Rosji* (Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2004), 67–71.

23 Roman Bäcker, *Rosyjskie myślenie polityczne za czasów prezydenta Putina* (Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2007), 18.

The core territory – Moscow and the surrounding part of the East European Plain – is vulnerable from a military point of view. It is not protected by natural barriers such as large rivers, seas, or mountains.[24] This vulnerability helped the Mongols to invade Ruthenia (*Rus*': see below for an explanation of the term) in the 13th century, which had a devastating and transforming effect on the Russian mentality. Living in a state of chronic threat due to the perception of open continental borders, Russians developed a "a special sense of vulnerability,"[25] to which they responded with a simple rule: the best defense is attack – or, in this case, conquest.

Since the 15th century, Muscovites have been expanding and enlarging their territory in order to create strategic depth between the core and the vulnerable peripheries. This "defensible expansion" meant that a potential invader would have to conquer and control vast terrain in an inhospitable climate before reaching Moscow, the capital. This strategy worked four times in Russia's history. First, in 1610–1612, when the Polish-Lithuanian invading force captured Moscow (1610) but was unable to hold it for more than two years due to a national uprising and inadequate resources. Second, in the first decade of the 18th century, when Russia faced an existential war with Sweden fought on Ukrainian soil; Russia prevailed. Third, in 1812, when Napoleon also entered Moscow but could not afford to stay in Russia with his army, consequently losing the war – less to Russia than to the winter. Finally, in 1941–1943, when Nazi Germany reached as far as the Volga River, but the strategic depth of the Soviet Union, combined with material support from the Allies and immense human resources, helped the Soviets ultimately prevail. But this "defensive expansionism" was not always successful. Russia lost both World War I and the Cold War despite its enormous size. What is really important, however, is not so much the concrete effects of this strategy as the fact that it created a very specific mentality. In short, "for Russia to be secure, it must create some kind of empire."[26]

The Russian concept of nation-building is a concept of expansion. This attitude is not nourished by geography per se, but by a specific reading of space. The giant territory became crucial in sustaining the imperial mindset: the vastness has been "critical in establishing and reinforcing its identity as an empire."[27] The notion that "a vast, ever-expanding territory is essential to Russian power" was "deeply embedded

24 James H. Billington, *The Icon and Axe: An Interpretative History of Russian Culture* (Vintage Books, 2010), 303.

25 Billington, 303.

26 Lauren Goodrich, "Russia: Rebuilding Empire While It Can," Stratfor, October 31, 2011, accessed March 26, 2026, https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russia-rebuilding-empire-while-it-can.

27 Lo, *Russia and The New World Disorder*, 16.

in Russian tradition."[28] As Tyutchev remarked in one of his other poems ("The Geography of Russia"), "Russia has no limits."[29] The land and territory became almost sacred, which explains why losing some lands (the breakup of the USSR) or the threat of losing others (Chechnya; the Kuril Islands)[30] has deeply frustrated Russians. Conversely, regaining territory (Crimea, Donbas) evokes genuine enthusiasm. However, permanent expansion became a poisonous pill, leading to a paradoxical situation. New territorial gains created new challenges, stimulating further expansion – a never-ending vicious circle. In this way, a feeling of permanent threat strengthened thinking in imperial categories: Russians felt vulnerable, so they kept expanding, but the more they expanded, the more vulnerable they felt. This dynamic illustrates what George Orwell once described on a different occasion: "an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks."[31] That is why the Russian ideology has been based on a "siege fortress" mentality and on an endless search for an enemy. This imperial axiom led to militarism, which matched well with (or perhaps created) violent patterns of everyday culture and social relations within Russia. Militarism became the backbone of the Russian way of life: "War or the preparation for a new war became the way that the Russian civilization has survived."[32] Thus, it is unsurprising that the stereotypical perception of Russia has been that of a warrior state, prone to aggression and fond of fighting. The recent invasion of Ukraine is just another example of this tendency.

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28 Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order*, 128.

29 "Where are its (Russian's) limits and where its frontiers? / To north, east, south and west? / Seven internal seas and seven great rivers / From Nile to Neva, from Elbe to China, / From Volga to Euphrates, from Ganges to Danube / That is the Russian realm." Quoted in Alexey Sklyarenko, "Daniel Veen, Raduga, Nile & Other Rivers in Ada," The Nabokovian, March 5, 2022, accessed March 26, 2026, https://thenabokovian.org/node/52997.

30 Interestingly, ceding nearly 1,000 kilometers to China in 1990s and 2004 (mostly river islands) did not evoke nationwide protests (only local ones, in 1990s). It did not significantly bother Russians, likely because these islands on the Amur and Argun do not function in national psyche. It is a very different story with highly publicized Chechnya and the Kurile Islands. Details: Michał Lubina, *Niedźwiedź w cieniu smoka: Rosja–Chiny 1991–2014*, Rosja Wczoraj, Dziś i Jutro: Polityka, Kultura, Religia 18 (Księgarnia Akademicka, 2014), 166–512.

31 George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," April 1946, accessed March 26, 2026, https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/.

32 Bobo Lo and Lilia Shevtsova, *21st Century Myth: Authoritarian Modernization in Russia and China* (Carnegie Moscow Center, 2012), 14.

Territorial expansion, however, has also played another role in Russia: a compensatory one. Historically, it compensated the Russians for their country's civilizational backwardness and authoritarian governance. Thinking in "great power" categories has remained a tool used by the authorities to maintain social coherence and integrity. The lack of civil liberties, the lack of agency among inhabitants, a low standard of living, and many other weaknesses of Russia have all been compensated by the glory of belonging to an imperial power.[33] "I may be a slave," wrote Mikhail Lermontov, one of the most important poets of 19th-century Russia, "but I am a slave of the Tsar of the universe."[34]

3. The Need to Be a Great Power

In Russia, messianic and metaphysical-theological elements are inseparable from the "great power" syndrome and imperialism. Indeed, imperialism – or, more precisely, the need to be a great power – remains the key aspect of the Russian mentality. However, this understanding of a "great power" is not typical of Western political science terminology (which views power as a state possessing force and resources), instead it is rooted in Russian culture and the concept of empire as a cultural trendsetter, "it refers to the 19th century's metaphysical concepts of Fyodor Tyutchev, who viewed an empire as a global leader and an exclusive center of culture, statehood and spirituality."[35] Russia is exceptional; it has a mission, and therefore, the right to be a superpower and to enforce its patterns. A conviction of cultural and moral superiority – a superiority that predestines it to become a great power – is an imperative deeply rooted in the Russian mentality. It is linked to the need for respect and recognition. Russia pays a lot of attention to being treated and perceived as an equal superpower and fears being disrespected. Its self-perception is closely related to a syndrome of humiliation following the end of the Cold War and its subsequent resurgence as a regional power in the 2000s. Being a great power is crucially important for Russian self-identity, especially for the elites.

The current ruling elite in the Kremlin believes that, to survive, Russia must "be a great power; as they believe only on this basis can the state (and its people) flourish."

33 Nizioł, *Dylematy kulturowe międzynarodowej roli Rosji*, 67– 71.

34 "How Russian Poetry Shapes Russia's War Mentality," Medium, October 2, 2025, accessed March 26, 2026, https://medium.com/@whatisrussiaorg/how-russian-poetry-explains-russian-war-in-ukraine-609078fd7eb4.

35 Dmitrij Orieszkin, "Imperialny projekt Rosji – smutna perspektywa," in *Imperium Putina*, ed. Wojciech Konończuk (Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego, 2007), 166.

Therefore, Russia's destiny as a great power and its unique civilizational identity are "accepted as self-evident truths, while resentment of Western policies is evident across the political spectrum," and the general population shares these sentiments.[36] This is why the great power syndrome continues to exert a significant influence on how Russia functions politically. The variety of names used to depict the country – "liberal empire,"[37] "Eurasian empire,"[38] "post-imperium,"[39] "world's third greatest power,"[40] or "post-modern empire" – is telling. The empire-(re)building spirit is very much alive, and for historical reasons, Ukraine is the crucial point. This attitude is deeply connected to the Russian understanding of the Eastern European space called Ruthenia.

4. Does Ruthenia Equal Russia?

Ruthenia (Rus') in the Middle Ages was an ethnocultural region (with unspecified borders) in Eastern Europe, inhabited mostly by Eastern Slavs, who shared a similar culture, language and, after Christianization in 988 AD, religion – Orthodox Christianity. Ruthenians established several states, such as Kievan Rus' (Kiev Ruthenia), Red Rus' (Galicia-Volhynia Ruthenia), Black Rus', White Rus' (Belarus), Carpathian Rus'. Among these, the most important was Kievan Rus', with Kyiv as its capital, existing from the 9th to the mid-13th century, reaching its peak in 10th-11th centuries.

The region of Ruthenia was devastated by the Mongol invasion in the 13th century. Later, parts of Ruthenia were conquered by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which merged with Poland in the late 14th century and evolved into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 16th century. Other parts were seized by the Grand Duchy of Muscovy once it liberated itself from Mongol control. In the 17th century, after an ephemeral attempt to establish a Cossacks state – a proto-Ukraine – southern Ruthenia was divided between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Grand

36 Lo, *Russia and The New World Disorder*, 10–34.

37 "Программное выступление Анатолия Чубайса в Санкт-Петербургском государственном инженерно-экономическом университете [Vystupleniye A. Chubaysa 'Misiya Rossii' v Sankt-Peterburgskom gosudarstwennom inzhinerno-ekonomicheskom universitete]," Ленправда [Lenpravda], September 26, 2003, accessed March 26, 2026, https://www.lenpravda.ru/today/251871.html.

38 Juri Fiedorow, "Rosyjskie supermocarstwo: Mity i rzeczywistość," in *Imperium Putina*, ed. Wojciech Konończuk (Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego, 2007), 121.

39 Dmitrij Trenin, *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story* (Carnegie, 2011), 13–18.

40 Sergei Karaganov, "Lucky Russia," Russia in Global Affairs, March 29, 2011, accessed March 26, 2026, https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/lucky-russia/.

Duchy of Muscovy (later the Russian Empire). After Russia helped annihilate the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late 18th century, it took control of nearly all historical Ruthenian lands, at first as the Russian Empire and later as the Soviet Union. Following the dissolution of the USSR, three countries emerged from former Ruthenia: Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

The boundary between Rus' and contemporary identities is blurred.[41] Consider the example of Belarus, originally referred to as Belarus or Belorussia. The English name is a direct translation of the original, which means White (*Bela*) Ruthenia (*Rus'*). While the English name is uncontroversial, names in other languages are less so.[42] Ukraine is somewhat straightforward; when translated, the name means "the edge" or "the boundary." The English and Chinese names are direct translations of the original name, *Ukrayina*.

Russia is the most complex case. The name Russia, originally *Rossiya*, is a transformation of Rus' (from *Rus* to *Ros*), specifically a Greek Byzantine designation. In English, the link is even apparent, as the first three letters of Russia are "RUS."[43]

While this terminology may be confusing to non-Slavic speakers, the political aspects of this linguistic melange are clear-cut. According to the primary Russian historical narrative, Russia is the successor to Ruthenia. In this paradigm, Kyiv was the first center of power in Ruthenia, understood as a single, unified space. Thus, Kyiv was called "the mother of Ruthenian cities." Following its devastation by the Mongols,

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41 The challenge begins with the name *russkiy*, which functions as both an adjective and an ethnonym. Historically, *russkiy* (or Ruthenian) denoted concepts associated with Rus'/Ruthenia, such as culture or art. Nowadays, it can mean both Ruthenian and Russian, depending on the context. Regarding ethnonyms, the distinction is even more complex. In the Russian language, there are two words for "Russians": *Russkiy* and *Rossiyanin*. The former (*Russkiy*) denotes an ethnic Russian, whereas the latter denotes a statutory citizen of the Russian Federation. Thus, an ethnic Russian is both *Russkiy* and *Rossiyanin*, however, a Buryat from Siberia or a Tatar from Tatarstan is only a *Rossiyanin*, not *Russkiy*. While the definition of *Rossiyanin* is relatively clear, the term is rarely used outside of formal contexts. *Russkii*, however, is more challenging as historically, and to certain extent even today, the term has denoted all Ruthenians, not just Russians. Consequently, *Russkiy* traditionally included ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. A Russian joke from the first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 illustrates this well: Russian troops surround Ukrainians and shout, "surrender!" to which the Ukrainians refuse by shouting back, "Russkiye do not surrender!" Today, however, Ukrainians very rarely use the term *Russkiy* for themselves, as it is now inextricably associated with Russia. Belarusians still use the term more often than the Ukrainians, though less frequently than the Russians.

42 In German, for example, Belarus is *Weißrussland*, or "Whiterussia" (whereas Russia is *Russland* in German, meaning the land of the Rus'). In Chinese it is *Baielousi*, again meaning "Whiterussia," as the name for Russia in Chinese is *Elousi*. The suffix *-luosi* is derived from Rus' (Ruthenia); however, "Ruthenia" (*Rus'*) itself in Chinese is translated from the Latin name (*Ruthenia*), not from the original Rus', resulting in the transiteration *Luseniya*.

43 In Chinese "Russia" it is simply *eluosi*, essentially "Rus" with the vowel "E" added at the beginning.

the narrative suggests that the center of power shifted eastwards to the city of Vladimir (on the Klyazma River). Eventually, Vladimir lost its position to Moscow.

Once the Grand Duchy of Muscovy gained strength, particularly after liberating itself from Mongol political vassalage, it began a process of "collecting Ruthenian/Rus lands," that is, conquering all former territories of Rus'. Russia ultimately succeeded in this in the late 18th century, when the Russian Empire, together with Prussia and Austria, annihilated the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. If one accepts this historical narrative, then Belarus and Ukraine are "naturally" situated within Russia's orbit. If "Ruthenian" equals "Russian," then the Russian claim to authority over Ukraine and Belarus appears justified, if not logical.

The contemporary iteration of "collecting Ruthenian lands" is the concept of *Russkiy Mir*, imperfectly translated into English as the "Russian World." It is imperfect because, as previously stated, *russkiy* means both "Russian" and "Ruthenian," whereas *mir* can mean both "world" and "peace" (though the former is more relevant here). In English, this Ruthenian-cum-Russian ambiguity is lost.

Culturally speaking, *Russkiy Mir* is a vague concept, officially a means to connect Russia with the Russian diaspora in the former USSR. In this framework, Russian culture is the core, while Ukrainian and Belarusian traditions are treated as subordinate, mirroring the hierarchy of the Soviet Union. Politically, this represents the latest manifestation of Russian imperialism, though on a regional rather than global scale. In Russian political parlance, this is called "the triune Russian people" (*triyediniy russkiy narod*), consisting of three groups: Russians, Belarussians, and Ukrainians. This is a quintessential example of the political usage of the Rus' heritage; the imperialist concept merges all three East Slavic nations under Moscow's leadership, thus nullifying differences and categorizing all *russkiye* people as Russians.

Ukraine challenges the narrative of Russia as the successor to Ruthenia. In the Ukrainian historical paradigm, Ruthenia was never a single space controlled by a single capital. Instead, there were various Ruthenian states – such as Kievan Rus', White Rus' or Red Rus' – and the term Rus/Ruthenia was a general geographic and cultural descriptor for a region rather than a political designation for a state. In this reading, Kiev, Vladimir, Novgorod, and Moscow were different city-states, as foreign to one another as Germany is to France, despite shared European roots.

Furthermore, because Ukraine considers itself the continuation of Kievan Rus, it rejects the notion of a "power shift" from Kyiv to Vladimir and then to Moscow. In the Ukrainian interpretation, the politically deposition of Kyiv by the rulers of Vladimir was a foreign invasion, symbolized by the removal of the region's most important Christian icon, (now) the Virgin of Vladimir (currently held in the Moscow Kremlin). In this narrative, Ukraine is the contemporary successor to the heritage of Kievan Rus',

as well as the 17th-century Cossack state that successfully asserted its liberation from Russian domination.

In the Ukrainian narrative, Ruthenian does not equal Russian. All Russian ambitions to control Ukraine are viewed as pure imperialism – aggression against a sovereign and independent nation. This distinction is crucial because an independent Ukraine invalidates Russian plans to control Eastern Europe. To put it simply, there is no "Great Russia" without Ukraine. This explains why Vladimir Putin has sought to control Ukraine since at least 2004 and why he launched a full-scale invasion in February 2022. He likely hoped to achieve victory by December 2022 – the centenary of the founding of the USSR – to form a new political entity consisting of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine under Moscow's leadership; however, Ukraine nullified these plans.

5. The "Near Abroad"

Ukraine is the key – the most important element of what is in Russian called *blizhneye zarubezhye* and translated into English, adequately this time, as the "near abroad." Today, the "near abroad" encompasses all the former Soviet republics. The term itself is an excellent example of Russian imperialism, as it contains a contradiction even on the linguistic level ("near" vs. "abroad"). It follows a long Russian tradition of characterizing neighboring countries as not fully independent (not so long time ago, there was a popular, rhythmic saying in Russia about Poland, *kuritsa ne ptitsa, Polsha ne zagranitsa*, meaning "just as a hen is not a bird, Poland is not foreign").

The notion of the "near abroad" is based on a common history and on the claim of allegedly superior rights over all former Ruthenian and Soviet lands. Russia's great-power ambitions in the "near abroad" also serve to compensate for failures in domestic affairs.[44] The near abroad is a central policy dimension for Moscow, alongside regaining the status of a global great power, and these two goals are mutually reinforcing.[45] It is the place where Russian realistic considerations, such as sphere of influence, meet autotelic striving for great-power status. It is also a Russian equivalent

44 Lo and Shevtsova, *21st Century Myth*, 47–48.

45 Marcin Kaczmarski, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order* (Routledge, 2015), 38–44.

of the Monroe Doctrine: no other great power is allowed to interfere in domestic issues without Russia's consent.[46]

Russia uses various instruments of influence – both bilateral and multilateral (e.g., CIS) – and a wide array of means (e.g., diplomatic and military) to control the "near abroad." Indirect control is preferred, avoiding official incorporation (as seen in South Ossetia, Abkhazia) and economic burdens, however, if necessary, military force is employed, as in the case of Ukraine. Control of the near abroad is a form of "collecting Soviet lands" that, from the Russian perspective, fell away from Russia after the fall of the USSR. Yet Putin is not trying to rebuild the USSR *per se*, rather, his goal is a synthesis of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union in a "light" version – a "moderate neo-imperialism."[47] Putin is simply reluctant to recognize ex-Soviet republics as sovereign, let alone to accept Western involvement there. The near abroad represents a vision of a *pax Rossica* characterized by the control of strategic space, dominant influence, and a cultural *mission civilisatrice*.[48] Or, at least, this was the ideal model that remained successful until 2022.

The failure of Putin's hope for indirect control of Ukraine through his proxy, Viktor Yanukovych – or, after 2022, through his concept of a "special intervention" for rapid regime change (intended to topple Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government and install pro-Russian puppets) – led Kremlin to change its strategy. If the ideal option of indirect control is impossible – and it is impossible due to a Ukrainian national identity that has developed independently of Russia over the last three decades – then a much more arduous task is required. Once the "special intervention" turned into a prolonged conflict and a war of attrition, the Russian calculus from the winter of 2022 shifted toward an all-out war to eradicate Ukraine, and transform it once again into "Little Russia" (*Malorossiya*) or "New Russia" (*Novorossiya*), a province of Russia – a truly "near" country without the pretense of being "abroad."

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46 Nicolas Gvosdev, "Rival Views of the Thaw Provoke Another Chill," The New York Times, January 25, 2006, accessed March 26, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/25/opinion/rival-views-of-the-thaw-provoke-another-chill.html.

47 Lo, *Russia and The New World Disorder*, 127; Lo and Shevtsova, *21st Century Myth*, 139; Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order*, 130; Celeste A. Wallander, "Russian Transimperialism and Its Implications," *Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2007): 107–122, accessed March 26, 2026, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/twq/spr2007/07spring_wallander.pdf.

48 Lo, *Russia and The New World Disorder*, 101–105.

6. Antidemocracy

The subsequent sets of factors that led to the Russian invasion of Ukraine are systemic and ideological. Russian elites believe that authoritarianism is a much more effective system for achieving stability than liberal democracy; it is certainly more effective for preventing regime change. Hence their dislike of revolutions. They also demand – rightly so, from their perspective – that outsiders, particularly Westerners, should not lecture any country on how it should be governed, let alone conduct interventions based on high moral assumptions. In these circumstances, opposition to Western values and norms is "not occasional policies of misguided leaders, but the fundamental orientation of the political elite, supported by the population."[49]

Russian authoritarianism represents a combination of personalized and bureaucratic power. The Russian political system is based on three pillars: personalized power, the fusion of power and property, and claims to great-power status or spheres of influence in the "near abroad." It is an eclectic system that includes, among other things, the imitation of Western institutions; the replacement of a coherent ideology by non-ideological "pragmatism," and a mixture of co-optation (bribing society) and restrictions.[50] Putin established a "patronal presidentialism" system in Russia[51] – a hierarchical structure of power with him at the apex. His power grew so substantially, especially in the 2010s, then the system acquired its own "-ism." "Putinism" denotes "a hybrid of centralized political power, economic rent seeking, social materialism, conservative morality, and an assertive international posture."[52] This system is also evolving. Initially, during Putin's first two terms, it was quasi-democratic. Later, it evolved into semiauthoritarian, softly authoritarian, fully authoritarian; finally, after 2022, it is becoming proto-totalitarian. Having accumulated such power and having been influenced by imperialistic philosophers such as Ivan Ilyin, Konstantin Leontiev, and Nikolai Danilevsky,[53] and seeing himself as "a transformative figure in the tradition of Peter I and Peter Stolypin,"[54] that would secure Russia's great power status

49 Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order*, 21.

50 Lo and Shevtsova, *21st Century Myth*, 45–66.

51 Margareta Mommsen, "Russia's Political Regime: Neo-Soviet Authoritarianism and Patronal Presidentialism," in *Presidents, Oligarchs and Bureaucrats: Forms of Rule in the Post-Soviet Space*, ed. Susan Stewart et al. (Ashgate, 2012), 63–89.

52 Lo, *Russia and The New World Disorder*, 7.

53 Lubina, *Niedźwiedź w objęciach smoka*, 205–208.

54 Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order*, 118.

again,[55] Putin decided to attack Ukraine to settle the issue and to secure his place in history.

These ideological aspects are critical, as there is an inseparable link between the domestic and international dimensions of Russian policymaking. The Russian perception of the current rules-based international order is highly critical. Moscow considers this system to be a thinly veiled American hegemony based on economic and axiological cohesion intended to reshape all countries along the US model. For these reasons, according to the Kremlin, the Americans have been promoting democracy worldwide as "the leading edge of neo-imperialism"[56] that "breeds chaos."[57]

Thus, Russia rejects the notion of global governance, claiming that this is a Western idea that reflects "Western norms and rules" shaped by "unequal power relations" based on Western dominance.[58] Democracy, human rights, humanitarian intervention, the "responsibility to protect" (R2P), and "limited sovereignty," are therefore understood as Western instruments for expanding spheres of influence and interfering in the domestic affairs of other countries. Consequently, Russians leaders object to the Western use of force (military interventions sanctioned by Western-cum-universal values), defend territorial integrity and state sovereignty against external interference, and detest democratization attempts. They also resent Western governments' criticisms, denounce Western media coverage as biased, reject foreign funding for nongovernmental organizations, and fear the use of the internet as a mobilization tool to foment revolutions. They also take cultural pride in their opposition to the threat of Western-cum-global culture.[59]

Understood in this manner, opposition to this entire Western, normative, liberal, democratic, and supranational superstructure is a well-conceived defense of national interests – a form of balancing against US hegemony. Or, as Westerners would prefer to phrase it, a revisionism of the international system. Until the second invasion of

55 Alexander Lukin, "Russia's New Authoritarianism and the Post-Soviet Political Ideal," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 25, no. 1 (2009): 56–92, https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586x.24.1.66.

56 Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order*, 141.

57 Dmitri Trenin, *From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente* (Carnegie Moscow Center, April 2015), accessed March 26, 2026, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Trenin_To_Asia_WEB_2015Eng.pdf.

58 Kaczmarski, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, 135.

59 Dmitri Trenin, *From Greater Europe to Greater Asia?*

Ukraine, it was a "soft" form of balancing or revisionism,[60] now, it is moving in the direction of hard balancing and revision.

Instead of the current rules-based international order (also known as US hegemony), which Russia considers a sort of "temporary aberration" of international politics – an ending unipolarity – Russia proposes the "democratization of international relations."[61] This intriguing phrase calls for multipolarity, a contemporary equivalent of a "concert of powers," and a preferred model of international relations. This is based on a political realist worldview and on traditional, 19th-century *Realpolitik* imperatives: national security, power projection, management of the strategic balance, and an emphasis on the primacy of state sovereignty.[62]

According to this vision, the international system is anarchic, based on power politics built on an "organized hypocrisy" rule where the logic of expected consequences dominates the logic of appropriateness.[63] This is due to power asymmetries and the absence of any universally recognized legitimate authority. Stronger states can pick and choose from among the norms that best suit their material interests or ignore norms altogether. They can impose their choices on weaker states in the absence of any legitimate institution that could constrain their coercion or take actions against them.[64] In such circumstances, the logic of consequences prevails – in this worldview, power relations dominate at the expense of allegedly universal values. This is a Hobbesian vision of *homo homini lupus est* ("man is a wolf to man"), or a neo-Leninist vision of *kto kogo* ("who whom").[65]

Russia's ideal vision of international relations is a contemporary equivalent of the 19th-century European concert of powers. It implies equivalence among major powers, with strategic checks and balances that restrain hegemonic influences. It is a sort of an "exclusive club" of great powers, not restricted by others' actions and acting

60 Chaka Ferguson, "The Strategic Use of Soft Balancing: The Normative Dimensions of the Chinese–Russian 'Strategic Partnership'," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 2 (2012): 197–222, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.583153.

61 "Совместное заявление Российской Федерации и Китайской Народной Республики о международных отношениях, вступающих в новую эпоху, и глобальном устойчивом развитии [Sovmestnoe zyavleniye Rossiyskoi Federatsii i Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki o miezhdunarodnykh otnosheniyakh, vstupayushchikh w novuyu epokhu, i globalnom ustoichivom razvitii]," Kremlin, February 5, 2022, accessed March 26, 2026, http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5770/print.

62 Bobo Lo, *The Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics* (Chatham House, 2008), 55.

63 Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 1–9.

64 Krasner, 1–9.

65 Lo, *Russia and The New World Disorder*, 14–47.

according to the logic of the concert of powers. In other words, it is a vision of a global political oligarchy.

Given these circumstances, Ukraine represents a fourfold challenge for Russia. Being democratic and relatively well-governed, geographically a "backdoor," and culturally close to Russia, it poses a direct threat to Putin's regime because it demonstrates that there is an alternative to autocracy. If a more or less successful democracy is possible in post-Soviet Eastern Europe, specifically in Ruthenia, then why not in Russia? From the Kremlin's point of view, the "contaminating effect" that Ukraine may have on Russian society through its democratic nature must be stopped at all costs.

Looking from this angle, Russia may have issues with Belarus's Alexander Lukashenko – a cunning, resource-consuming, and unreliable political client of Russia – yet he remains a dictator whose governance is notably less effective than Putin's. Consequently, he represents a "positive" example from the Kremlin's perspective. Ukraine, on the other hand, despite its shortcomings (e.g., the oligarchization of economic life), maintains a vibrant civil society, relatively free elections and media, and an elected government, it thus embodies everything the Kremlin detests.

Furthermore, given that Russians have difficulties believing in the free agency of individuals and nations, they perceive Ukrainian democracy not as an example of a homegrown political system rooted in the traditions of the Cossack assemblies of the 17th century, but rather as an American scheme designed to weaken Russia and diminish its sphere of influence. The current pro-Western political orientation of Ukraine reinforces this perspective; it serves as a proof – if any proof were needed – of an irresistible American drive for global hegemony. The reality – that Ukraine turned toward the US only after Russia began seriously threatening its existence – is irrelevant. In the context of Russian empire-building, if facts contradict the restoration of great-power status, the facts are deemed negligible.

7. The "Rally 'Round the Flag" Effect: Socioeconomic Factors

Lastly, the final set of factors concerns the socioeconomic challenges confronting Putin's leadership. In terms of governance, Putin was quite successful in the 2000s, achieving remarkable prosperity for Russia; he was less spectacular in the 2010s, though his performance remained acceptable in the early 2010s. Since the mid-2010s, Russia has experienced a creeping economic decline – a neo-Brezhnevian era of stagnation.

While Putin's first two terms were characterized by economic ascent, his return to the office in 2012 coincided with a visible slowdown, particularly after the 2014

aggression against Ukraine. Western sanctions, while limited, strained the Russian economy.

Even more damaging was the 2014–2015 collapse in global energy prices, combined with the decreasing value of the ruble. These factors – compounded by a lack of reforms, failed technological transformation, declining foreign direct investment (FDI), the weakness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the inefficiency of the bureaucracy (including the administration and the judiciary), and endemic corruption – rendered the 2010s a decade of stagnation. Average growth plummeted to 0,8% (0,4% in the latter half of the decade; the real data may be even worse, as there are reasonable suspicions that Rosstat modifies statistics to please the authorities),[66] making Russia's share of the global gross domestic product (GDP) at the end of the 2010s worse than it was in 2008 (2% vs. 3% in the latter case).[67] The short-term prosperity from the 2000s was clearly ending.

Furthermore, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic not only hit the economy hard but also affected the society. Forced to comply with antipandemic measures, the public became tired of the ruling elites and their decisions (whether related to the pandemic or otherwise, such as the increase in the retirement age), even staging unprecedented protests, as in the case of the removed Khabarovsk governor, Sergei Furgal.

These two combined factors – economic and societal – signaled the end of the unwritten social contract between the authorities and the ruled. If, in the 2000s, the society turned a blind eye to authoritarian kleptocracy in return for increasing – albeit unevenly distributed – prosperity across many social groups, then the end of this prosperity in the 2010s terminated this source of legitimacy. Facing this challenge, the authorities turned to a very traditional – and in Moscow's case, perhaps eternal – legitimacy tool: empire-building tied to nationalism. The seizure of Crimea boosted Putin's popularity, as did (temporary) success in Syria and the gradual takeover of Belarus. A potential capture of Ukraine (which, from the Kremlin's perspective, had been moving too close to the West since 2014) was intended to complete this trajectory, representing a "small, victorious war" that would compensate for socioeconomic problems, reestablish an empire, and secure the stability of the Putinist regime for the long term.

66 "Rosja na rozdrożu – wzrost, stabilność czy stagnacja," Forsal.pl, March 23, 2020, accessed April 24, 2026, https://forsal.pl/artykuly/1458327,rosja-na-rozdrozu-wzrost-stabilnosc-czy-stagnacja.html.

67 "Skrótowa historia rosyjskiej gospodarki czasów Putina," WEI, August 10, 2019, accessed April 24, 2026, https://wei.org.pl/2019/blogi/panstwo/marekbudzisz/skrotowa-historia-rosyjskiej-gospodarki-czasow-putina/.

Conclusion

Russia invaded Ukraine for a combination of political, geographical, cultural, historical, systemic, and ideological reasons described in this article. They share one commonality: regardless of what Ukraine did or might have done, short of political surrender, there was little Ukraine could do to prevent Russian aggression.

At present, Russia is culturally, politically, and emotionally unable to tolerate an independent Ukraine. From Moscow's perspective – or, to be exact, from the Putin regime's perspective – Ukraine must be subjugated or cease to exist, becoming a failed state. That is why the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war is less about spheres of influence, strategic balance, or national interests, and more about identity: the solidifying Ukrainian identity as a free, independent nation and the Russian self-perception as a unique power destined for greatness. Since there is no "Great Russia" without Ukraine, and since Ukrainians are fighting for their political survival, this has been and will continue to be a bloody, devastating war with dire consequences for both these countries, their neighbors, Europe, and possibly the whole world.

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