

## **The War in Ukraine is Part of the Soviet Empire's Unravelling**

**Article by Gerard Toal**

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Russia's February invasion of Ukraine followed years of instability across much of the former Soviet Union. From Belarus to Kazakhstan, protests and violence have shaken authoritarian regimes with the prospect of change from below. Elsewhere, as in Nagorno-Karabakh, full-scale wars have broken out over longstanding territorial disputes. In this conversation, Gerard Toal connects developments across the post-Soviet space to explain the latest descent into war.

***Green European Journal: In Near Abroad, you critique two common understandings of the conflict in Ukraine. One view sees the war as the latest example of Russia's almost intrinsic impulse to expand and invade. The other argues that this war was bound to happen because of NATO expansion. Both leave little room for the complex historical context or the agency of people living in Ukraine. Could you explain your approach to understanding Russia's "near abroad"?***

**Gerard Toal:** My approach to the recent history of Russia's relationship with its neighbourhood is one that firsts looks at the structures of the geopolitical field, then broader issues concerning geopolitical culture, and finally, the empirical record. I begin from certain broad structural conditions, but do not presume that they are necessarily going to lead to particular outcomes. Instead, what are important are the interactions between the different actors, and what you get is a very contingent process characterised by certain critical junctures in which the parties interact. Tracing the history, you can see increasing radicalisation across parties and how specific events led to growing suspicion and eventually the emergence of a full-blown security dilemma that spirals downwards.

The current crisis is a very radical moment that has plunged the relationship between the West and Russia to new depths. I believe this was not inevitable but the product of the interaction of the parties. It is a co-created crisis. That is not to distribute blame equally or fall into "both-sideism". It's an argument about needing to do the work and look at what happened at particular moments with what implications.

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**Ukraine was invaded a few days after the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk**

**and Luhansk were recognised as independent by the Russian Federation. Frozen conflicts around Russian-backed separatist regions are a common feature across the post-Soviet space. How should we understand these statelets?**

You have to make necessary distinctions between these entities. Similar entities exist across the world. Northern Cyprus is one example. Republika Srbska or Republika Srbska Krajina, which existed during the collapse of Yugoslavia, is another. In the post-Soviet space, these entities are the result of the contested nature of the borders created by the Bolsheviks. Under communism, decisions about borders were made by small dictatorial executives based upon deeply ideological criteria that did not necessarily take the wishes of the people on the ground into consideration.

The Soviet Union collapsed in large part because it was overwhelmed by a nationalist wave (facilitating this, of course, was a profound economic crisis). That nationalist wave began with the Karabakh conflict. From there, protests among nationalist communities swept to the Baltic States and onwards to Ukraine and Russia until the Soviet Union essentially unraveled. The subsequent redrawing of borders was violent in certain instances.

Those places that broke toward violence featured insurgent nationalist movements defecting from the former imperial centre but with regions within them that were very ambivalent about this and felt threatened by the nationalising project of the new state (i.e. a security dilemma produced by Matryoshka territorial design). This process led to violent outcomes in Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, though importantly it didn't in Ukraine with Crimea. This process was contingent not inevitable.

So, the larger geopolitical field around this latest conflict is structured by a condition of postcolonialism, including in Russia itself. The legacy of empire and a desire for its renewal are key to the geopolitical culture that emerged in Russia when Putin came to power.

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**Do you think that the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and Azerbaijan's military victory against Armenia contributed to the Russian perceptions of the situation in eastern Ukraine ahead of the invasion?**

The short answer is that we will not know until the archives are available. But, from the public record, it is evident that that war was an influential event. The first point is that Russia tilted towards Azerbaijan in that war for various reasons. That shift was decisive in shaping the outcome and allowed Russia to become a broker on the ground and introduce troops. Russia will have real material influence over the direction of Armenia and Azerbaijan going forward, which represents a positive outcome as far as Russia was concerned.

The second factor is more nebulous but could be significant. The war was won through the use of Turkish drone technology, most famously the Bayraktar TB2. This consolidated the notion that weaponry and new regime of military technology can decisively shift so-called frozen conflicts. Subsequently, those particular drones were introduced into the Ukraine theatre. This may have created a sense of insecurity among the separatists supported by Russia in the Donbas and a concern that, over time, the Ukrainian state was going to have the capacity to change the battlefield and potentially defeat the de facto states. In geopolitical theory terms, this drone technology represents a geospatial revolution; a particular technological change with the potential to reshape the existing geopolitical field.

**There have been protests across the post-Soviet space in recent years, in Kazakhstan, in Belarus, as well as anti-corruption protests in Russia itself led by Alexei Navalny. How did this relative instability contribute to the context around the invasion?**

This is something that folks may disagree on, but the likely Kremlin interpretation is that these events were viewed as “colour revolutions” sponsored by the West to undermine Russian power in the near abroad.

This perception runs counter to the considerable efforts on the part of the protesters to de-geopoliticise the Belarus protests after the disputed elections in August of 2020. Similar to the Velvet Revolution in Armenia in 2018, the protestors made sure to avoid NATO and European Union flags. It was a conscious effort to communicate that this was simply a protest against the existing regime. Joe Biden and Charles Michel sought to affirm this by asserting that “this is not about geopolitics.” But the Lukashenka regime firmly rejected that framing effort. In the practiced manner of insecure authoritarian regimes, they blamed fifth columnists, outsiders, and anyone but themselves.

The Kremlin bought this framing; indeed it is their default too. I think that Putin is dispositionally conspiratorial minded. He uses cognitive shortcuts to affirm his own prior conspiracy theories. The idea of “coloured revolutions” is the biggest conspiracy theory of them all; it is the paranoid domino theory of autocrats across post-Soviet space.

Kazakhstan was read in a similar way. Local protests sparked by rising fuel prices were captured by an out-of-favour elite faction. They sought to instrumentalise the protests for their own purposes and hired the mafia to turn up the violence. But it was very convenient for the Kazakh President to blame it on outsiders and talk up foreign mercenaries. Putin came in and settled what had become an intra-elite dispute.

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**Were there any developments in Ukraine - whether in Ukraine itself or the**

**separatist regions - that were particularly important to the Russian decision to invade in February 2022?**

I think that the decision to invade had been made some time ago, maybe even almost two years prior, after Putin decided that the Ukrainians were not going to implement the Minsk II accords. Some point to March 2020 when Zelensky's chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, met with Putin's adviser Dmitry Kozak, and agreed on a special Advisory Council in which Ukrainian officials would discuss the peace process with representatives of the Russian-backed separatist governments. Thereafter, Yermak and former president Leonid Kuchma were charged with high treason! Perceived concessions were criminalised. Perhaps this is when Putin decided another war was needed. Again, the archives will speak. With Ukraine actively seeking European Union and NATO membership, Putin decided that Russia needed to reestablish its "escalation dominance".

**Chess master or unstable tyrant? How important is Putin's emotional and psychological state to determining his thinking around the invasion of Ukraine and its conduct?**

The whole question of Putin's emotional state is extremely important. After all, it's scary to look at a madman with nuclear weapons. But we need to avoid the "emotional othering" of Putin. Putin's particular psychological condition and his emotional rationality should be put in the context of other autocratic regimes. Over time, autocratic leaders become further isolated from everyday life and what is happening in their states. There is no doubt that, especially since Covid-19, Putin has entered further into an information bubble.

We need to be aware that Putin believes that the policies that he's pursuing are necessary policies. He has internalised the notion that being the leader of Russia requires a certain bloodymindedness towards questions of state security. With that comes a hubris, which is to say that he begins to position himself within the pantheon of Russian rulers like Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Alexander I (defeater of Napoleon), and Stalin. And with that hubris comes a certain messianic mindset.

**Hearing that Putin places himself in the pantheon of Russian imperialism is grounds for concern if you are Moldovan, Georgian, or in the Baltics. How concerned should we be about the war expanding beyond Ukraine?**

The first point is that the war is going really badly for Russia. Russia is failing to achieve its objectives on the ground.

Many analysts thought that that the Kremlin was reasonably informed about public opinion in Ukraine. I research Ukrainian public opinion, I'm intimately familiar with it, and I know that in March 2014, there was no place in Ukraine beyond the areas where Russia was able to establish a hold that would welcome the Russian military. Sure certain minorities in certain regions were sympathetic to Russia. But a very small number trusted Putin (73 per cent did not trust him in our survey in late 2019). The Russians may have thought that they could take advantage of general dissatisfaction (high "wrong direction" scores in surveys) and Zelensky's poor ratings to build a majority. But they did not consider that going in inevitably involved violence, which completely alienates the population. It was a massive failure of basic intelligence work. It appears the whole process was corrupted - the head of

the FSB Fifth Service in charge of Ukraine, Colonel-General Sergei Beseda and his deputy are reportedly under arrest - and intelligence officials merely affirmed what superiors wanted to believe.

The second point is that the initial plans may well have involved spilling beyond Ukraine. Plans accidentally revealed by Lukashenka when briefing his National Security Council showed lines of movement from Odessa into Transnistria. It is possible that part of the initial war plan was to link up all of the areas that were conquered by Catherine the Great in the northern Black Sea area, through Kherson and Mykolaiv to take Odessa and then enter Transnistria. But even if it would be possible to achieve that militarily, Russian forces are not going to be able to hold it.

As for invading Georgia or anywhere else, the Russian state does not have the capability to do that. Russia has a large military, but it's an enormous country and it cannot involve all of its troops in Ukraine. Additionally, it has a significant demographic challenge.

This war is one massive geopolitical blunder on the part of Putin and his regime is imperiled by it. It's a new and dark condition because, as Putin has nuclear weapons at his disposal, he cannot be seen to lose. In a very ugly paradox, we have a vested interest in allowing Putin a face-saving win in order to defeat him in the long term. That involves containing the crisis and arranging some sort of ceasefire, before letting the implications of what he has unleashed here work their way out of the Russian state and internationally.

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### **What are the prospects for de-escalation and the beginnings of a peace process?**

China has lined itself up as an ally of Russia in this crisis but its role will be important. It endorsed Putin's invasion with the joint statement that was made at the beginning of the Winter Olympics between Xi and Putin in which China decried NATO expansion. Ukraine wasn't mentioned by name, and of course, Russia reaffirmed China's position on Taiwan. But there was a lot of talk in that statement about multipolarity and "real democracy". The common point was to challenge what they see as the liberal hegemony of the United States.

But China is also one of the largest investors in Ukraine, meaning its material interests are at stake. It could be a broker of peace here and enhance its status internationally.

### **What about the EU?**

One possible settlement could involve a treaty of neutrality between Russia and Ukraine in which Ukraine commits never to seek a membership in a military alliance that is hostile to Russia. In return, Russia could agree to support Ukraine's bid for membership in the

European Union.

Now whether that would happen is another matter. One of the things that surprised many analysts in 2014 was the way in which Russia decided that the European Union itself is a geopolitical actor and a threat. A considerable portion of the Ukrainian economy at that time was tied up with markets in Russia, and so Ukraine joining the European Union risked it cutting links with the Eurasian Economic Union.

I hope that the European Union has learned from that mistake and understands the real dangers in blurring the lines between NATO and the European Union. Neutral states such as Austria, Finland and Ireland represent a particular status and bring a particular value to the EU. It is something that Ukraine could aspire to.

The European Union could offer an accelerated process of membership for Ukraine, although it would probably have to make the same offer to Moldova and Georgia. I'd add Bosnia as things have deteriorated there considerably, and its badly needs a reset. However, in return for EU membership, those states would have to undergo fundamental structural transformation. Ukraine's sovereignty has been compromised by the economic structure that has captured its economy and its state for so long.

State capacity of Ukraine has fallen throughout the post-Soviet period and fell the most in the south and east. It is perfectly understandable that people in those areas have nostalgia for the Soviet Union. It was a better time for them. Ukraine still has not recovered to the same economic level as it had in 1990, and that is an indictment of Ukraine and the predatory nature of the elites that have governed its economy. The EU should only accept a Ukraine run in the interests of its people as a whole as a member.

**You have a forthcoming book called *Oceans Rise, Empires Fall: How Geopolitics Hastens Climate Catastrophe*. Is there an ecological reading to helps us understand this war?**

In many ways, it is central. First, the Soviet Union had a particular modernity structured around fossil fuel use to which regions like the Donbas were central. The economy of the Donbas is built around on coal mining, which then led to steel production and ferrous metal production of various kinds. The greenhouse gas production legacy is still with us, in the planet's atmosphere, and it is shaping our present and our future.

The second important aspect is nuclear power. Ukraine, especially Chernobyl, demonstrates the tremendous dangers of nuclear power. What happened at Zaporizhzhia with a firefight at the largest nuclear plant in Europe underscores how nuclear power is a deeply problematic form of energy production.

The third point is that Russia as a petrostate is an extractive superpower. Russia's military strength comes from its exploitation of the Earth. That exploitation has hastened the climate crisis but one of the challenges for us is to recognise that the real cost is not simply for the planet but also geopolitically in the short term. This war is a crisis made possible by an extractive political economy. It is not something that is particular to Russia. The United States is also an extractive great power and the United States has helped put in place a geopolitical order in the Middle East that allows petro-dictators to rule and wage war

against helpless states. Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen is an example of that.

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However, there are two lines of optimism. The first is that this has been a wake-up call in terms of Europe's dependence upon Russian oil and gas. Europe needs to double down on renewable energy and cutting energy use through increased home insulation. At the same time, the whole issue of nuclear and the possibility of a new generation of nuclear power plants is something that the green movement has to look at. I am extremely sceptical about nuclear power, but a new generation of nuclear could perhaps deal with the gap left by taking gas, oil and coal out of the energy equation. I'm re-evaluating my anti-nuclear power stance in light of the urgency of the climate emergency.

The second positive is going after the oligarchs. Select groups of people have enriched themselves to obscene levels by exploiting something that does not even belong to humans but to the Earth. We have responsibility to use those resources in a way that does not simply benefit humans in the short term but that avoids negative ecological consequences for humans and nonhumans, the environment, animals, and the planet as a whole.

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