The Causes and Consequences of Russia's Actions towards Ukraine

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The crisis in relations between Russia and the West following Russia's annexation of the Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine has led to a large number of publications written by scholars and commentators from a wide variety of perspectives and specialities, including Russian and Eurasian area studies, international relations and security studies. As one of the most important crises of recent decades, the conflict has attracted the attention of many scholars, regardless of whether they have worked extensively on Ukraine or Ukrainian-Russian relations. Newcomers to this conflict are forced to take at face value some facile characterisations of the situation, rather than recognising the complexity and contestation of many of the key drivers of the conflict. We identify two gaps in the literature, both of which stem from viewing Russia's actions as a response to recent events. First, few analyses dig into the history of the relationship. As a result, phenomena with deep histories are sometimes seen as recent events. Second, and related, the issue of national identity is often treated superficially leading to an underweighting of national identity concerns as a factor underpinning Russia's actions.

A tradition has persisted from the Soviet era whereby scholars specialising in Russian politics claim expertise on the non-Russian countries which emerged as independent states after 1991. For these reasons, many of the works on the crisis use few primary sources from Ukraine (whether in Ukrainian or Russian) and few show evidence of extensive fieldwork in Ukraine. Ukrainian scholarship on Russian hybrid warfare, such as by the country's leading strategist Volodymyr Horbulin, has been ignored by Western scholars.[1] A dearth of Ukrainian sources and fieldwork in Ukraine naturally leads these works to rely heavily on secondary sources and quotes from official Russian sources. While understandable when the Soviet government restricted travel beyond Moscow to sensitive republics, and when information about the non-Russian republics was difficult to access, there is less reason today to approach countries such as Ukraine via Russia and the Russian media. Not only is travel to Ukraine and other states easy, but Ukrainian sources are widely available via the Internet in both Ukrainian and Russian.[2] The web sites of the Ukrainian government, president and parliament are in both Ukrainian and Russian.

Scholars writing about this conflict face a choice in perspectives that is likely to lead them to being criticised no matter what they do. Those who blame the conflict on Russia's aggression face the accusation that they ignore the actions of the US, NATO, the EU and Ukrainian nationalists, all of which supposedly left Russia little freedom of action to do anything other than intervene militarily. Those who blame the conflict on the West and Ukraine can be accused of defending an attack on a weaker neighbour that clearly violates international law and to many resembles Germany's aggression towards its neighbours in the 1930s. Those who try to take a more 'balanced' perspective risk being seen as naïve or as apologists by both of the previous groups.

While these perspectives compete fundamentally, they tend to share two underlying characteristics. First, they are largely focused on assigning blame, regardless of where they locate it. Second, many, though not all, in their efforts to make their cases, provide clear and simple explanations of the conflict. This leads them to choose and assemble facts and interpretations to support their argument rather than exploring the many areas in which causes are

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intertwined, interpretations are contested, and 'facts' are interpreted completely differently depending on one's pre-existing perspective.

A good example is the question of the rightful ownership of the Crimean Peninsula. Prior to the crisis, few scholars of international politics paid much attention to it. Those who blame the West for the crisis (both from leftist and realist perspectives) see Russia's annexation of the Crimea as returning the territory to its 'natural' home. This rests on focusing on certain facts – Russian control of the territory from the 1780s to 1954; the notion that the 1954 transfer was a 'gift' or even a whim, and the predominance of the Russian language in the peninsula. The viewpoint of the Crimea being more 'Russian' than Ukrainian remains widespread, particularly among Western scholars of Russia and it is commonplace among critics of US foreign policy and realists. Neil Kent's otherwise informative and balanced history of the Crimea writes that the referendum 'was joyfully received by most Crimeans'. He continues: 'There is no doubt that the majority of the population of Crimea supported joining the Russian Federation'.[3] Both assertions are very dubious.

Those who blame the conflict on Russia focus on a different set of facts. The territory was legally part of Ukraine, and thus its seizure violated international law, and to judge Russia's seizure legal on historical or linguistic grounds would set a disruptive precedent. When Crimeans had a chance to vote on their future in a well-prepared referendum, as they did in the 1991 referendum on Ukrainian independence, 54% voted for Ukraine's secession from the Soviet Union. In the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and again in the 1997 Treaty of Friendship, Russia pledged to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity. As Paul R. Magocsi and Andrew Wilson both point out, if length of time within a state is the criterion we use to decide to whom Crimea should belong, then it should be returned to the Tatars who ruled the peninsula from the 13th to the late-18th century.[4] Wilson calculates that the Crimea, although annexed by Russia in 1783, 'was only ever truly Russian from the Crimean War of 1853–56 until 1917' and again from 1945–54; that is, it was under Russian rule for seventy-three years (Crimea was a Soviet republic from 1921 to 1945). The peninsula was Ukrainian for a slightly shorter period of 60 years, but under Tatar rule for four hundred.[5]

Similarly, those who studied Ukraine between 1991 and 2014 find that support for separatism was never backed by a majority of the population in the Crimea or the Donbas. Public backing for secession was a real factor, but in the two decades preceding the crisis, combined support for an independent Crimea and union of the Crimea with Russia varied between 20–40%. The March 2014 referendum claimed an unlikely 'Yes' vote of 97% when Tatars, who make up approximately 15% of the population, boycotted it. A report mistakenly leaked by the Russian Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights showed the real turnout was only 30% (not 83%) and of these only half (i.e. 15%) voted in support of union with Russia.[6]

One can debate at length which of these factors ought to weigh more heavily in assessing who 'should' control Crimea, which has a huge impact on how to allot blame for the larger crisis. Unfortunately, rather than doing so, most analyses choose the version that supports the allotment of blame that has already been predetermined.

Work on the Ukraine-Russia conflict can be divided into five groups. The first emphasises Western expansion as the cause of the conflict, portraying Russia as a passive victim compelled to respond. This includes both those arguing primarily from a leftist position against American influence in the world and those invoking realism to indict Western policy. Works from this perspective tend to stress the nationalist elements in Ukrainian politics and the extremist elements within Ukrainian nationalism.[7]

The second and third schools are complementary in that they both see Russia as the driver of the conflict, but they diverge on the drivers of Russian policy. The second school focuses on Russian geopolitical expansion – its desire to undo at least some of the results of 1991. Rather than criticising the West for doing too much, some in this school criticise it for not doing more sooner to help integrate Ukraine in the West.[8] A third school sees the roots of Russian behaviour as driven by the internal needs of the autocratic model built by Putin and the Soviet origins of the *siloviki* (security forces).[9] A fourth perspective, relying largely on geopolitical concepts, sees both sides as being partly to blame.[10] A final approach sees the conflict as an effort by the Russian government to reassert a particular notion of Russian national identity which sees Russia not as a nation-state but as a 'civilisation', that extends beyond the boundaries of the Russian Federation and is incompatible with an independent Ukraine.[11] This perspective fits

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with others that blame Russia, but we save it for last because it is relatively underdeveloped and we seek to give it extra attention.

We stress that while in theory these causal factors are distinct, in practice they tend to be combined. Russian leaders, for example, could be motivated by both the geopolitical and domestic payoffs of seizing Crimea. Because almost all of the literature seeks to apportion blame, there is a strong tendency to combine different analytical arguments that support the conclusion. This leads to some analytical muddle. For example, the legality of the annexation of Crimea, the role of local Ukrainian versus Russian forces in the Donbas secessionist movements, and the wisdom of NATO enlargement are three entirely distinct questions, and yet there is a strong tendency to join them together. Those who downplay the international legal aspect of the annexation of the Crimea also tend to argue that the Donbas conflict was essentially domestic (and is thus a 'civil war' rather than an 'invasion') and that NATO enlargement was at best foolish and at worst aggressive. The opposite views tend also to cluster. These positions correlate well with views on Western sanctions against Russia.

'The Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault'

The first group of work portrays Russia as a victim, forced to react to NATO and EU enlargement and democracy promotion into what President Medvedev described as Russia's 'privileged zone of interest'. This perspective is advanced by two different groups of scholars from opposing ends of the political spectrum: left-wing critics of US foreign policy and realists. Similarly, the work of Richard Sakwa, Stephen Cohen, Jonathan Steele and John Mearsheimer among others, focuses on NATO, the US and Ukrainian nationalists in explaining the outbreak of conflict.

These works share a basic argument: Russia is a great power, and because of its power and history is entitled to respect and to rights that other states (such as Ukraine) are not. By enlarging NATO into countries that Russia (as the Soviet Union) once controlled, the West (driven by the US) was a threat to Russian national security. Different scholars focus on different policies and events, but the list of misdeeds by the US/NATO/EU includes multiple rounds of NATO enlargement, the discussion of a Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Ukraine (which was not granted) at NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit, the abrogation by the US of the ABM treaty, the support for colour revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and elsewhere, the EU's plans for an Association Agreement with Ukraine, and finally support for the Euromaidan protests that ousted Viktor Yanukovych as Ukrainian President. They claim that Yanukovych's ouster was illegitimate, and that the presence of radical nationalists among those on Maidan created an immediate threat to ethnic Russians or Russian speakers in Ukraine justified Russian intervention. The strength of these perspectives is that they capture many of the same points made by Putin and other defenders of Russia's policies. The primary difference between the 'leftist' and 'realist' versions is that the realist claims to invoke the timeless lessons of realist theory, and to identify Western missteps in those countries' theoretically-misguided adoption of liberal international relations theories. In contrast, the leftists tend to see the root of the problem in US imperialism (as the Cold War-era revisionists blamed the Cold War on US expansionism).

These approaches rely on a selective approach to history, paying little attention to events between Ukraine and Russia during much of the post-Soviet period and particularly during Yanukovych's presidency from 2010 (which is connected to the question of whether his ouster was justified). Issues such as nationalism and regionalism in Ukraine tend to be dealt with superficially. Realists in particular prioritise the immediate external environment and therefore largely ignore domestic factors in Russia and Ukraine. They emphasise the regional fragmentation of Ukraine and view the conflict as a 'civil war' between Ukrainian and Russian speakers, and they criticise the provocative policies of 'Ukrainian nationalists'. Ukrainian citizens have a different view of the crisis, with only 16% of Ukrainians seeing it as a 'civil war' while 72% view it as 'an aggressive war by Russia against Ukraine'.[12]

These perspectives are as notable for what they do not discuss as for what they do. While it is understandable why realist scholars downplay the importance of Ukraine's sovereignty or international law, it is less clear why those claiming to criticise the dominance of the US do so. These approaches resemble Hegelian notions of 'historic' and 'non-historic' peoples (with Ukrainians being in the latter group), but in the literature, the leftists neither defend this position theoretically nor elaborate its implications (who else is deemed non-historic? when are such non-historic

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nations 'fair game' and when are they not?). In other words, it is one thing to say that the US and NATO were unwise in enlarging eastward, and to believe that this threatened Russia, it is another thing to say that this caused or justified Russia militarily invading a third country, Ukraine. This needs further theoretical elaboration.

Advocates of these two positions have also interpreted data concerning Russian involvement in Eastern Ukraine selectively. This has become more problematic as an increasing volume of evidence from satellites, NATO, Organisation for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) observers, Western journalists, think tanks (such as Bellingcat), Ukrainian military intelligence and captured Russian soldiers that have all documented Russia's military involvement. Ukrainian military intelligence estimates there are up to 6, 000 Russian forces in the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) with an additional 40, 000 proxy forces.[13] In June 2017, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov undermined the denial that Russian forces are in Eastern Ukraine when he talked of 'our decision to join the fight in Donbas and in Syria'.[14]

Critics of Western policy draw selectively on conspiracy theories that implicate Ukrainian nationalists or the West. De Ploeg cites on thirty occasions Ivan Katchanovski's claims that 'Ukrainian nationalists' were responsible for the sniper killings on the Euromaidan[15]; Katchanovski in turn draws on a highly selective use of sources gleaned from all corners of the Internet and YouTube, to the exclusion of other accounts.[16] There is little dispute among the broad mainstream of scholars, experts and policymakers, based on extensive evidence including eyewitness accounts, court convictions and video footage, that Yanukovych's vigilantes and *Berkut* riot police shot and killed the protestors.[17] In November 2017, on the anniversary of the Euromaidan which is officially celebrated as the 'Day of Dignity and Freedom' on 21 November of each year, Russia's information warfare shifted gear and blamed 'Georgian snipers' for the killings.[18] Given Russia's well-documented disinformation efforts (see chapter two), more scepticism might be due.

A similar conspiracy theory blames 'Ukrainian nationalists' for the deaths of 42 pro-Russian protestors in Odesa on 2 May 2014. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs produced a report exaggerating the number of deaths into the hundreds and describing it as a 'massacre' committed by 'Ukrainian nationalists'.[19] What happened that day has been pieced together by local journalists in a blow-by-blow account of the day's tragic events. In Odesa, the first deaths on that day were shootings of pro-Ukrainian protestors and Molotov cocktails were thrown by *both* sides which set fire to the building leading to a total of 48 dying – six from gunshot wounds, 34 from smoke inhalation and burns, and eight from jumping to their deaths.[20]

The 'realist' analysis of the Ukraine-Russia conflict is difficult to assess because many of the ways in which realism has been applied to this conflict by Mearsheimer and others contradicts fundamental tenets of realist theory. Put differently, in many respects the realist analysis of the Ukraine conflict is not realist at all.[21] Thus, Mearsheimer's current views have evolved from the 1990s when he supported Ukraine keeping the nuclear weapons it inherited from the USSR[22], a step which was seen at the time as being highly provocative towards Russia.

Realists focus upon the West's great power relations with Russia[23], and in this view, Ukraine is a side show; indeed, Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer's conclusions do not once mention Ukraine. The gist of their argument is that the West's movement towards Russia constituted a threat to which Russia was compelled to respond. However, it is not clear the enlargement of NATO and Western policy toward Ukraine actually go against the dictums of realism. Realism finds that states live in an insecure world, and counsels that the smart ones will always try to increase their power. If that is the case, then realism would likely have advised the US and its allies to expand their alliance while they had the possibility to do so. Indeed, the fact that Russia has now sought to move west would likely be seen by realists as further justifying NATO enlargement: it is better for the alliance to be facing Russia in Ukraine rather than in Poland or Germany.

Similarly, it is a contradiction of realism to argue that US policies and NATO enlargement somehow made Russia more aggressive, because in realist theory, states are *always* seeking to expand their power. Thus, realists would expect Russia to take advantage of the opportunities open to it regardless of whether Russian leaders were angry or felt betrayed by the West. Realism holds that interests, not emotions, drive state behaviour. Again, realism just as likely leads to the opposite conclusion: if Russia invaded Ukraine it was not because the West moved too far east,

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but because it did not move far enough east to prevent Russian territorial expansion. Criticising states for being strong rather than weak cuts against the entire tradition of realist scholarship.

Oddly, the arguments made by self-described realists regarding Ukraine not only contradict realist theory, but they also adopt the position of liberalism, which realists have scorned for generations. A key concept in realism (and liberalism) is the 'security dilemma', the idea that when a state takes steps to make itself more secure, it undermines the security of its neighbour, thus spurring a reaction. Realists regard this as an immutable characteristic of the system, one that is foolhardy to try to overcome. States that refrain from pursuing power are likely to find themselves endangered. Liberalism, anticipating an escalating cycle of response, counsels that both sides can be better off through restraint. Realism sees that restraint as naïve, because states will always seek advantage and can renege or cheat on any deal (as Russia did concerning the Budapest Memorandum and the 1997 Friendship Treaty with Ukraine). Liberals, not realists, advocate that states try to mitigate the security dilemma by either unilaterally or via a formal agreement limiting efforts to increase their power relative to their potential adversaries. Thus, in saying that NATO should have refrained from enlargement, and assuming that this could be counted on to prevent Russia from itself trying to expand, Mearsheimer is adopting a liberal, not a realist, position.

Those invoking realism are applying it more consistently when they criticise the West for adopting policies recommended by liberalism; namely, relying on the spread of democracy and on international institutions to maintain security. Hopes by Western policymakers that the problem of security would be solved in Central Europe have not held up. Again, however, it is not clear that realism would counsel a carve-up of Eastern Europe on Russia's terms rather than an effort to strengthen resistance to potential Russian expansion.

The argument made by Mearsheimer and others retains another important aspect of realism as well; namely, that international politics is about the interests of the 'great powers', and that interests of non-great powers should and inevitably will be secondary to those of great powers. Because great power war is so deadly, avoiding it is a moral imperative that justifies subjecting the needs of lesser powers to those of great power accommodation. Leaving morals aside, because great powers can force the lesser ones to bend to their needs, they will. In this case, the implication is that preserving some kind of great power condominium between the US and Russia requires dividing Europe in a way that leaves Russia satisfied, and hence a 'status quo', rather than a 'revolutionary' state, to use former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's terms.

This aspect of the argument, unfortunately, has received relatively little attention, for this is the point on which much of the debate over who is to blame and what should be done next hinges. It is in large part a normative debate, but it also points back to the long-standing disagreements between liberalism and realism. Liberalism (represented in this debate by the position of the EU) believes strongly that respect for international law and state sovereignty is essential to maintaining the security order in Europe, and is the only way to maintain a long-term peace. This is what has brought peace, for example to France and Germany after they fought three wars in 70 years. Liberals find Russia's invasion of Ukraine not only destructive for peace but normatively appalling. Most realists would hold that lasting peace simply is not possible in international affairs. These two questions prompted by realism deserve more attention. First, do we believe that peace is best preserved by guarding the sovereignty of small states or by sacrificing it to the needs of great powers? Second, is sacrificing the sovereignty of small states a morally acceptable position?[24] As noted above, however, realism does not make it clear whether letting Russia control Ukraine is the height of prudence or a foolish cession of important territory.

'The Russians Went Ape'[25]

The second body of scholarly work focuses upon Russia seeking to expand its influence and gain recognition of its status as a great power. This body of work on the crisis views Russia's hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine as the continuation of its long-standing policy of creating frozen conflicts since the early-1990s in Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan. This literature also analyses Russia's revanchist policies within the context of Putin lamenting the disintegration of the USSR and the Russian desire to build new unions, in this case the Eurasian Economic Union. In this respect, those blaming Russia draw on a set of events and policies that those who blame the West largely ignore. Surprisingly, little of this scholarly work drills down deeper to pursue the national identity issues that lead many in

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Russia to view Ukraine as being an artificial country and failed state. There may be insight from comparing Russia's view to that seen in previous cases of colonial collapse, such as that of the United Kingdom's colonial relationship with Ireland and France's relationship with Algeria. In both of those cases as well, the colonial power viewed these territories more as an integral 'Near Abroad' rather than as distinct colonies. The British, French and Russians differentiated between peoples closely bound to the metropolis and foreign colonies further afield. Russia appears not to view Ukraine and Belarus in the same manner as Georgia or Uzbekistan and especially the three Baltic States. De-colonisation in the Near Abroad, whether Ireland, Algeria or Ukraine, was more intense and bitter, producing a strong sense of betrayal in London, Paris and Moscow respectively at the independence of regions considered to be part of the metropolis.

The third body of scholarly work agrees that the conflict is largely driven by Russian behaviour, but sees that behaviour rooted in Russia's autocratic domestic politics rather than in its international aspirations.[26] One version of this approach sees Putin's 'militocratic' political system dominated by the intelligence services and military and its 'Chekist' (the name of the first Soviet secret service) operating culture as the root of Russia's military aggression. Alexander Motyl has analysed Putin's Russia as a fascist political system.[27] Russian scholar Vladisav Inozemtsev defines Putin's Russia as fascist and imperialist rather than nationalist because it is grounded in language rather than blood, unlike the racist doctrines of Nazism.[28] Although not explicitly racist, collectively defining Russian speakers as 'Russians' has strong ethno-nationalist overtones, especially in Belarus and Ukraine, because it implicitly denies the existence of their national identities. Russia's 'conservative values' messaging is heavily masculine in nature and is linked to a focus on Putin's unique greatness, glorification of the intelligence services, reasserting the myths of the Great Patriotic War and asserting Russia as a great power.[29]

Another variant of this work analyses Russia as a 'mafia state', or 'kleptocracy', where pursuit of money is as important as nationalism and seeking recognition of Russia as a great power. Mark Galeotti believes there is no inconsistency between widespread corruption and nationalism in Putin's Russia; after all, kleptocrats in many parts of the world are also nationalists. There is often the 'thinnest of lines' between organised crime and paramilitaries in many conflicts. This is also the case in the Crimea and the Russian proxy enclaves in the Donbas – the DNR and LNR.[30] Crimean Prime Minister Sergei Aksyonov, leader of a small Russian nationalist party, is a former organised crime leader with the pseudonym 'Goblin'.

Similarly, Wilson writes that Russia's hybrid war is 'foreign policy as *raiderstvo*' (corporate raiding), extending beyond Russian borders the same techniques that define the mix of business and organised crime that prevails in Russia. Evidence for this is seen in the massive corporate raiding of the Ukrainian state and private assets following Russia's annexation of the Crimea. Nor is this form of politics alien in Ukraine itself, where it was regionally prominent in the Donbas before 2010, and where Yanukovych as president undertook a systematic campaign to gather key business assets among his family and a small circle of allies.

The search for the domestic sources of Russian policy goes all the way down to the individual level and Putin himself. Masha Gessen examines Putin's biography, arguing that his early years and experience as a KGB officer in East Germany (GDR) during the fall of communism tell us a great deal about Putin as a leader.[31] Putin saw first-hand how a popular protest had led to a revolution in the GDR and two decades later he viewed them closer to home on Russia's borders in Georgia and Ukraine. Putin took away from the GDR a uniformly negative view of political instability under Presidents Mikhail Gorbachev and later in the 1990s under President Boris Yeltsin, one reason being because political strife could be used by Western intelligence agencies and governments to foment regime change.[32] In November 2017, the 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, a popular revolution whose revolutionaries had received assistance from Germany which led to regime change, was not celebrated by Putin's Russia. Clifford G. Gaddy and Fiona Hill write that Putin's roots in the Soviet secret services go much deeper through his father who was one of only a few who survived as a member of an NKVD (Russia's secret police) unit sent behind enemy lines in Nazi occupied Estonia.[33] Putin appears to be the key player in Russia's foreign policy, so questions about him as an individual seem highly relevant. Can Putin be best understood as an improviser and gambler who is spontaneous and emotional, or as a cold, calculating strategist? Is Putin a nationalist or does he use nationalism instrumentally to win votes in order to maintain popular support and undermine the democratic opposition?

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Geopolitics

The fourth perspective sees the conflict as part of a broader geopolitical competition between Russia and the West. This perspective focuses on relations between the West and its institutions (NATO and the EU) on the one hand and Russia on the other, and tends to reduce Ukraine's role to that of a battleground in a competition between Russia and the West. Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton discuss the 'dynamic interaction' between geopolitics, geo-ideas and geo-economics while Toal invokes 'critical geopolitics'. While specific assertions vary, a primary focus is the extension of Western institutions eastward and increasing opposition to this in Russia. This school of thought sees the source of the conflict in the reliance of the West on a post-Cold War security architecture in Europe that excluded Russia. Many of these works fit more comfortably with realist theory than those blaming the conflict on the US.

While Menon and Rumer see this 'architecture' problem as the fundamental cause of the conflict, Charap and Colton see it as only a permissive cause.[34] For Charap and Colton, the driving force for the conflict was the collision between eastward-moving Western institutions and Russia's defence of its traditional sphere of influence. 'It was the contestation over the lands between Russia and the West that led to the explosion in Ukraine and sent tensions spiralling out of control'.[35] They see overlapping 'geopolitical', 'geoeconomic' and 'geoideational' conflicts.[36]

In this view, an immediate cause of the conflict was the EU's inability to foresee Russia's negative response to the Eastern Partnership enlarging into Eurasia. Just as many criticised NATO for assuming its enlargement could not be seen as a threat by Russia much of this literature criticises the EU for ignoring what Charap and Colton call the 'geoeconomic' consequences of its expansion eastward. By 2013, it was the EU, not NATO, that was taking the lead in pushing into territory that Russia considered vital to its security. Moreover, including Ukraine in a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU would undermine Russia's long-term efforts to build its own Eurasian Union trade bloc that included Ukraine.

Many of these authors, including Menon and Rumer, Charap and Colton, and Toal, strive to be even-handed in criticising both Russia and the West for their roles in the conflict. This is captured in the title of Charap and Colton's book *Everyone Loses*. Toal similarly rejects characterisations of Russia as an imperial power because they 'rest on superficial conceptions of geopolitics'.[37] Toal believes that Putin's reactions were shaped by a broader range of factors than those narrowly looked at by realists or by liberals focusing on Russia as an imperial power. These factors included a Ukrainian 'nationalising state', colour revolutions in Russia's neighbours, NATO and EU enlargement and state dynamics.[38] Although Toal recognises that NATO membership was not on offer to Ukraine, he believes Russia's concern over the future of Sevastopol 'was reasonable'.[39] Similarly, Charap and Colton appear to place greater blame on the West than Russia for the conflict.

National Identity and Nationalism

The final body of scholarly publications, which is the smallest, analyses national identity in Ukrainian-Russian relations and Russian chauvinism towards Ukrainians. In light of the large literature on Russian nationalism, it is odd that it has been underemphasised as a source of Russian behaviour in Ukraine, while scholars and journalists, especially those defending Russia or criticising the West, put great emphasis on nationalism in Ukraine, where nationalism is much less salient and extreme nationalists much less influential than in Russia.[40] No presidential candidate would win a Ukrainian election espousing an ethnic nationalist programme. Meanwhile, no Ukrainian nationalist party managed to cross the threshold to enter parliament in the 2014 elections – in the same year Russia invaded Ukraine. In Ukraine, civic patriotism rather than ethnic nationalism has greater public support because of the country's regional and linguistic diversity. Polls show that three-quarters of Ukrainians hold negative views of Russian leaders but not the Russian people – which would be expected if ethnic nationalism was dominant in Ukraine. The relative imbalance in attention to nationalism in Russia and Ukraine might stem from two factors. First, because there is so much scholarship on Russia, and most scholars and journalists know much more about Russia, nationalism is only one of many factors likely to work its way into an account of Russian behaviour. In contrast, with much less scholarship on Ukraine, and many scholars and journalists much less familiar with Ukraine, it is easy to focus attention on a familiar and evocative theme, such as nationalism. That is especially true in light of a second factor, the concerted effort by Russian leaders to exaggerate the role and extremism of nationalism in Ukraine. In this

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section, we review the role of nationalism and national identity in explanations both of Russia's and Ukraine's behaviour.

The role of Russian nationalism underpins, to some extent, the literatures discussed above focusing on Russian great power aspirations and Russian domestic politics as sources of the conflict. Some also see nationalism as the direct cause, Ivan Krastev writes, 'It is Putin the conservative and not Putin the realist who decided to violate Ukraine's sovereignty. His march on Crimea is not realpolitik it is *kulturkampf*'.[41]

Russian nationalism has a long history and it was prominent in Russian foreign policy discussions in the 1990s, as a large literature at that time shows, but President Yeltsin never wholeheartedly embraced it. Similarly, Russian designs on Crimea surfaced repeatedly throughout the post-Soviet period (see chapter four). Charles Clover writes that after 2000, the 'emergence of a virulent nationalist opposition movement took the mainstream hostage'.[42] In the 1990s, the red-brown coalition opposed to Yeltsin, the regime's controlled 'nationalist opposition' Zhirinovsky and Dugin had been on the extremes of Russian politics.

As Toal stresses, Putin's rejection of Western influence in Russia's 'privileged zone of interests' and alienation from the West was 'years in the making'.[43] The traditional theory of Eurasianism, in which Russia is viewed not as a colonising empire but as a positive civilisation that extends beyond Russia's borders, was rejuvenated and popularised. In this view, Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians are parts of a single *Russkii Mir* (Russian World) civilisation, the division of which into separate states is artificial. In Russia's domestic minorities policy, which recognises a wide array of groups, there is no recognition of Ukrainians, who by numbers are the second largest minority, simply because they are not seen as distinct and do not possess autonomous territorial institutions.[44]

It is this *Russkii Mir* civilisation which Russian nationalists fear is under threat from the West. Galeotti and Andrew Bowen write that Putin does not see himself as an empire builder but as 'defending a civilisation against the 'chaotic darkness' that will ensue if he allows Russia to be politically encircled abroad and culturally colonised by Western values at home'.[45] The works of Eurasianist ideologists such as Aleksandr Dugin, who in 2014 called upon his fellow Russians to 'kill, kill Ukrainians'[46], have provided a new post-Soviet world outlook and identity for Russia's ruling elites and *siloviki*.

Putin embraced nationalism after the colour revolutions, and went further after widespread street protests to his return to the presidency in 2012. Clover writes that the 'Orange fever' in Russia in the mid-2000s helped what was seen as extremist rhetoric at that time 'become the standard jargon of state policy a mere decade and a half later'.[47] Putin publicly articulated this view in his February 2007 speech to the Munich security conference.[48] Since his re-election in 2012, Putin's promotion of 'conservative values' has condemned multiculturalism, the welcoming of Muslim immigrants, gay marriage and the decline of the nation-state (all themes which have resonated with populist nationalists in the EU and the US).

When President Petro Poroshenko hailed Ukraine's achievement of a visa-free regime with the EU as his country's final break with Russia, Putin responded by associating Europe with homosexuality: 'By the way, there are many more blue uniforms (gays) there than here, so he shouldn't relax too much, and just in case, he should keep a look out about him'.[49]

While it is not surprising that Russian nationalists are on the same page as Putin, the majority of opposition democratic political leaders, such as Alexei Navalny, also support Russia's annexation of the Crimea. This is significant because it indicates that Russian nationalism, and in particular its views toward Ukraine, are not isolated to Putin and his team, and therefore will not automatically pass when he eventually leaves office.

The role of nationalism in Ukraine has attracted more attention, primarily from those who see Russia's intervention as justified. Three related arguments are made. First, the coalition that came to rule in Ukraine after the Euromaidan was illegitimate and threatening because it contained representatives of extreme nationalist parties. Second, the role of those groups in the protests constituted sufficient danger to ethnic Russians and Russian speakers to justify their desire to secede and Russia's intervention to protect them. Third, the unsuccessful effort by Euromaidan

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revolutionaries in parliament to annul Yanukovych's 2012 language law was depicted as constituting a further threat to the rights of Russians and Russian speakers (the measure passed but was not signed into law by acting head of state Oleksandr Turchynov).[50]

Among those who study Ukraine, the influence and the extremism of the various nationalist groups are a matter of considerable debate. What has attracted less attention, however, is that the same authors who are blistering in their criticism of US interference seem to advance a standard for military intervention in one's neighbours that is enticingly low and surprisingly vague.

A common framework for understanding the crisis is to portray Ukraine as divided between governments pursuing pluralist policies and governments pursuing what Sakwa calls 'monist' (nationalist) policies – by which Sakwa means policies that reject pluralism. In this view, the 'civil war' was caused by pluralism being overthrown by 'monist' nationality policies which are intolerant of Russian-speakers and espouse Russophobia.[51] As scholars of Ukraine have explored for over two decades, however, simple binaries (e.g. between 'monist' and pluralist or between ethnic and linguistic categories) are highly misleading in Ukraine. Moreover, these critics of 'monism' oddly ignore the politics of Yanukovych, who was assiduously trying to eliminate any potential political competitors as well as economic rivals. The desire to stop him before he fully consolidated autocracy in the country was one of the underlying sources of support for the Euromaidan protests, and helps explain why various oligarchs supported his ouster.

In addition, talk of multiculturalism in Russian-controlled regions, whether the Crimea or the DNR and LNR, is a myth. In the Crimea, Tatars have come under sustained repression, its leaders banned from returning to the Crimea and their unofficial parliament *Mejlis* has been banned. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kiev Patriarchate has been banned. In the DNR and LNR, Ukrainian language schools and media have been closed down and Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kiev Patriarchate and Protestant Churches banned.

Upwards of a quarter of citizens in Eastern Ukraine considered themselves to have mixed Russian-Ukrainian ethnicity, and the majority of Ukrainians speak both Russian and Ukrainian, depending on the circumstances. Moreover, even Russian/Ukrainian is in some cases a false distinction, as people often intermingle the two. Similarly, as Volodymyr Kravchenko points out, the dichotomy of a Ukraine divided between 'monism' and 'pluralism' shows little understanding of modern Ukrainian identity, as in fact 'the two are partially intertwined and interdependent'.[52] Exaggerating these differences, however, has a profound impact, as it prompted observers to predict conflict in Ukraine, and therefore to see it as 'normal' when it happened. Predictions of Ukraine disintegrating into a civil war between its eastern and western regions have been published since as long ago as the early 1990s.[53]

The primary question we face in evaluating nationalism as a cause of conflict is whether it is a fundamental source of behaviour or is being used instrumentally by leaders to build support for policies they have chosen on other grounds. Because nationalism can be used by politicians instrumentally, it is compatible with various explanations concerning underlying driving forces. Even if we believe that nationalism is exploited by the Russian leadership to build support for itself, the fact that it appears to work so well means that nationalism must be part of our understanding of the current conflict. Similarly, even if Ukrainian nationalists are adept at gaining attention, they may not be having much influence on policy. A major difference between Russia and Ukraine is that invoking nationalism is a successful strategy to win votes in Russia but not in Ukraine; indeed, no Ukrainian president has ever won an election with a nationalist programme.

Tied to the question of nationalism is that of identity which can be either ethnic or civic or, as is the case in most Western democracies both. The Russian view of identity is based on language and culture (together encompassing the nebulous term 'civilisation') and therefore Russians and Russian speakers irrespective of their citizenship are 'Russians'. Here the term 'Russians' becomes confusing in English as it can have three meanings: (1) ethnic Russians (*Russkii*) in the Russian Federation; (2) Russians citizens (*Rossiyanyn*) in the Russian Federation; and (3) the three eastern Slavs (*Russkii* as pertaining to the members of the *Russkii Mir* who emerged together from Kiev Rus). Although there is a similarity between one and two to the difference between 'English' and 'British', the confusion lies in the use of only word ('Russian') to describe both.

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The Russian understanding of identity is coupled with three further factors pertaining to Ukraine and Belarus: (1) Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians are 'one people'; (2) Belarus and Ukraine are artificial states; (3) the borders of Belarus and especially Ukraine are artificial, referring not only to the Crimea but also to Eastern and Southern Ukraine (so-called *Novorossiya*). Russian views of identity and Ukraine and Ukrainians clash with reality on the ground (as seen in the failure of the *Novorossiya* project) and are diametrically opposed to how Ukrainians view their own identity in ethnic, civic or ethnic-civic terms. Ironically, Putin's military aggression has strengthened Ukrainian identity and made Russian understanding of Ukraine and Ukrainians even more obsolete.

Conclusion

As the fragmented nature of this literature review has demonstrated, the field has not yet developed a clear set of analytical debates that define the topic. The dominant debate – over who is to blame – is one that is unresolvable. Analytically, so far, the works on the topic come from a bewildering array of paradigms, levels of analysis, geographical foci, and conceptualisations of the problem. Underlying these, however, is a series of issues that seem to shape much of the discussion even if they are not addressed directly. Here we identify several.

A first basic problem concerns the principal of the sovereign equality of states. Russia's position, and that of many works on the topic, answers the question clearly in the negative, or at least with considerable qualification. For realists, the question itself is naïve. But many others who do not claim to be realists accept, to some degree or another, the idea that Russia has special rights or privileges due to its size and power. For those who do not espouse realism, the question is what are those privileges and where do they end. Charap and Colton are correct to write, 'It should surprise no one that a country of Russia's capabilities and ambitions will seek influence over its periphery; the US or China are no different in that respect'.[54]

The bigger question is how much, and to what extent we consider such ambitions legitimate? Put more pointedly, how legitimate is it to injure the interests of the region's other states in order to serve Russia's? One suspects that the 'legitimacy' claim does us little good, because it runs head on into other legitimate claims. Thomas Graham and Menon, for example lay out a compelling case that Russia's concept of its role as a power has been consistent over time, and has been impinged by the events of the post-Cold War period. But they leave unaddressed the crucial question of how far we should impinge on other states – including Ukraine – to satisfy Russia's conception of its great power status.[55] How does one resolve competition over claims of legitimacy, other than via the naked exercise of power? One important question, therefore, is how to answer the question of what exactly one country's interests are beyond its borders, and how far they extend geographically. Can some mix of *realpolitik* and principle solve the problem? If not, is the diverse group of scholars advocating for recognising Russia's rights beyond its borders ready to endorse the realist position?

Absent any shared agreement between Russia and the West on that question, a second question presses. How do we know when acceding to the demands of a powerful state to extend its influence will solve security problems, and when such concessions will make them worse? There may be too few historical cases to arrive at good empirical generalisations. As a result, analogies will be used, and in this case the comparison to Germany's territorial demands in the 1930s, has been made. Russia's behaviour since 2014 is ambiguous enough to be consistent both with the view that it stopped where it did because it was satiated, and the view that it stopped where it did because of pushback, both from within Ukraine and from the international community. In terms of territory, there is a good case to be made that Russia can be satisfied somewhere within the boundaries of the former Soviet Union. Normatively, however, Russia shows signs of being a revolutionary power, hoping to overturn both the prevailing distribution of power and the rules of the game that others in Europe have accepted for some time. Perhaps no task is as urgent as correctly assessing the respects in which concessions will satisfy Russia's ambitions, and which will stoke them.

If the questions above seem to push the answers into the realist court, we have to acknowledge as we did earlier in this chapter that realism too has its limits. The question of when to appease and when to confront is one that realism can answer only in retrospect (Neville Chamberlain's cutting a deal with Hitler in 1938 looked highly cynical and realistic in the moment). If there is to be a new carve-up of Europe, such as that reached at Yalta in 1945 or in earlier partitions of Poland, what border should the West seek, and how should it pursue that interest? Mearsheimer's

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argument points directly to such a 'grand bargain', but he and others are silent on where the new line should be, and how it should be redrawn when constellations of power change in the future.

Another series of important questions relates to the relationship between the domestic and international sources of Russian foreign policy. Those who see Russian behaviour as the main cause of the conflict can draw on both its great power aspirations and several aspects of its domestic politics. In this instance, those arguments are complementary, but that complementarity makes it hard to say which might have more influence in the longer term, or what might happen when those motives conflict rather than reinforce one another. In particular, the notion that a change in government in Russia would lead to a less assertive foreign policy causes fear among some in Russia and hope among many in the West, but it is not clear that the prediction will come true. In the 1990s, Yeltsin was often exhibiting autocratic control, not democracy, when he held back the mix of communist and nationalist revanchists that came to dominate the State Duma. Frozen conflicts in Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan happened on Yeltsin's watch in the 1990s. The assumption that a democratic Russia could be part of a 'Europe whole and free' has yet to be decisively tested. We need to understand the domestic dynamics of Russian foreign policy better than we do.

These are not the only questions one can pose, but these are questions on which we can imagine fruitful debate and in some cases, progress on empirical questions. Moreover, by framing these issues as specific instances of broader problems, these questions would allow us to bring to this case large literatures in international relations, history, and comparative politics.

Further Reading

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Notes

[1] Volodymyr Horbulin, ed., Svitova Hibrydna Viyna: Ukrayinskyy Front (Kharkiv: Folio, 2017). See also 'Russia's "Hybrid" War – Challenge and Threat for Europe', special issue of the Razumkov*Ukrainian Centre for Economic and Political Studies Magazine National Security and Defence*, nos. 9/10, 2016.

[2] Ukraine publishes many Russian-language newspapers and Internet web sites while Ukraine's most popular television channel, Inter, broadcasts largely in Russian. Relatively few scholars in the West have a command of Ukrainian, increasing the likelihood of relying on Russian sources. Zerkalo Nedeli and Ukrainska Pravda, for example, are published in both Russian and Ukrainian. Three of Ukraine's five weekly political magazines are in Russian.

[3] Neil Kent, *Crimea: A History* (London: Hurst, 2016), pp.157 and 160.

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[5] A. Wilson, Ukraine Crisis, p.100.

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[10] G. Toal, *Near Abroad* and Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton, *Everyone Loses. The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017).

[11] Taras Kuzio, *Putin's War Against Ukraine: Revolution, Nationalism, and Crime* (Toronto: Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Toronto, 2017).

[12] Razumkov Ukrainian Centre for Economic and Political Studies survey, 3 April 2015. http://old.razumkov.org.ua/ukr/poll.php?poll_id=1026

[13] http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2017/09/9/7154531/

[14] https://www.unian.info/politics/2006424-lavrov-on-donbas-war-i-heard-criticism-of-our-decision-to-join-the-fight.html

[15] C. K. De Ploeg, *Ukraine in the Crossfire* also frequently cites Sakwa who endorses the book on the cover.

[16] Katchanowski's conspiracy theory of a false flag operation on the Euromaidan where protestors were allegedly murdered by Ukrainian nationalists is cited by many leftist authors on the war. See R. Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*, pp.90–93. This explanation is also popular with the Russian government.

[17] For primary sources see '20 Fevralya: Kto dal komandu strelyat po Maidanu?' in Sonya Koshkina, *Maidan. Nerasskazannaya istoriya* (Kyiv: Bright Star Publishing, pp.272–287 and 'Chastyna Tretya: 18 Lyutoho – 20 Lyutoho' in Leonid Finberg and Ulyana Holovach eds., *Maydan. Svidchennya. Kyiv, 2013–2014 roku* (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera, 2016), pp.505–761. On the 'Heavenly Hundred' murdered protestors see O. Trybushna and I. Solomko eds., *Nebesna Sotnya* (Kyiv: Folio, 2014). An extensive bibliography of Western academic studies of the Euromaidan can be found in T. Kuzio, *Putin's War Against Ukraine*, pp.363–367. For secondary sources see Alison Smale, 'Tending Their Wounds, Vowing to Fight On', *New York Times*, 6 April 2014, Andrew Higgins and Andrew E. Kramer, 'Defeated Even Before He Was Ousted', *The New York Times*, 4 January 2015 and Tom Parfitt, 'Families of victims in Ukraine massacre slate investigation into deaths', *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 February 2015.

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[24] W. Wayne Merry, 'The Origins of Russia's War in Ukraine: The Clash of Russian and European "Civilizational Choices" for Ukraine' in Elizabeth A. Wood, William E. Pomerantz, W. W. Merry and Maxim Trudolyubov,*Roots of Russia's War in Ukraine* (Washington DC; Woodrow Wilson Center, 2016), p.30.

[25] A. Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis*, p.vii. Wilson was referencing Norman Stone's explanation of World War II as 'The Germans went ape'.

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[28] Vladislav Inozemstev, 'Putin's Russia: A Moderate Fascist State', *The American Interest*, 23 January 2017. https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/01/23/putins-russia-a-moderate-fascist-state/

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[37] G. Toal, *Near Abroad*, pp.20–21 and 26–33.

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[51] See R. Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine and Bruno De Cordier*, 'Ukraine's Vendee War? A Look at the 'Resistance Identity' of the Donbas Insurgency, Russian Analytical Digest, no.198 (14 February 2017). http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/specialinterest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/en/publications/rad/rad-all-issues/details.html?id=/n/o/1/9/no_198_identity_politicsnr_198_identity_

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[55] Thomas Graham and R. Menon, 'The Putin Problem', *Boston Review*, 12 September 2017. http://bostonreview.net/politics/thomas-graham-rajan-menon-putin-problem

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