

The Ideas Behind Putin's War in Ukraine

Written by William M. Zolinger Fujii

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/06/05/the-ideas-behind-putins-war-in-ukraine/>

WILLIAM M. ZOLINGER FUJII, JUN 5 2022

Contemporary Western political debate on the retreat of the liberal international order typically identifies China and Russia as the two major sources of external pressure. In turn, the domestic roots of internal pressure consist of deepening social inequality, mass immigration, voters' scepticism, and growing national populism within the core liberal democracies. As a rising superpower that exposes a successful model of development which rejects liberal democracy, the People's Republic of China is often seen as an authoritarian state that wishes to reshape the global system, with which it is well integrated from within. By contrast, the Russian Federation is conventionally portrayed as a declining great power (though a nuclear superpower) whose authoritarian regime is some sort of a measure of last resort and which seeks to disrupt the US-led order partially from the outside. While the former has benefitted significantly from the end of the Cold War, the latter was arguably its greatest loser, bar none. Such portrayals accurately reflect the general reality and reinforce the perspective that tends to regard Moscow's international behaviour as largely reactive to the West's actions, be it through the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, or the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

This article proposes that Putin's war in Ukraine cannot be understood only as a reactive move motivated exclusively by geopolitical factors. That is, while hard security concerns have indeed been at the centre of Russia's military interventions in the former Soviet space, including in the ongoing war in Ukraine, such motivations interact with a set of values that influence the 'superstructure' of Russian leadership in Moscow. This shall be done by outlining the main ideological and ideational influences that have shaped Vladimir Putin's geopolitical vision of Ukraine. Additionally, the 'denazification argument', for its part, does not require or merit any serious discussion due to its inherent absurdness.

Although structural realists regard Vladimir Putin as a power maximiser whose foreign policy ultimately seeks to guarantee Russia's survival, essentially black-boxing domestic variables, such analyses do not account for those ideas that have influenced the Russian President and been mobilised by him in the pursuit of hard geopolitical objectives. Putin is a power maximiser who acts to ensure the survival – and expansion – of the Russian state, but those goals are not articulated in an intellectual vacuum, however pragmatically pursued they may be. Rather, as neoclassical realists would argue, external systemic stimuli are influenced internally by factors such as leaders' images, strategic culture, and a state's historical experiences via domestic processes that precede foreign policy behaviour. In the specific case of contemporary Russia – an autocracy with a hypertrophied Foreign Policy Executive – these translate into elements such as geopolitical horizons, historical memory, and socio-political values that interact and converge to form the worldview of Putin's and his closest aides, while at the same time serving to give meaning and legitimacy to their actions.

To be sure, even considering his intellectual inclinations, for the most part, Putin has been a pragmatic leader in the policy domain, having dealt with virtually all types of heads of governments and states without showing preferences as far as their political affiliations were concerned. This may be well credited mostly to his leadership style, but it also likely results partly from the limited quantitative national power capability that can be mobilised by Russia, whose entire GDP is smaller than the total nominal output of the Tokyo Metropolis. Compared to the other major illiberal power, the Russian economy and population represent only one-tenth of China's, which may at least partially explain why the Russian Federation has not been able to craft an international project and proactively pursue its implementation in the same manner as its Chinese partner.

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Of course, being a political leader and not a thinker, Putin should ultimately be judged by his actions rather than ideas. During his administrative period as Russia's President, he formulated relatively few notions that could be seen as a political vision and was often pragmatic not only in terms of policy, but also in the discursive domain. From the third term, however, more ideational elements began to be expressed in connection with Russia's concrete foreign policy behaviour, including the 2014 military incursions into Ukraine. In the wake of the annexation of Crimea, Putin publicly elaborated his view on Russia's perceived historical rights in detail, claiming that Russians and Ukrainians were one people on the basis of culture, civilisation, and human values. But rather than having a guru, as many have pointed out, Putin's ideational apparatus is better explained as a mixture of ideas from various sources and traditions, a mixture selectively incorporated and not necessarily either coherent or consistent over time. In the two decades that have followed his rise to power, the Russian President has quoted various past intellectuals and historical figures; at the same time, he has maintained close contact with a number of advisors who compete for his attention, forming what could be loosely seen as a 'Putinist' vision that at once influences his worldview and is used to advance his geopolitical ambitions.

Dugin and Surkov

A well-known figure to whom much influence on Putin has been attributed is the philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, a self-proclaimed fascist who ceased to adopt the label in recent years. Among his most notorious ideas is 'Eurasianism', a strategic geopolitical vision anchored by a dimension of 'thick' values. Formulated in opposition to what he calls 'Atlanticism' and its dual pillars of (a) political liberalism and (b) free market capitalism, Atlanticism rejects Western individualistic values disseminated above all by the United States, and sees the Russian people as Russia's historical subject.

In pure geopolitical terms, Dugin envisions a vast bloc that would encompass the Eurasian continent through annexation and a system of alliances based on three axes, whereby Russia sits at its political, military, and cultural centre: to the west, Moscow-Berlin; in the south, Moscow-Tehran; and in the east, Moscow-Tokyo. To that end, he argues that Russia must foster both anti-American sentiment and the collectivist traditions that exist in continental Europe and Japan, whilst seeking to push back the United States from these key areas. Ultimately, he argues, the goal is to organise an illiberal Eurasian world under Russian leadership in opposition to a liberal Atlanticist bloc.

In pursuing these greater objectives, Dugin proposes that Russia should make concessions to Germany and Japan. Concessions would include returning Kaliningrad and the South Kurils, respectively, while Britain would be kept outside of the bloc due to its inexorable ties to the Atlanticist tradition. As a state with little geopolitical significance, and without cultural and ethnic exclusiveness, he argues, Ukraine is part of Russia with the exception of its three far-western regions. Many of these prescriptions are overly ambitious and unrealistic, and it is unlikely that Putin shares them entirely with Dugin. Restoring the former Soviet space – but crucially not its political regime – reverting the 'greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century', and eventually expelling the United States from Europe and East Asia, however, seem to be where Putin agrees with the Russian philosopher. A commonly misinterpreted phrase 'catastrophe' here, was not the end of the Soviet Union as such, but the demise of 'historical Russia', as Putin clarified in 2021. Dugin has long been a leading voice campaigning for the restoration of that historical Russia, having called for the invasion of Ukraine as early as 2008 in the context of the war in Georgia.

When considering Dugin's ideas, it may be useful to look at the philosophers who influenced his thought. From René Guénon, he absorbed the Perennialist metaphysical belief in universal unchangeable truths and the concept of *Kali Yuga* as applied to modern Western civilisation. In Martin Heidegger, Dugin discovered the idea of fundamental ontology and formulated a structural criticism of the West based on Russian traditionalism, whilst Julius Evola provides the framework for practical action, as the former two thinkers circumscribe their philosophy to the ideational realm. In developing his international vision, Dugin also draws on Carl Schmitt in elaborating on the creation of a *Großraum* (Great Space) that integrates Eurasia in a cultural, geopolitical, and spatial sense.

The degree to which Dugin's influence on Putin remains significant is debatable, and there have been indications that it has decreased considerably over the past years, regardless of how influential it had been. This notwithstanding, what is known with certainty is that he has indeed been influential at least until the early 2010s, with his work

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'*Foundations of Geopolitics*' having been used as a textbook in both Russian General Staff and military universities.

A greater and clearer influence than Dugin has arguably been that of Vladislav Surkov, who has been one of the Kremlin's principal ideologues for several years. Having acted as a grey cardinal during Putin's first two terms as President, he has served as Russia's deputy Prime Minister and presidential assistant on foreign affairs. Surkov, who coined the term 'sovereign democracy' that is associated with Putin's regime and claimed to be 'the author, or one of the authors, of the new Russian system' in 2013, oversaw Moscow's Ukraine policy for several years, including during the 2014 crisis. A key figure in the Kremlin's relations with the Donbas separatists, for Surkov there is no such a thing as Ukraine and 'Ukrainian-ness' would be best explained as a disorder of the mind.

Ivan Ilyin

Another thinker who has influenced Vladimir Putin is the philosopher Ivan Ilyin, a 'White Russian' who was expelled from the Soviet Union in the early 1920s. An advocate of Christian fascism, he identified much convergence between Italian fascism, Nazism, and the White Russian movement before growing disillusioned with Adolf Hitler, although he never recanted support for National Socialism. Rejecting the idea of individual liberties proclaimed by the West, but also opposing the atheism and class struggle of Communism, Ilyin defended the organic spiritual unity of the people of Russia with its government. In his philosophical worldview, the Ukrainian people belonged to the Russian spiritual organism and had to be absorbed accordingly.

After the Second World War, Ilyin wrote a work that has been an important influence on Putin and which the Russian President ordered his country's governors to read in 2014. According to '*Our Mission*' (or '*Our Tasks*', depending on the edition), Russia was surrounded by imperialist neighbours who would never accept its uniqueness, and would inevitably seek to dismember the Russian territory. If nothing was done, Ilyin argued, Germany would annex the Baltics and Ukraine, meanwhile Britain would advance on Central Asia and the Caucasus, and Japan would dominate the Russian Far East. The dismemberment of Russia would be preceded by the promotion of values such as democratisation and freedom, ultimately leading to the dismantlement of the country.

Published in the early days of the Cold War, the essay was written around the time NATO was being established. Adapting Ilyin to the contemporary world, the primary menace would be Washington and its military alliance system that includes Britain, Germany, and Japan and consequently encircles Russian territory. For those in Moscow influenced by Ilyin, Western international democracy promotion programmes that emerged in the early 1990s seemed to confirm the philosophers' predictions, alongside the expansion of the EU and NATO eastwards. In a speech to the Russian Federal Assembly in 2006, Putin referenced Ilyin's passage that the calling: 'of soldier is a high and honourable title and that the soldier represents the national unity of the people, the will of the Russian state, strength and honour', concluding that 'we must be able to respond to attempts from any quarters to put foreign policy pressure on Russia.' Thus, leading Russia's resistance against external threats from the West, both ideological and geopolitical, is Vladimir Putin himself, as Russian national television showed on the fifteenth anniversary of his rule.

Berdyaev and Solovyov

In addition to Ilyin, the regional governors of Russia were instructed by Putin to read the philosopher and theologian Nikolai Berdyaev, along with a book by the Silver Age thinker and literary critic Vladimir Solovyov, over the 2014 winter holiday. Similar to Ilyin, Berdyaev rejected both Marxism and Western liberalism, and exposed a form of inward-looking authoritarian conservatism that would protect Russia from foreign influence and attempts to threaten its territorial base. A Christian existentialist, he believed that Russians are fundamentally different from other peoples of the West and cannot be understood by them, as the Russian soul is complex and results from the intermixing of two currents of world history. Contrary to the Western liberal tradition, Berdyaev argued that the cult of the saints and sanctity remained a core constitutive element of Russian identity, enabling Russia to realise its grievous historical fate. These views have been echoed by Putin in his historical narrative about Russia's uniqueness, greatness, and mission, with Berdyaev being considered one of his favourite philosophers.

Lev Gumilev

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A few months after the inauguration of his third term, novel concepts seemed to be increasingly incorporated into Putin's intellectual repertoire. In addition to previous influences, the ideas of the Russian historian and ethnologist Lev Gumilev began to be articulated within a broader geopolitical and civilisational discourse. In particular, the Russian President has explicitly mentioned the concept of *passionarnost* ('passionarity') in his speeches, showing convergence between his and the thinker's visions. For Putin, with new economic, geopolitical, and ethnic conflicts emerging, overcoming these challenges would depend on the mental and ideological energy that a nation can mobilise at a given time – this being the *passionarnost* as conceptualised by Gumilev. Not unlike the other figures, Gumilev believed that Western influence had corrupted and weakened Russia, which had to turn to its Eurasian roots in its path towards national rejuvenation.

Concluding Thoughts

The idea of a Eurasian identity and a grand geopolitical project centred on Russia, the 'Third Rome', permeates Dugin, Ilyin, and Gumilev despite their different views on the country's ideal future, and an indispensable component of that worldview is the subjugation of Ukraine both as a nation and as a fully sovereign political entity. For Dugin, not only is that a necessary goal in the path towards the restoration of Russian greatness, but an independent Ukraine is actually a threat to Russia's existence. In Ilyin's thought, there is no such a thing as a Ukrainian nation in the first place, while the 'loss' of Ukraine could eventually lead to the dismemberment of Russia. And according to Gumilev, Ukrainians form one people with Russians and Belarussians, a fact that the Soviet state tragically sought to change by artificial means. As made clear on various occasions, these are also the beliefs of Vladimir Putin, who called for the reconstruction of the cultural, spiritual, and historical unity between Russians and Ukrainians to which the latter's elites represent a major obstacle.

Some, like Piotr Dutkiewicz, have referred to this vision as Putin's Civilisational Doctrine. This may well be the case, as Russia's concerns regarding NATO expansion do not exist in a void and is animated by ideas that are deeply rooted in Russian intellectual traditions which additionally serve to legitimise Russia's geopolitical ambitions by providing a historico-intellectual rationale for Putin's goals. Such hard security calculations are underpinned by both ideational and ideological bases, by which Putin and his closest circle interpret these external systemic factors – which, for their part, interact with beliefs and views on Russia in its cultural, ethnic, historical, and spiritual dimensions while being mobilised by the Kremlin with the intent of boosting the legitimacy of its actions. After all, geopolitical ambitions and ideas are not mutually exclusive, quite the contrary, as the latter influences the former while the former is often pursued in the name of the latter.

As it was demonstrated during the 'unipolar moment', the belief in the primacy of Western values and liberal hegemony that made up Washington's 'software' constituted both a motivation and a pretext for the United States in the pursuit of its own hard geopolitical goals internationally. Similarly, the ongoing war in Ukraine is more multifaceted and may require a perspective that attributes a central place to, but goes beyond, a narrow view of Putin's security-related motivations. Although Ukraine's integration into the West is unacceptable to the Kremlin on security grounds, and perhaps rather understandably so from the viewpoint of an authoritarian and deeply insecure regime, it is likely to be inadmissible for what Putin would consider 'civilizational' reasons, too.

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