

What Motivated Putin to Invade Ukraine?

Written by Bulent Gokay and Lily Hamourtziadou

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BULENT GOKAY AND LILY HAMOURTZIADOU, DEC 29 2024

Ukraine was plunged into a catastrophic and perilous war in 2022 when Russia's invasion led to widespread devastation and human suffering not seen in Europe since the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia during the early 1990s. Numerous analysts and commentators contend that Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine stems from a broader imperialistic ambition, indicative of a long-standing desire to expand Russia's influence and control over neighbouring territories. These perspectives imply that the invasion is not merely a spontaneous act but rather a calculated manoeuvre within a larger strategy aimed at reclaiming and dominating regions historically associated with Russian power.

'Putin is an imperialist who must be stopped now, or he will become more dangerous', said US Senator Chuck Grassley (2023). Patrick Smith of NBC News says, 'Russia's invasion of Ukraine has raised fears that Putin is intent not only on claiming its neighbour and former Soviet republic but potentially has his eye on Poland, Finland and the Baltics, among others' (2022). 'It's clear now that Putin's endgame is nothing short of a revanchist imperialist remaking of the globe to take control of the entire former Soviet space', says Evelyn Farkas, an American national security advisor (Politico, 2022). Strobe Talbott, former US deputy secretary of state from 1994 to 2001, says, 'Putin certainly has an endgame in mind: It's recreating the Russian Empire with himself as tsar' (Politico, 2022). After Ukraine, the Kremlin's next targets could be Moldova and the Baltic countries, Admiral Michel Hofman, Belgian Chief-of-Defense, warned (Hulsemann, 2023). Alexander J. Motyl argues that Putin's Russia is attempting to invade other countries in a manner reminiscent of Hitler's ambitions in the 1940s.

The striking similarities between Vladimir Putin's Russia and Adolf Hitler's Germany are not accidental. Both regimes had — the past tense is intentional — the same historical trajectory because both were the product of imperial collapse and its destabilizing aftermath on the one hand and the emergence of a strong leader promising to make the country great again on the other (Motyl, 2022).

According to Jonathan Katz, Putin 'is this century's equivalent to Hitler, and the threat he poses to Europe, U.S. and global security extends far beyond the current conflict in Ukraine'. (Herman, 2022) 'Putin is proving to be the "Hitler of the 21st century" with the invasion of Ukraine, said Leo Varadkar, Ireland's deputy premier (Independent, 2022).

Putin's Russia exists as a closed and repressive regime. There is a tendency among Western observers to interpret every conflict through the lens of the Second World War. This uncritical comparison is not only overly simplistic but also potentially dangerous. Many within the Western political and media elite seem to have adopted this shallow perspective. While it is undeniable that Putin is a brutal leader, he does not exhibit the same genocidal tendencies characteristic of Hitler's regime. Interpreting Putin's actions through the lens of World War II and Nazi Germany fails to accurately capture the motivations behind his regime's invasion of Ukraine. Such comparisons often lead to a simplistic and unilluminating understanding of the conflict in Ukraine.

Putin's rise to power and consolidation resemble those of a conventional autocrat who is satisfied with personal power and enrichment; however, he lacks the geopolitical ambitions and ideological motivations similar to those of Hitler's Third Reich, as Richard Evans explains:

Putin's aims are limited. They're very ambitious, but they have limits. Hitler's aims were unlimited. He literally wanted

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to conquer the world, and his central belief was the racial question — he saw history in terms of racial struggle. Putin, however, is a Russian nationalist. He believes that Ukrainians are Russian, not that they are an inferior race. (Millan, 2023)

In a similar vein, Rajiv Sikri, a seasoned Indian diplomat with considerable expertise in the region, suggests that President Putin's objectives may be somewhat constrained.

He would probably want to have a pro-Russian, or at least not a hostile, government in Kyiv, and for Ukraine to be a neutral state like Finland, Sweden or Austria. ... Putin's interest in Ukraine is limited to the eastern, Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine, not Western Ukraine which has dominated Ukrainian politics since the Maidan revolution of 2014 (Politico, 2022).

Vladimir Putin emerged as a formidable hardline leader largely due to his actions in 1999, when he ordered the intense bombardment of Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, a small Muslim republic in southern Russia with a population of approximately 1.5 million. Since the end of World War II, no other city has endured such extensive bombing. Numerous other cities and towns throughout Chechnya were also left in ruins, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Chechen fighters and tens of thousands of civilians. Thomas de Waal, a journalist who reported on Chechnya in the 1990s, observes notable similarities between Putin's war in Chechnya in 1999 and the conflict in Ukraine in 2022.

The use of heavy artillery, the indiscriminate attacking of an urban center. They bring back some pretty terrible memories for those of us who covered the Chechnya war of the 1990s. ...There was a project to restore Chechnya to Russian control, and nowadays in 2022, to restore Ukraine to the Russian sphere of influence... And there was no Plan B. Once the people started resisting, which came as a surprise in Chechnya and is coming as a surprise in Ukraine, there was no political Plan B about what to do with the resistance (in Myre, 2022).

Since his original appointment as Prime Minister by Yeltsin in 1999, followed by his assumption of the role of Acting President later that year, Putin has led the country as an authoritarian Russian nationalist. His governance is defined not by ideological zeal, but by a focus on pragmatic decision-making. This form of authoritarian Russian nationalism reflects a 'pick-and-mix approach to ideology.' (Faure, 2022) There are numerous historical figures from both the Tsarist Russian and Soviet periods, alongside certain ideologues that he selectively incorporates to shape his somewhat ambiguous ideology. A significant factor influencing Moscow's policy may not be linked to a single individual or ideological framework; instead, it can be associated with the Izborsky Club, a right-wing think tank that provides insights into the pragmatic ideological foundations of the Putin regime.

Founded at the end of 2012, the Izborsky Club embodies the ideological foundations that provide insight into Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. The club advocates for Eurasianism, promoting the expansion of Moscow's control and influence over a region encompassing the former Soviet Union. The think tank functioned as a central gathering place for a considerable number of self-identified nationalists and anti-liberals, all unified by the overarching aim of influencing the future of the Russian state. (Laruelle, 2016: 630) The club was founded in 2012 in the quaint town of Izborsk, situated in Pskov Oblast in north-western Russia, just across the border from Estonia. Its establishment coincided with the celebration of the city's 1,150th anniversary, which inspired the club's name. Following its inception, additional meetings were held in various locations, including Yekaterinburg, Ulyanovsk, St. Petersburg, Saratov, Bryansk, Belgorod, Tula, Kaluga, Omsk, Nizhny Novgorod, Orenburg, and Donetsk, as well as in regions such as Yakutia, Dagestan, and Crimea.

The Izborsky Club has significant financial resources and maintains strong ties to the Kremlin. While Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov has denied any connections to the club, it has been awarded grants totaling 10 million rubles from the Presidential Administration, functioning as a non-profit organization. The inaugural meeting was attended by Vladimir Medinsky, who was the Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation at the time and is currently a personal advisor to Putin. Several regional governors and presidents of various state republics, including Yakutia, Dagestan, and Chechnya, were also present (Zygar, 2023).

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Alexandr Prokhanov, a veteran nationalist author, activist, and editor of the newspaper *Zavtra*, serves as the founder and chairman of the organization. Prokhanov is closely linked with influential Orthodox businessmen, including Konstantin Malofeev, who is reportedly a key financier of the Donbas insurgency in eastern Ukraine. Notable members include Bishop Tikhon, an Orthodox priest and best-selling author rumoured to be Putin's personal confessor; economist and politician Sergei Glaz'ev, who acts as an adviser to Putin; Moscow State University professor and right-wing philosopher Alexander Dugin, often referred to as 'Putin's brain'; and oligarchs Oleg Rozanov, Yuri Lastochkin, and Aleksandr Notin. Additionally, the group features Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, Uzbek Shamil Sultanov, who coordinates the Kremlin's strategy in the Islamic world, as well as leading TV news anchors Mikhail Leontev and Maksim Shevchenko (Laruelle, 2016).

Putin has distanced himself from the Club, never attending its meetings, and the organization has not been closely associated with him. This stance aligns with his preference for pragmatism, steering clear of the Club's overtly right-wing, Russian imperialist agendas. Many observers have aptly described Putin as an opportunist rather than a strategist driven by ideology. Nonetheless, this does not change the fact that the Club's discourse and narrative not only mirror but also contribute to the broader narrative of Putin's regime (Bacon, 2018).

In the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, the Izborsky Club's agenda, which advocated for the unity of the 'reds' and 'whites,' resonated with the Putin regime's persistent emphasis on national cohesion. Throughout 2014, Putin's speeches mirrored the language and style of Club members, asserting that Crimea is the spiritual and political heart of Russia. The Club's 2016 *Doctrine of Russian World* document included 'the protection of ethnic Russians' rights against the "Russophobia" of the Ukrainian ruling elites, dominated by "neo-Nazis.'" (Faure, 2023). In October 2021, the Club issued a new manifesto called *Ideology of Russian Victory*, which can be considered the most elaborate doctrinal platform justifying war in Ukraine (Laruelle, 2022).

All things considered, and with the war now approaching its third year, the level of destruction in Ukraine has reached proportions not witnessed in Europe since World War II and the end does not yet seem to be in sight. Putin commenced this war anticipating a swift and uncomplicated victory, but he misjudged the determination of the Ukrainian people to defend their homeland. Conversely, Ukraine and NATO overestimated their ability to overcome Russia on the battlefield.

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