

# Evaluating Russia's Grand Strategy in Ukraine

Written by Christopher Friend

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Evaluating Russia's Grand Strategy in Ukraine

<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/07/06/evaluating-russias-grand-strategy-in-ukraine/>

CHRISTOPHER FRIEND, JUL 6 2020

The fall of the Soviet Union and subsequent establishment of 15 independent states in its place brought economic, social, and military turmoil to the former republics. The largest and most centralized republic, Russia, emerged as the Russian Federation and began a campaign to establish regional hegemonic dominance. The collapse of the Soviet Union was an embarrassing failure of the communist experiment from which the Russian Federation needed to bounce back. The rise as a major world power after World War II gave the Soviet Union a lust for dominance, which to this day has yet to be satisfied. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia's grand strategy has focused on its reemergence as a world power.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the Russia's contemporary grand strategy as it relates to Ukraine. The former Soviet Republic of Ukraine is in a unique position militarily, geographically, and diplomatically when it comes to relations with Russia. Ukraine's unique position stems from several factors. First, militarily it is a NATO-friendly state, but does not enjoy the benefits of membership. Despite its non-member status, NATO has substantial importance for Euro-Atlantic security, according to NATO's own documentation (NATO, 2019). Second, geographically it sits on the Black Sea, a critical Russian naval hub, and an area of great geographic importance. Access to the Black Sea allows for access to the Mediterranean Sea, which is critical to trade. In the same vein, access to the Black Sea provides avenues for power projection across the region. Third, diplomatically Ukraine has had strained and turbulent relations with Russia, especially after the instalment of a new Ukrainian government in 2014 and the subsequent annexation of Crimea. The only other state to face such an abrupt incursion into their sovereign lands by Russia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is Georgia. The goal of evaluating Russia's grand strategy in this environment is to understand how Russia might conduct itself in future engagements with similar states on its path to regional dominance as well as to look at how the future may play out geopolitically for Russia. First, I will define the grand strategy, parameters to success, review contextually relevant, historical Russian-Ukrainian relations. I will also discuss how Russia has pursued those success parameters in Ukraine, and finally I will evaluate Russia's strategy towards Ukraine.

It is important to first define grand strategy before diving into the specifics. Grand strategy, as I will use it in this paper, is a means-ends chain, i.e. the means to which a state achieves its ends (goals). Evaluation of grand strategy requires defining parameters of success. The Russian International Affairs Council, which is a government funded entity founded by presidential decree offers three main components by which I will measure the success of Russia's grand strategy in Ukraine. First, solidifying itself as a respected regional hegemony (Kortunov, 2019). Second, an increase in economic prosperity (Chimiris, 2020). Third, the reestablishment as a respected world power (Chimiris, 2019). Failure is simply the inverse of the successes, but with an emphasis on visible consequences to the Russian state. A success may not be outwardly visible to the world, but any failure certainly will be put on display. Many of these ends are connected and are reliant upon each other, and each requires a delicate balance of diplomatic, military, and economic tool utilization, and can be viewed through the lens of Ukraine-Russian relations. These successes are outlined in Russia's 2015 National Security Strategy, wherein it calls for "further increasing the Russian Federation's economic, political, military, and spiritual potentials and for enhancing its role in shaping a polycentric world" (Russian Federation, 2015). From a western perspective Russia's grand strategy towards Ukraine is contrarian in regard to all three measurements of success. Russia's actions in the short-term prove more-or-less successful, but when extrapolated beyond a single event and timeframe, Russia's grand strategy in Ukraine fails to meet its measurements of success. Exploring the contemporary grand strategy between Russia and Ukraine

# Evaluating Russia's Grand Strategy in Ukraine

Written by Christopher Friend

offers a glimpse into that delicate balance and the ways in which Russia is putting its grand strategy into play as well as allowing us to critique and suggest improvements to this grand strategy.

## Russia and Ukraine: History and Context

Russia has always seen Ukraine as part of its traditional Motherland. This argument has some merits, as Kievan Rus' was the 9<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century cultural foundation to imperial Russia. Additionally, Ukrainian territories had been a part of various empires, primarily Russian, until 1917 when a short-lived independent government was formed. In 1919, Ukraine once again became an arm of the now Soviet Union under the title of Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Despite the long-standing Russian control, many Ukrainian cultural figures, such as 19<sup>th</sup> century poet Taras Shevchenko, advocated for a free Ukrainian state. However, Russia remained adamant on suppressing any inkling of Ukrainian nationalism until the Soviet Union collapsed and could no longer hold onto Ukraine. For right or for wrong, historically, Ukraine has been a major part of Russian history despite cultural divergences.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine became its own independent state. Ukrainian-Russian relations were tense from the start. The territory of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol were primary topics of dispute. The two states resolved the issue of the Russia's Black Sea naval fleet in Sevastopol by establishing a long-term lease on the naval base. However, Ukraine's ownership of Crimea, and to a larger extent the failure of Russia to formally recognize Ukraine's sovereignty remained issues until May 1997 (Steward, 1997). That year the two states signed the Russian-Ukrainian Friendship Treaty, in which Russia formally recognized Ukraine as an independent state. At the time, this treaty was perceived by some experts as "[shedding] the cloak 'of shared history between ruler and ruled'" (Steward, 1997). Throughout the 90s, until the friendship treaty was officially signed, Ukraine overtly aligned itself with the West and NATO, forcing Russia to accept their borders for fear Ukraine would be pushed too far westward (Steward, 1997). NATO expansion at the time was a direct threat to Russia, and they could not afford a satellite state to join NATO ranks. This poaching of Ukraine by NATO certainly came as a backhanded surprise, as in the early 1990s, western leaders advocated several times for a halt to NATO expansion eastward towards Russian borders, with a particular sensitivity toward former Warsaw Pact members (Savranskaya, et al., 2017). The entire post-dissolution debacle has most certainly influenced Russia's current grand strategy towards Ukraine. Nonetheless, it is worth reviewing relations between Ukraine and Russia between 1997 and 2014, as they are in stark contrast to post-2014 relations.

In 1994 Leonid Kuchma was elected to serve as the Ukrainian president. His administration balanced its new-found independence, while hoping to rebuild relations with Russia. His victory in the 1994 and 1999 presidential elections showcased the split between those who wanted a unilateral path forward and those who wanted to rebuild ties with Russia (Global Security). The pro-Russian electorate won, and Kuchma proceeded to attempt to rebuild ties. The Kuchma administration, in 2003, "accepted in principle a proposal to establish a 'joint economic space' with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan (Ivan Alekseyevich Yerofeyev, n.d.). In 2004, Russian-backed Ukrainian presidential candidate, Victor Yanukovich won the presidential election. However, protesters supporting pro-Western candidate Yushchenko revolted in what is known as the Orange Revolution, forcing a revote, which Yushchenko won (Council on Foreign Relations). Notably, Russia saw this color revolution as a ploy by the U.S. to further destabilize the region (Cordesman, 2014). In 2010, Yanukovich once again won the presidential election, this time securing it long-term. As the Russian-backed candidate, he resumed ties with Russia. In 2010 his administration extended the lease of Sevastopol to Russia; he stated that the Holodomor, a famine-genocide committed by the Soviet Union on Ukraine, should not be considered a genocide; and perhaps the nail in his administration's coffin was his withdrawal from E.U. trade talks and announcement of his indication to join the Eurasian Customs Union (Council on Foreign Relations).

The repeated pro-Russian moves by Yanukovich resulted in many Ukrainians protesting his administration in early 2014. The protests were violent and deadly and were the direct result of Yanukovich's failure to enter into agreements with the E.U. He feared it would negatively affect trade with Russia. Protesters, seeing continued pushback of the E.U. as a failure of his administration and government, pushed Yanukovich out of office and the Ukrainian government was rebuilt. Shortly after the revolution, Ukrainians elected Oleksandr Turchynov as President of Ukraine, an election and presidency which Russia refused to recognize as legitimate (Myers, 2014). A few months

# Evaluating Russia's Grand Strategy in Ukraine

Written by Christopher Friend

later, Ukrainians once again elected a pro-western candidate, Petro Poroshenko, in a landslide victory against several opponents. His administration wanted to expand peace talks with Russia, but publicly announced that military intervention was possible, referring to the separatists as "terrorists" (RT International, 2014). The conflict in Eastern Ukraine persisted throughout his presidency in part due to his escalatory and hawkish rhetoric. In 2019 comedian-turned-politician Volodymyr Zelensky won the Ukrainian presidential elections against incumbent Poroshenko. His victory symbolized a country tired of continued escalations with Russia and the failing domestic policies of the previous administration (Fox, 2019). Zelensky's policies became increasingly clear over the last several months: economic prosperity and peace with Russia. However, Zelensky will not simply give in to Russian aggression, as the key term of any peace agreement, Zelensky said, is "[...] a full withdrawal, a full disarming of all illegal formations, military formations [...]" (Shuster, 2019). Prior to the 2014 revolution Ukrainian-Russia relations were turbulent, but often resolvable under pro-Russian President Yanukovich. However, since the 2014 revolution, which Russia deemed an illegal, U.S.-backed coup, tensions have escalated substantially (Osnos, et al., 2017). This conflict has reignited strained relations between the two states and has been a central defining factor in modern day Russian grand strategy towards Ukraine. The conflict has provided Russia the background on which to pursue its grand strategy success factors: regional hegemony, economic prosperity, and recognition as a reputable world power.

## Russia as a Regional Hegemony

Russia has been facing an existential threat for many years. NATO enlargement and political/economic incursions into former Soviet states have worried Russian policy makers for decades. The recent pro-western changes in Ukraine have prompted Russia to act aggressively to counteract NATO enlargement in a move to establish its regional hegemony. While this has proved in the short-term to be successful, Russia is betting on its ability to maintain control of its regional assets, which if successful could prove disastrous to the current Russian state. Russia's first step in Ukraine to set the stage for a regional hegemony is to provide the argument for its rightful ownership of Crimea.

The idea of historical ownership of Ukraine has been publicly reinforced by Russian President Vladimir Putin. In a 2014 address to the State Duma and other political leaders, President Putin said, "In people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia. This firm conviction is based on truth and justice and was passed from generation to generation, over time, under any circumstances, despite all the dramatic changes our country went through during the entire 20th century" (Russian Federation, 2014). This speech came days after Crimea affirmed a referendum supporting its repatriation to Russia, and weeks before violence began in eastern Ukraine between Russian-backed forces and the Ukrainian military.

In late April 2014 in an annual question and answer session, President Putin commented that, "Our task was not to conduct a full-fledged military operation there, but it was to ensure people's safety and security and a comfortable environment to express their will" (Russian Federation, 2014). The conflict that followed between 2014 and 2019 claimed the lives of over 9,000 combatants and civilians and left millions of people displaced from Eastern Ukraine and neighboring territories (Human Rights Watch, 2019). President Putin and state media repeatedly blamed the incursion on mistreatment of ethnic Russians, and a rightful return of Crimea to the motherland. However, six years of conflict, thousands dead on each side, and the conflict's timing lend to other possibilities. What does Russia have to gain from starting and subsequently prolonging such a conflict?

The annexation of Crimea and the subsequent violence is a means to an end for Russia. As aforementioned, one of Russia's dominant goals is to become a respected regional hegemony. Following the 2014 revolution, the new Ukrainian ruling coalition set joining NATO as a primary goal (RFE/RL, 2014). The possibility of a former satellite state and geographically significant neighbor (Russia's Black Sea fleet is stationed in Sevastopol, Ukraine) joining NATO would be both an embarrassment and a cataclysmic failure of Russian grand strategy. As NATO expands Eastward towards Russian interests, Russia's ability to defend its territories from both ground and air incursions becomes more difficult, especially as NATO states become more unilaterally aggressive. For example, in 2015 Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet, which had entered Turkish airspace during a bombing mission over Syria (Tomkiw, 2015). This promoted an increase in military posture by both Turkey and Russia. The geopolitical jostle between NATO and Russia can be well explained by Halford Mackinder who wrote, "Who rules East Europe

# Evaluating Russia's Grand Strategy in Ukraine

Written by Christopher Friend

commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; Who rules the World-Island commands the World" (Mackinder, 1942). Failure to control its immediate neighbors means a loosened grip on regional and world influence for Russia. One fear for Russian leaders is Western interference in neighboring states and eventually Russia through the so-called "color revolutions", like Ukraine's 2014 Orange Revolution. Mark Katz, a prominent voice on Russian strategy, notes that "the principal security challenge confronting Russia [is] the possibility of internal opposition growing strong enough to overthrow his regime through a democratic revolution [...]" (Katz, 2017). Ukraine's increasing westernization after the abolishment of the Yanukovich administration (the consequences of which could potentially spill over into Russian domestic spheres) and fear of NATO expansionism gave Russia an excuse to pursue conflict in the region under the guise of protecting ethnically Russian Crimean peoples from the ills of westernization. The real reason for the conflict, succinctly put, is to maintain hegemonic control in the region.

Russia gains several strategic advantages by initiating conflict with Ukraine. First and foremost, by initiating armed conflict, it puts a damper on any short-term possibility of Ukraine joining NATO. One of NATO's key principles is collective defense, wherein an attack on one ally is an attack on all. Had Ukraine been a full-fledged member of NATO, or become one after the attack, then the alliance would be beholden to defend against Russian provocations. However, while Ukraine is not a member of NATO, it does enjoy some benefits from its member states. The U.S. has supplied several lethal weapons to Ukraine and several other states have helped train Ukrainian military forces. This relationship and subsequent provocation by Russia have created a dilemma for NATO: how can NATO assure friendly states on the border of Russia that they will be safeguarded from provocation? Sanctions, military exercises, and more are tools of pressure, but none have seemed to work as intended against Russia (Chatzky, 2019). As NATO and its allies are applying these ineffective tools, Russia is weakening Ukraine economically and militarily.

This is where the second strategic advantage comes into play: the conflict has played out in Russia's favor by sowing discord between NATO and prospective allies on Russia's border. Throughout this conflict NATO has provided support to Ukraine, but these efforts have had little effect on deterring further Russian interference, even six years later. This begs the questions, if such a strategically important state such as Ukraine can succumb to Russia's incursions despite NATO interference, how can smaller, pragmatically less-important states fare? There is no good answer, but many westernizing non-NATO states may see themselves falling victim to the same attacks Russia lodged on Ukraine.

Herein lies the cumulative advantage for Russia, as it has more-or-less began to cement itself as a regional hegemony. In 2019 Putin told reporters in an interview that integration in the post-Soviet space was unsurprising, as "using all these advantages [(shared language, culture, etc.)] that have been developed over decades, if not centuries, we increase our competitiveness. This is the only way I can explain the resistance of some of our Western colleagues [towards engaging with us]" (TASS, 2020). By establishing itself as a regional hegemony, Russia can coerce weaker states such as Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, etc. that joining forces with Russia is the primary way to remain independent from Western influence, as Western influence would precede Russian interference as it has in Ukraine. As a regional hegemony, Russia may begin to feel more at ease, as these weaker states act as client states and create a buffer between Russia's border and NATO enlargement both ideologically and geographically.

But how does this push for hegemonic control play out for Russia? In the case of Ukraine, Russia's efforts have succeeded on a macro level. It has successfully, at least for now, delayed Ukraine's seemingly inevitable membership to NATO. Additionally, it has weakened NATO's influence in Eastern Europe, as Russia is beginning to establish closer relations with post-Soviet states, limiting the extent of NATO enlargement in those regions. On a micro level though, Russia has faced consequences. I will discuss Russia's failure to maintain an image as a "peacekeeper" later, but the consequences for their incursion into Ukraine go beyond that. Russia has faced several sanctions from NATO member states, and although the sanctions have not had a widely felt economic impact, the sanctions targeted several key figures related to the Russian government. Russia also faced increased pressure in the United Nations and other diplomatic channels because of what many states considered an illegal move into sovereign territory (although the consequences of such actions do not go far beyond condemnations and economic sanctions). Moreover, the conflict cost the lives of hundreds of Russian soldiers and ethnically Russian peoples.

# Evaluating Russia's Grand Strategy in Ukraine

Written by Christopher Friend

Strictly presented with the immediate pros and cons of Russia's establishment of a regional hegemony through Ukraine, Russia seems to have made a logical decision. However, in the long run, a scenario favoring Russia seems unlikely. Since annexation in 2014, Crimea has not seen an economic boom despite billions of dollars in federal subsidies (Ballard, 2019). This is money that is not being spent on wider domestic projects in Russia such as roads, bridges, etc. According to a poll by the Public Opinion Foundation in 2019, only 39% of Russians believe the Crimean annexation did more good than harm compared to 67% in 2014 (FOM, 2019). As Russia's economy continues to stagnate despite annexation of Crimea, Putin may face harsh criticism in the future. A sharp economic downturn in Russia because of increased sanctions and limits on foreign investment could result in a decrease in support for the current government. As Putin looks to establish a life-long grip on Russia through the abolishment of term limits, along with tight control of media and stifling of protests, Russians may fear their only option is a color revolution of sorts. If change cannot happen through democratic means, then concession or revolution are the only options. Additionally, should Ukraine continue to receive an increase in foreign support and realize a subsequent increase in economic prosperity, Crimeans may simply see reintegration into Ukraine as an economic benefit.

Overall, on its path towards regional hegemony through Ukraine, Russia has experienced several benefits: disruption of NATO enlargement, weakened NATO influence, and the beginning of a regional hegemony in Eastern Europe. However, looking forward, Russia will have to counter many challenges, primary of which being the maintenance and betterment of its own economy. Failure to do so may result in regime-altering consequences. Russia is stuck between two stones: allow NATO enlargement or face the consequences of its incursion into Ukraine.

## Russia's Economic Prosperity

As a single-commodity export of oil, Russia does not enjoy the benefits of economic resiliency. Mid-2010 economic pitfalls combined with encroachment by western actors into Ukraine pushed Russia to seek economic restoration through its annexation of Crimea. In the short term this plan made sense, but long term it has failed to provide the economic stability needed to boost the Russian economy and in fact may have contributed to its further decline.

In early 2014 crude oil prices began to plummet resulting in billions of dollars in losses for the Russian government, whose primary export is oil. Additionally, GDP growth was on the decline, and a recession was imminent (Trading Economics; Treanor, 2014). As a result of various factors, including economic downturn, Putin's approval ratings slowly declined to the lowest point since 2000 (Statista, 2020). Russia required a quick fix to preserve its economy and regime control. At the same time Ukraine was beginning to revolt, which Russia feared was a prelude to NATO enlargement. It is important to understand Ukraine-Russia trade relations to understand the economic threat that Russia sensed at the time.

Ukraine and Russia have long been economic partners. Over 1/3 of Russian gas exports flow through Russian-owned pipelines in Ukraine (Pifer, 2019). Moreover, imports and exports to and from Russia were a majority of Ukraine's trading volume prior to 2014, making Ukraine dependent on Russian trade. In 2013, the Ukrainian government prepared to sign an Association and Free-trade Agreement with the E.U., which would open integration into European trading spheres, reducing its reliance on Russia. Had Ukraine joined the E.U. market, it would be unable to join the Eurasian Economic Union, which was a Russian-led union designed to counter the E.U., project Russian power, and increase post-Soviet state integration (Avedissian, 2019). To preserve its economic hold on Ukraine, Russia managed to persuade Ukrainian officials not to sign the agreement, which in turn led to Yanukovich's administration's downfall.

Then, in 2014, with an increasingly westernizing government taking power, it became more important for Russia to act to protect its interests. Shortly after the annexation of Crimea, the Russian legislative body approved the withdrawal from the 2010 Kharkiv Agreement (TASS, 2014). The agreement had required Russia to provide discounts on gas flowing through Ukraine in exchange for leasing the Black Sea naval base in Sevastopol. Given the plummeting oil prices at the time, Russia simply could not afford to waste approximately \$4 billion a year on the deal. Additionally, the annexation of Crimea allowed for Russian access to the rich natural resources of Eastern Ukraine. The waters around Crimea alone, which Russia considers its territory, contain billions of cubic meters of oil and gas reserves (Cohen, 2019). By annexing Crimea, Russia was able to bolster its own natural energy production, while

# Evaluating Russia's Grand Strategy in Ukraine

Written by Christopher Friend

reducing Ukraine's access to previously held territories.

The annexation and related moves, made in response to Russia's economic downturn, were not an automatic fix for the Russian economy, but at the time they made sense. In hindsight, the conflict exacerbated Russia's economic decline in the short term. Russia's recession was inevitable, but the conflict made the effects of it much worse. For example, as a result of economic sanctions placed on Russia by Western countries, Russia enacted its own countersanctions focused on food imports. Food prices rose substantially because of the countersanctions (BBC, 2014). In 2017, Russia's economy rebounded, and the capitalization of newfound Ukrainian resources was looking more promising. Despite this rebound, Russia continued to maintain an aggressive posture when countering Ukraine's positive economic outlooks. In 2018, Russia began blockading the Strait of Kerch, which connects Ukraine's principal port in Mariupol to the rest of the world. This blockade severely limited Ukraine's ability to export material, resulting in \$400 million in losses to Ukraine and hurting its overall economic growth (Mirovalev, 2019). Russia was playing a zero-sum game. If it cannot participate in meaningful trade with Ukraine, then no country could.

In 2020 Russia's current economic outlook is beginning to look grim again. Over the last few years Russia's economic growth rates have slowed substantially. In 2019 Russia's GDP grew by just 1.3% compared to 2.5% in 2018 (Moscow Times, 2020). Now, as early 2020 oil prices fall, Russia's ability to meet its spending goals are looking farfetched. Russia's bet on natural gas has not yet paid off. In the long run, Russian citizens may perceive their hold on Crimea and the continued conflict in Ukraine as wasteful. A stagnant Russian economy could mean a decrease in support for Putin, resulting in threats to his control. Ukraine recently published data indicating that Ukrainian reliance on Russian imports was decreasing substantially as it becomes more aligned with the E.U. through diversification of trading partners and exports (Aslund, 2020). As Ukraine diversifies its trading partners, it is less beholden to Russian control and thus more susceptible to western influence. This economic uptick for Ukraine sends two messages. First, it highlights to other countries facing Russian economic pressure that alignment with the E.U. is possible. Second, Crimean citizens, facing a stagnant economy under Russian control, may see Ukraine as a better option. To support this messaging, Ukraine cut off water supply to Crimea, resulting in shortages in the region, forcing Russian authorities to spend additional money towards simply supplying its residents with water.

Overall, Russia's grand strategy in Ukraine does not bode well for their long-term economic prosperity. The short-term gain experienced by Crimea's annexation does not effectively mitigate the long-term consequences of Russia's over reliance on oil and lack of foreign investments because of aggressive policies.

## Recognition as a World Power

Russia's reemergence as a world power is heavily reliant on its ability to bolster its image as a successful negotiator in international conflicts. Ukraine offers a stage in which to highlight Russia's ability to balance its need to protect state assets while also engaging in peaceful negotiation. However, Russia's version of "peaceful negotiations" is fundamentally different from Western ideals, which results in an insurmountable barrier to Russia's reemergence as a world power. It is unlikely that Russia can overcome this barrier, as it is the result of long-standing cultural and geopolitical views of the world.

Following World War II, Russia played an important role in world power dynamics. It enjoyed the demarcation of spheres of influence, and through various pacts and annexations received large swaths of territories in Eastern Europe (Hungary, Poland, East Germany, Bulgaria, etc.). To counteract NATO, the Soviet Union formed the Warsaw Pact, which brought many Eastern Bloc countries under Soviet influence. The early post-WWII Soviet Union had immense power and global influence.

The benefits the Soviet Union experienced collapsed at the dissolution of the Soviet state. As individual Soviet territories began introducing their own sovereign governments and as Russia itself experienced extreme economic hardship, the global influence Russia projected dwindled. This was not for lack of trying. In 1991 Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine founded the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and by 1993 CIS consisted of 12 out of the 15 Soviet republics. The CIS' aim was to help the emerging countries grow and increase cooperation within the post-Soviet landscape. CIS member states established a military defense pact, but cooperation was limited, as Russia

# Evaluating Russia's Grand Strategy in Ukraine

Written by Christopher Friend

accounted for 50% of the funding in 1993 for the defense of CIS states (Anthony, 1998). Additionally, unlike the E.U., which was a well-established free trade area, CIS did not enact a free trade agreement until 2011 and even then, only a handful of states ratified the agreement initially (Baker, et al., 2012). Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has not possessed the same influence it once had.

As NATO began expanding Eastward toward post-Soviet states, Russia felt its power further decrease and its sphere of influence shrink. The 2015 Russian National Security Strategy outlines two important points:

1. "Russia has demonstrated the ability to safeguard sovereignty, independence, and state and territorial integrity and to protect the rights of compatriots abroad. There has been an increase in the Russian Federation's role in resolving the most important international problems, settling military conflicts, and ensuring strategic stability and the supremacy of international law in interstate relations" (Russian Federation, 2015).
2. The buildup of military potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the endowment of it with global functions pursued in violation of the norms of international law, the galvanization of the bloc countries' military activity, the further expansion of the alliance, and the location of its military infrastructure closer to Russian borders are creating a threat to national security" (Russian Federation, 2015).

From these two points it is abundantly clear that Russia continues to see its role in the global power dynamic as an influential, peaceful negotiator while at the same time understanding the need to protect its assets from foreign influence. Relations with Ukraine are a prime example of Russia attempting to balance these two beliefs.

Western states viewed the annexation of Ukraine as an act of aggression, but as aforementioned, Russia perceived it as a necessary step to protect its interests. Now, as the conflict enters an extended stalemate, it is increasingly important for Russia to shift its priority from protectionism of state interests to peaceful negotiation to bolster its credibility as a respected, rational state (Chimiris, 2019). In 2019 Ukraine and Russia agreed to a cease-fire in Donbass and still Russian state media continues to tout its willingness towards peace while also blaming Ukraine for lack of results (TASS, 2020). However, despite these public, potentially image bolstering activities, the shift towards peaceful negotiator has yet to manifest itself in the eyes of Western observers.

Peter Dickson of the Atlantic Council explains the West's vision of Russia's failure as a peaceful negotiator well, "Russia's war aims remain the same as they were in 2014. Ideally, the Kremlin would like to reassert its authority over Ukraine and draw the country back into the Russian orbit. If this proves impossible, Moscow's priority is to prevent Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration by destabilizing the country and making it ungovernable. In other words, Ukraine should either be Russian, or it should be a failed state" (Dickson, 2020). The question becomes, where is Russia going with this contrarian strategy? Well, Russia may still be able to succeed in negotiating peace under the current terms by pressuring Ukraine. Should this occur, Russian state media would no doubt report this as an example of Russia's ability to negotiate international conflicts, and the Russian state may well believe a coerced outcome is a result of its success as a world leader. The primary barrier to Russia's emergence as a respected world power is the divergence between it and the West's versions of "peaceful negotiation". It is not that Russia believes its actions to be contrarian to its goals, it is that its adversaries perceive Russia's actions as contrarian. The problem lies in a fundamental difference in world views.

## Conclusion

What alternative strategies can Russia pursue moving forward to ensure its goals are achievable long term?

First, Russia must reassess its grievances with the West. While NATO expansionism is a threat to Russian interests, is it a threat worth focusing so many resources on? That is the key question Russian leaders must answer. Militarily NATO is not an immediate, critical threat, as neither NATO nor Russia are interested in a full-scale war, but Putin certainly sees western-backed democratization as a threat to his power, and rightfully so (Majumdar, 2019). In that respect, it is unlikely that Russia will completely abandon its aggressive countermeasures against NATO, however Russia should engage in less overtly aggressive geopolitical behavior and pursue a mutual reduction in arms

# Evaluating Russia's Grand Strategy in Ukraine

Written by Christopher Friend

between itself and NATO states, particularly the U.S. This will allow Russia to focus efforts on other external threats such as China and provide a more attractive business environment for foreign investment (Katz, 2017). In terms of its grand strategy in Ukraine, Russia should make efforts to engage in actionable peace plans with Ukrainian leaders. It is critical Russia understand the importance of maintaining control of Crimea, but relinquishing control of much of Eastern Ukraine should be an acceptable term.

Second, Russia must prioritize diversification of its economy and improve the investment environment. In the short term, Russia should continue to capitalize on its natural resource gains from the Crimean annexation, but long term it should establish domestic industries to decrease its reliance on the energy sector. As aforementioned, Russia's economic failures are a dangerous pretext to potential regime changes and loss of control. A 2007 report by the European Central Bank concluded that in relation to long-term economic growth in Russia, "Improvement to the investment climate [...] is a key policy variable for ensuring the sizable necessary investments [to improve its economy]" (Beck, et al., 2007). Although outdated, their conclusion is true, especially as Russia continues to rely on its oil production. In addition to countering Dutch disease through diversification of other sectors, Russia must reduce its aggressive policies to attract the foreign investment necessary.

Third, and most important, is Russia needs to establish a forward-thinking, proactive approach to its grand strategy in Ukraine and as a whole. As previously mentioned, Russia's reactive strategies have been relatively successful in the short-term, but they fail to properly mitigate long-term consequences which could negatively impact the state's success. By enacting some version of the two above policy suggestions, Russia puts itself on a better path towards regime longevity and hopefully reduction in conflict with the West. Although there is no formal reactionary international theory, two international relations theorists describe Russia's current grand strategy well: "For reactionaries, the world was once better: a past political order, now lost, shows us retrospectively how things should be but no longer are. Fixated on this prelapsarian world, reaction is a doctrine of political nostalgia. It imagines a past it hopes to recreate" (MacKay, et al., 2018). This sentiment describes perfectly what Russia hopes to achieve through its current strategies in Ukraine, yet its grand strategy neither accounts for the present circumstances, nor does it look towards the future.

Overall, I assess that Russia's strategies in Ukraine are reactive in response to the perceived threat of NATO enlargement and economic decline, while based around the context of its goal to reemerge as a world power. Russia's strategies in the short-term are more-or-less successful, however; a lack of forethought and adequate planning for the future, economically, could damage Russia's regime control. In addition, a fundamental difference in world view between the West and Russia prohibit its emergence as a dominant world power. To counteract these failures in its strategy, Russia must reevaluate its grievances with the West, improve its economic outlook by combating Dutch disease and improve the investment environment, and establish proactive strategies rather than fixate on a prelapsarian, could-be world.

## Bibliography

Anthony, Ian. "Russia and the Arms Trade." Accessed April 16, 2020. <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a341002.pdf>. Solna, Sweden : Oxford ; New York: SIPRI ; Oxford University Press, 1998.

Aslund, Anders. Atlantic Council. "Russia Loses Leverage as Ukrainian Exports Go Global," February 20, 2020. <https://atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-loses-leverage-as-ukrainian-exports-go-global/>.

Avedissian, Karena. "Fact Sheet: What Is the Eurasian Economic Union?" Accessed April 23, 2020. <https://www.evnreport.com/understanding-the-region/fact-sheet-what-is-the-eurasian-economic-union>.

Baker, McKenzi. "CIS Free Trade Agreement Comes into Force - U.S.-Ukraine Business Council (USUBC)." Accessed April 26, 2020. <https://www.usubc.org/site/member-news/cis-free-trade-agreement-comes-into-force>.

Ballard, Barclay. "Crimea Doesn't Pay: Assessing the Economic Impact of Russia's Annexation." Accessed April 22,



# Evaluating Russia's Grand Strategy in Ukraine

Written by Christopher Friend

2020. <https://www.worldfinance.com/special-reports/crimea-doesnt-pay-assessing-the-economic-impact-of-russias-annexation>.

BBC. "Russian Import Ban Fuels Food Price Rises – BBC News." Accessed April 23, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28849726>.

Beck, Roland, Annette Kamps, and Elitza Mileva. "Long-Term Growth Prospects for the Russian Economy," n.d., 34.

Chatzky, Andrew. Council on Foreign Relations. "Have Sanctions on Russia Changed Putin's Calculus?" Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/have-sanctions-russia-changed-putins-calculus>.

Chimiris, Ekaterina. "Russia-Ukraine Relations 2020: Equation With Many Variables. A View from Russia." Accessed April 21, 2020. <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russia-ukraine-relations-2020-equation-with-many-variables-a-view-from-russia/>.

Chimiris, Ekaterina. "Ukraine: Geopolitical View of the Interested International Actors." Accessed April 21, 2020. <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/ukraine-geopolitical-view-of-the-interested-international-actors/>.

Cohen, Ariel. "As Russia Closes In On Crimea's Energy Resources, What Is Next For Ukraine?" Forbes. Accessed April 23, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2019/02/28/as-russia-closes-in-on-crimeas-energy-resources-what-is-next-for-ukraine/>.

Cordesman, Anthony. "Russia and the 'Color Revolution.'" Accessed April 16, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-%E2%80%9Ccolor-revolution%E2%80%9D>.

Council on Foreign Relations. "Ukraine's Post-Independence Struggles." Accessed April 16, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/ukraines-post-independence-struggles>

Dickinson, Peter. "Does Putin Want Peace?," April 23, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/does-putin-want-peace/>.

Fox, Kara. "Political Newcomer Volodymyr Zelensky Celebrates Victory in Ukraine's Presidential Elections." CNN. Accessed April 18, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/21/europe/ukraine-election-results-intl/index.html>.

Global Security. "1994-2004 – President Leonid Kuchma." Accessed April 16, 2020. <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ukraine/kuchma.htm>.

Human Rights Watch. "World Report 2019: Rights Trends in Ukraine." Human Rights Watch, December 18, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/ukraine>.

Katz, Mark. "Putin and Russia's Strategic Priorities." Accessed April 15, 2020.

Kortunov, Andrey. "How to Stop NATO." Accessed April 21, 2020. <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/how-to-stop-nato/>.

Mackinder, Halford J. "Democratic Ideals and Reality," 1942., 106.

Majumdar, Dave. "Europe's Worst Nightmare: Here's What a NATO-Russia War Would Look Like." Text. The National Interest. The Center for the National Interest, March 31, 2019.

<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/europes-worst-nightmare-heres-what-nato-russia-war-would-look-50047>.

# Evaluating Russia's Grand Strategy in Ukraine

Written by Christopher Friend

- Marcus, Jonathan. "Nato's Dilemma in the Black Sea." *BBC News*, December 4, 2018, sec. Europe. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46425777>.
- Myers, Steven Lee. "Putin, Flashing Disdain, Defends Action in Crimea." *The New York Times*, March 4, 2014, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/05/world/europe/putin-flashing-disdain-defends-action-in-crimea.html>.
- NATO. "Relations with Ukraine." NATO. Accessed April 16, 2020. [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_37750.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37750.htm).
- Osnos, Evan. "Trump, Putin, and the New Cold War." *The New Yorker*. Accessed April 15, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/trump-putin-and-the-new-cold-war>.
- Pifer, Steven. "Heading for (Another) Ukraine-Russia Gas Fight?" *Brookings* (blog), August 30, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/08/30/heading-for-another-ukraine-russia-gas-fight/>.
- RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. "New Ukraine Coalition Agreed." Accessed April 15, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-parliament-coalition-agreement/26703123.html>.
- Russian Federation. "Address by President of the Russian Federation." President of Russia. Accessed April 15, 2020. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.
- Russian Federation. "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin." President of Russia. Accessed April 18, 2020. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>.
- Russian Federation. "Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.Pdf." Accessed April 16, 2020. <http://www.iee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>.
- RT International. "Ukraine President Proclaims 7-Day Ceasefire, Rolls out Peace Plan." Accessed April 18, 2020. <https://www.rt.com/news/167380-ukraine-ceasefire-clashes-east/>.
- Savranskaya, Svetland, and Tom Blanton. "NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard | National Security Archive." Accessed April 16, 2020. [https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early#\\_edn3](https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early#_edn3).
- Shuster, Simon. "Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky Speaks Out on Trump, Putin and a Divided Europe." Accessed April 18, 2020. <https://time.com/5742108/ukraine-zelensky-interview-trump-putin-europe/>.
- Stewart, Dale. "The Russian-Ukrainian Friendship Treaty and the Search for Regional Stability in Eastern Europe." Naval Postgraduate School, December, 1997.
- Statista. "Putin Approval Rating Russia 2000-2020." Accessed April 23, 2020. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/896181/putin-approval-rating-russia/>.
- TASS. "Kiev Undermines Opportunities for Improvements in Donbass — Russian Negotiator." Accessed April 26, 2020. <https://tass.com/world/1148577>.
- TASS. "State Duma Approves Denunciation of Russian-Ukrainian Agreements on Black Sea Fleet." Accessed April 23, 2020. <https://tass.com/russia/725964>.
- The Moscow Times. "Russia GDP Growth Almost Halves in 2019." *The Moscow Times*, February 3, 2020. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/02/03/russia-gdp-growth-almost-halves-in-2019-a69143>.
- Tomkiw, Lydia. "What Is A Fencer Su-24? What To Know About The Russian Plane Shot Down By Turkey."

# Evaluating Russia's Grand Strategy in Ukraine

Written by Christopher Friend

International Business Times, November 24, 2015. <https://www.ibtimes.com/what-fencer-su-24-what-know-about-russian-plane-shot-down-turkey-2197848>.

Trading Economics. "Russia GDP Growth Rate | 1995-2019 Data | 2020-2022 Forecast | Historical | Chart." Accessed April 23, 2020. <https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/gdp-growth>.

Treanor, Jill. "Russian Recession Fears as Economy Shrinks for First Time in Five Years." *The Guardian*, December 29, 2014, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/29/russia-recession-economy-shrinks-oil-prices-sanctions-rouble>.

Welt, Cory. "Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy," n.d., 43.

Yerofeev, Ivan Alekseevich. "Ukraine - Kuchma's Presidency." Accessed April 16, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine/Kuchmas-presidency>.

"Крым / ФОМ." Accessed April 22, 2020. <https://fom.ru/Politika/14182>.

ТАСС. "Путин Заявил, Что Постсоветские Страны Постепенно Преодолевают Страхи Возрождения СССР." Accessed April 21, 2020. <https://tass.ru/politika/8281131>.

*Written at: George Mason University*

*Written for: Ketian Zhang*

*Date written: April 2020*