

Opinion – Putin’s Obsession with Ukraine as a ‘Russian Land’

Written by Taras Kuzio

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TARAS KUZIO, JAN 17 2022

Everybody is a ‘Ukraine expert’ these days, or are they? Practically none of the multitude of Western commentaries about the Russian threat to invade Ukraine have mentioned Russian President Vladimir Putin’s obsession with Ukraine as a ‘Russian land’ that needs to be re-taken back from Washington’s control as the driving factor of the worst crisis in Europe since the 1960s.

As I have explained in my book *Crisis in Russian Studies?*, Western scholars have either downplayed Russian nationalism in Putin’s Russia or not wanted to deal with the consequences. As I analyse in *Russian Nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian War* published on 27 January, the USSR recognised a Ukrainian identity different (but close) to Russian; Soviet Ukraine even had a seat at the UN (the USSR had three seats). Russian nationalism under Putin has stagnated to that of the pre-Soviet era and White Russian emigres which denies the very existence of a Ukrainian state and Ukrainian people. Putin and other Russian officials repeatedly state Russians and Ukrainians are ‘one people.’ Russian information warfare repeats this racism on a daily basis and denigrates Ukraine and Ukrainians in a manner commonly found among pre-1945 Western colonialists.

As seen in Putin’s 6,000 word article published in July, at the heart of Putin’s demand is an utter disdain for Ukraine and an unwillingness to accept it is a sovereign and independent country. As the liberal British Observer newspaper wrote: ‘The Russian view that Ukraine is stolen territory to which it has a natural right has roots in tsarist times and before. Ukrainians (and Belarusians) were habitually called ‘little Russians’. Indigenous narratives stress a common history and common faith indissolubly linking two brotherly eastern Slavic races. Putin has repeatedly stated that ‘Russians and Ukrainians are one people’.

The Observer continued: ‘Conveniently forgotten is 19th-century imperial oppression that included a ban on Ukraine’s language’ followed by ‘a man-made ‘terror famine’ (Holodomor) that killed 4-5 million ‘and is now officially viewed as a Soviet genocide.’ Although this crisis is taking place in the early 21st century, Putin’s views of Ukraine as part of ‘Russia’ ‘recalls that of 1950s France towards Algeria and of 19th-century England towards Ireland.’ Indeed, I have explored the similarities between British and Russian chauvinism towards the Irish and Ukrainians respectively and that of Ulster and Donbas empire loyalists.

Putin and the Kremlin believe Ukraine is ruled by a ‘fascist junta’ that came to power in the Euromaidan Revolution and transformed the country into a US puppet state. In their dystopian world, Russian leaders do not feel the need to explain how ‘fascist’ Ukraine can be led by a Jewish-Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Or explain how a ‘fascist’ regime is suppressing Russophones when a Russian-speaker (Zelenskyy) won a landslide in the 2019 Ukrainian elections? The Kremlin’s complete control of the media in Russia makes it difficult for most Russians to understand these contradictions in official disinformation. 68% of Russians blame the US and NATO and Ukraine for the escalation of the war this year and only 6% Russia and its two proxy entities in occupied Donbas. While Russian media push ‘civil war’ disinformation about the conflict in eastern Ukraine, approximately three quarters of Ukrainians believe their country is already at war with Russia. When we therefore discuss the question of ‘Will Russian invade?’ we need to remember that this already happened in 2014-2015 in Crimea and the Donbas.

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Former Russian President and Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev’s, now deputy head of the Russian Security Council, showed complete disdain for Ukraine’s independence in his October 2021 article. Medvedev echoed the Kremlin’s official line that Ukraine is a US puppet state, ruling out talking to Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a waste of time and instead calling for talks with its alleged US puppet master. As Medvedev wrote, ‘it makes no sense for us to deal with the vassals. Business must be done with the overlord’.

Because Ukraine is a ‘Russian land’ it has no right to decide its own future and should be, forcibly if need be, returned to the Russian World. The Russian World brings together Ukrainians (‘Little Russians’) and Belarusians (‘White Russians’) under Russian (‘Great Russian’) leadership. All three are now viewed by Putin – as in the Tsarist era – as the pan-Russian nation (*obshcherusskiy narod*).

Contemporary pan-Russianism is as much a threat to European security as pan-Germanism was in the 1930s. The two are identical in demanding the unity of ‘Russian’ (or Russian speaking) and German speaking peoples. In the 1930s, the pan-Germanists were obsessed with Poland while today the pan-Russianists are obsessed with Ukraine.

In December 2021, Putin presented Europe and the US with a demand for written security guarantees or Russia will resort to ‘military-technical means’. US-Russian, NATO-Russian and OSCE summits in the second week of January produced no positive breakthrough as the West would never have agreed to Putin’s ultimatums. Putin has long sought a second agreement modelled on that signed by the great powers in Yalta in 1945 where the US would recognise Eurasia as Russia’s exclusive sphere of influence and Ukraine as part of that sphere.

Russia’s penchant for a second Yalta agreement akin to that in 1945 would never have taken place; while Putin has not the world has moved on. Russia’s leaders are nostalgic for the Cold War when the Soviet Union and the US negotiated how to run the world and divide it into spheres of influence. ‘The US has consistently expressed support for the principle that every country has the sovereign right to make its own decisions with respect to its security,’ a US official said. ‘That remains US policy today and will remain US policy in the future.’

With the failure of diplomacy to reach a way out of an artificially manufactured crisis, Europe is faced, according to a leaked US intelligence report with the threat of a Russian military invasion of Ukraine in January-February. US intelligence was of good enough quality to have convinced doubters in the EU and NATO of the seriousness of the Russian threat to invade Ukraine when it was circulated to the November 2021 meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Riga. Western diplomats are being warned to be ready to quickly evacuate, presumably if some of Russian military attack takes place.

Putin’s brinkmanship creates the biggest threat to European security since the 1961 Cuban missile crisis and should be understood in four ways. The first is the threat to Russia’s own political stability. Putin’s occupation of Crimea has remained popular among Russians over the seven years since the peninsula was invaded. An average of 84-86% of Russians, including some members of the opposition such as imprisoned Alexei Navalny, support Crimea’s annexation.

This is not true of the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine which has no historical symbolism in Russian nationalism. Putin has therefore hidden Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine by describing what is taking place in the Donbas as a ‘civil war’. As the Levada Centre, Russia’s last independent sociological service, recently wrote: ‘To imagine that the Ukrainian army is at war with the Russian one is beyond the imagination of Russians.’ While 37% of Russians believe the conflict could transform into a Russian-Ukrainian war, 55% do not.

A full-scale invasion of Ukraine would destroy Putin’s seven-year myth of a ‘civil war’ by showing Russia is at war with its neighbour. This ‘civil war’ myth has been used by Putin to hide the conflict from the Russian population while allowing Russia to have its cake and eat it by sitting at the negotiating table to find a peaceful outcome to a war the Kremlin is itself undertaking against Ukraine.

British expert on Russian security Mark Galeotti believes that ‘A vicious war in Ukraine could shatter the unity and legitimization of the Russian regime.’ Russian sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya writes that an open Russian-

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Ukrainian war, ‘would be incredibly unpopular with the Russian people.’ A Russian occupation of Ukraine would be bloody and costly to Russian forces with the large number of body bags returning to Russia adding to the threats to the stability of Putin’s regime.

The second threat is that an invasion would – like in 2014 – again show how Russian stereotypes of Ukraine have nothing in common with reality. Because Russian leaders believe Ukrainians are ‘Little Russians’ under ‘fascist’ and US control, an invading force would be welcomed with bread and salt as liberators. This is not true. About two thirds of Ukrainian troops fighting against Russian proxies in the Donbas are eastern Ukrainians and Russian speakers. The highest casualties of Ukrainian security forces are to be found in Dnipropetrovsk.

Thirdly, an invading force needs to have a 3:1 ratio to succeed against well-dug in defending forces. With Ukraine’s 260,000-strong army, the third largest in Europe, would require upwards of two thirds of Russia’s entire army to subdue. Coupled with this number are one million reservists of whom 400,000 are battle hardened veterans of the Donbas war. Each of Ukraine’s 25 regions has a territorial defence force that would become partisans after an invasion. Russia could invade Ukraine and possibly defeat its army, but it would be impossible for Putin to achieve his end goal of transforming Ukraine into a copy of Alexander Lukashenka’s Belarus. A Russian occupation of Ukraine would require levels of pacification of the occupied population that would make repression in Belarus since last year’s elections look like a Sunday picnic.

If Ukraine is invaded it would be inevitable that the US and some other NATO members would aim to transform it, in the words of US Senator Chris Murphy, into Russia’s ‘next Afghanistan’. The US Congress is sending ‘increased military systems’ and will ‘dramatically increase the amount of lethal aid [to Ukraine]’. NATO special forces have been training and learning from their Ukrainian counterparts since 2014. NATO provides support on countering cyber attacks of the type Ukraine was hit on the 13 January. The US is also to offer Ukraine intelligence on impending Russian military movements and attack plans.

The roots of this artificial crisis lie in Putin’s pan-Russianist obsession that Ukraine is a ‘Russian land’ and Ukrainians are a branch of the pan-Russian nation. Everything else flows from that. If Ukraine is ‘Russian’ it has no right to decide a destiny separate to Russia’s. As long as Western scholars continue to dismiss or downplay nationalism in Russia, they will be unable to see the wood for the trees about the worst crisis in Russia’s relations with the West for the last six decades.

About the author:

Taras Kuzio is professor of political science at the National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy and co-author of the forthcoming *The Four Roots of the Russian-Ukrainian War*. He is the author and editor of 23 books, including *Fascism and Genocide: Russia’s War Against Ukrainians* (2023); *Russian Nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian War: Autocracy-Orthodoxy-Nationality* (2022); *Crisis in Russian Studies: Nationalism (Imperialism), Racism and War* (2020); *Putin’s War Against Ukraine: Revolution, Nationalism, and Crime* (2017, 2019); and *Ukraine: Democratization, Corruption, and the New Russian Imperialism* (2015). He has also published six think tank monographs, and 165 book chapters and scholarly articles.