

# Vladimir Putin's Imperialism and Military Goals Against Ukraine

Written by Taras Kuzio

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TARAS KUZIO, FEB 24 2022

The unbelievable has happened. The world is faced with a crisis on the magnitude of that which it faced in 1961 in Cuba. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is likely to become the biggest war in Europe since World War II. The destruction of Ukraine's democracy through a Russian invasion and installation of a pro-Kremlin puppet regime, would energise the anti-democratic onslaught of autocrats, such as China and Iran, around the world and send a signal that the democratic West is in decline. A successful overthrow of democracy in Ukraine would increase the threat to the three Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, all NATO members, and encourage China to consider a military conquest of Taiwan.

Russia has demanded since the mid-1990s that Eurasia be recognised as Russia's exclusive sphere of influence where countries cannot integrate with, or join, NATO and the EU. Russia has also been opposed to Eurasian countries using UN peacekeepers in frozen conflicts artificially manufactured by the Kremlin to thwart pro-Western countries integrating into NATO and the EU. Ranked by the human rights monitoring think tank Freedom House as a "consolidated authoritarian regime", Russia aggressively opposes the spread of democracy in Eurasia. The existence of a successful democracy in Ukraine is viewed by the Kremlin as a threat to the autocracy built by President Vladimir Putin.

The Kremlin's seeks the consolidation of the three eastern Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians) into the Russian World, a concept created in 2007. Ukraine is important to Russian nationalist mythology because it includes the city of Kyiv, the birthplace of the medieval Kyiv Rus state. In 2016, a monument to Grand Prince Volodymyr the Great was unveiled next to the Kremlin in Moscow, a city that was founded in 1146 and did not therefore exist when Grand Prince Volodymyr the Great ruled Kyiv Rus in 980-1015. The city of Kyiv is at least 600 years older than Moscow.

In 2010–2014, Ukraine pursued a "non-bloc" foreign policy where it did not seek NATO membership. This "non-bloc" status did not prevent Russia invading and annexing Crimea in February–March 2014 and launching a military invasions and hybrid warfare against Ukraine. Russia always interpreted "neutrality" in a different manner to that of Finland or Austria during the Cold War. As witnessed by the Kremlin's aggressive policies towards Ukraine in 2012-2014, Russia understands "neutral" status or Ukraine as the country returning to Russia's sphere of influence. Russia seeks not only Ukraine's formal renunciation of NATO membership. The Kremlin would also apply pressure on Ukraine to renounce all forms of military cooperation with NATO.

Since the launch of the EU's Eastern Partnership in 2010, Russia has strongly opposed EU "enlargement" alongside its long-standing hostility to NATO enlargement into Eurasia. As seen in Russian pressure on President Viktor Yanukovich in 2012-2013, Ukraine would be also pressured to withdraw from the EU Association Agreement and DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement), two elements of the EU's Eastern Partnership. A "neutral" Ukraine no longer integrating into NATO and the EU would be pressured to join the Eurasian Economic Union, the Kremlin's alternative to the EU. This was Putin's goal towards Ukraine in 2013-2014 which was thwarted by the Euromaidan Revolution of Dignity.

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The Kremlin's central demand is Ukraine must be a part of the Russian World which is viewed as the core of the Eurasian Economic Union. The three eastern Slavs were viewed in the same manner as the core of the Soviet Union. Without Ukraine and the city of Kyiv, Putin cannot claim to have united the Russian World which he sees as his historic legacy.

Since 2000, when Putin was first elected president, the Kremlin has adopted Tsarist imperial nationalism towards Ukraine and Ukrainians that denies the existence of the country and people. In the eyes of the Kremlin, Ukraine is a "Russian land" and Ukrainians are one of three (alongside Russians and Belarusians) branches of a pan-Russian nation. Putin's Russian nationalism views Ukrainians as "Little Russians" – as was clear in his long July 2021 article. President Putin views his historical legacy as a "Gatherer of Russian Lands". The first territory to be "gathered" was Crimea in 2014, and the second Belarus in 2021. Ukraine is the third and last part of "Russian lands" which Putin seeks to "gather."

Since the 2014 crisis, the Kremlin has pressured Ukraine to implement the Russian interpretation of the Minsk agreements. Because Ukraine always opposed this, Russia moved to using military threats in late 2021. Russia's interpretation of the Minsk Agreements would have created a weak central government, federalised state, and Kremlin influence exerted through the Russian-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics. This would have been coupled with Ukraine's "neutrality"; that is, Kyiv's rejection of cooperation with and membership of NATO and EU. NATO was never offering Ukraine membership. The US was never planning to install surface to air missiles in Ukraine that could threaten Russia. And Ukraine and NATO have undertaken military cooperation since the mid-1990s when the Partnership for Peace Programme (PfP) was created. The real factors underlying the crisis were as follows.

Firstly, treason charges were levelled against Ukraine's pro-Russian politician Viktor Medvedchuk and his 4 pro-Russian TV channels were closed in February (ZiK, 112, NewsOne) and December 2021 (First Independent). As leader of the pro-Russian Opposition Platform-For Life party, Medvedchuk is Putin's political representative in Ukraine. Putin is also the Godfather of his daughter.

Secondly, Medvedev's 11 October 2021 article in *Kommersant* demonstrated the Kremlin had lost patience with President Zelenskyy who was ridiculed Zelenskyy as a US puppet. The Kremlin said it would no longer talk to Kyiv and would only negotiate with its "puppet masters" in Washington DC. Medvedev warned that Russia would "wait for the emergence of a sane leadership in Ukraine" that "is aimed not at a total confrontation with Russia on the brink of war...but at building equal and mutually beneficial relations with Russia." Medvedev's warning implied the Kremlin sought regime change in Ukraine.

Thirdly, on 27 October 2021, the Kremlin was infuriated by Ukraine's first use of a Turkish drone to successfully destroy Russian proxy forces in the Donbas region. This suggested to the Kremlin that Ukraine's military was becoming strong enough to prevent Russia using proxy forces to pressure Ukraine to accept the Russian interpretation of the Minsk agreements. In the last eight years, Russia had combined diplomatic and military pressure to try and force Kyiv to capitulate into accepting the Russian interpretation of the Minsk agreements.

On 17 December 2021, the Kremlin issued two ultimatums to the West demanding "written security guarantees." The tone of the two ultimatums suggested the Kremlin never considered a compromise deal. The US sent a written response in late January 2022 that turned down Russian demands. In January 2022, US-Russia (Geneva), NATO-Russia (Brussels) and OSCE (Vienna) meetings produced no diplomatic breakthroughs. French President Emmanuel Macron and British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss and Defence Secretary Ben Wallace undertook visits to Russia in February that also failed to reach diplomatic breakthroughs. The last attempt for a diplomatic path to avert war was SPD leader and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to Moscow on 15 February 2022.

If Zelenskyy refuses to capitulate, Russia could launch a larger military operation to capture Kyiv. This would lead to tens, possibly hundreds, of thousands of casualties. The Kremlin would seek to undertake regime change and install a pro-Russian quisling who would implement the Russian interpretation of the Minsk agreements. The Kremlin's options for pro-Russian quislings would be Nashi Party leader Yevhen Murayev or Opposition Platform-For Life Party

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leader Medvedchuk. Because both politicians are highly marginal and electorally unpopular the Kremlin would need to install a brutal autocratic regime to maintain them in power. No leaked intelligence or Western media accounts included Western Ukraine under Russian occupation. The region has a strong identity where the nationalist Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) fought against Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union for a decade from the early 1940s to the early 1950s.

In the event of a Russian occupation of Ukraine and Zelenskyy's refusal to capitulate to the Kremlin's demands, Western Ukraine would most likely become the location of a Ukrainian Government-in-Exile. Western Ukraine borders four NATO and EU members – Poland (where 1.5 million Ukrainians work and study), Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. In the event of war in central and southern-eastern Ukraine, Western Ukraine would become a supply base, training ground, and bases for supplies from NATO members to Ukrainian partisans fighting against a Russian occupation. We would be returning to 1980s Cold War when the US and UK covertly supplied the anti-Soviet Afghan resistance.

Nationalist myths with their origins in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that have been revived in the Kremlin drive to this war. We should stop looking at NATO which was never the main driver. Russian great power nationalists led by Putin seek to wipe the country of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people from the map of Europe. A Russian occupation of Ukraine will be brutal and massively abuse human rights. Russia has compiled a list of pro-Ukrainian politicians and activists who will be interned in camps or executed. Ukrainians are all living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Putin isn't.

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## 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.