

A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE CAUSES OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

It is no news that Russia is the largest country in the world in terms of extension of territory (17,098,242 sq km) and that such extension guarantees protection in what penetrability in the territory is concerned. Russia has a compact, rectangle shape, and the icy Arctic Ocean provides northern military protection for a part of the year. Despite this, Russia's sweeping 22,407 km, discontinuous borders with an average relatively high quotient of pressure, its vast, easily passable Eurasian flat lands, its low population density constitute relevant geopolitical challenges. To add to the latter, the encirclement of Russia by a predominantly hostile *rimland*, which pressures to contain Russia in its the inlands – away from warmer seas – should also be pointed out.

Located in that *hostile rimland* is Ukraine. Roughly 28 times smaller than Russia, with about 603,550 sq km and 5,581 km of land borders, the Ukrainian territory also has a rectangle compact shape. With no major geographical barriers, the Ukrainian fertile plains (with many plateaus) extend until the Carpathian mountains in the west of the country. With a coastline of 2,782 km located in a semi-closed sea, Ukraine relies heavily on the gravitational force of the Turkish straits, from which it depends to access the sea lanes of the international trade. To add up, the extremely high quotient of pressure in the northern, southern and eastern borders, is another major challenge for Ukraine.

A clear-cut case of a continental power, a central seat of defensive position, Russia is however placed close to some of the most aggressive regional contexts of the world, such as the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula. Alongside several internal problems – like the disturbance in its western borders and the resentments in the Caucasus – Russia has a poor transportation infrastructure for its size, which complicates the circulation in the territory. Russia faces then formidable tests in these geopolitical factors as well.

As mentioned, located in the *rimland*, specifically in a shatterbelt (the volatile intermarium corridor) Ukraine demonstrated to be very accessible from all geographical directions – and the well-developed net of Ukrainian railways and roads increases this accessibility reality exponentially. In the course of history, this geographical accessibility increased external pressures and brought geopolitical instability. Not only this context created many litigation zones, but also repeatedly attributed a defensive position to Ukraine. The superior level of

dependence of the country – explained by its position too – lead Ukraine to be often a subject of others' sphere of influences (Poles, Russians, Americans).

In terms of wide natural-resource base, Russia counts with major deposits of oil, natural gas, coal, and many strategic minerals, reserves of rare earths, and millions of tons of timber. Despite a very low percentage of arable land (7.3%), Russia is the world's largest producer of sugar beets and is in the top three producers of wheat. In addition, Russia has one of the largest freshwater reserves in the planet. Russia is a natural resource-rich country, a leading energy exporter to Asia, as China represents 21% of Russia's export partner (and 39% of import partner). Notwithstanding the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the economic sanctions that followed, Russia's GDP growth rate in 2023 was 3.6%.

Ukraine is also rich in resources. Its 56.1% of arable land makes Ukraine one of the largest exporters of grain (wheat and corn). Moreover, Ukraine possesses reserves of iron ore, coal, manganese, natural gas, oil, salt, sulfur, graphite, titanium, nickel, mercury, gold, and timber. The country has significant operational nuclear reactors. In 2021 Ukraine's GDP growth was of 3.45%. After a major contraction in 2022, the GDP growth rate increased to 5.3% in 2023 due to the Western support packages. However, it matters to refer that, in the future, these package loans will have to be paid off.

Russia has a total population of 140,820,810 unevenly distributed in the territory, meaning a low population density. The percentage of the population living in urban areas is of 75%. In addition, the population is greatly concentrated in the western part of the country, ranging from the Baltic Sea, south to the Caspian Sea, and eastward parallel to the Kazakh border. Exceptions to this are a few pockets scattered in the territory.

In 2022 Ukraine's population was about 43,306,477 while in 2024 decreased to 35,661,826. The deaths in the battlefield and the wave of refugees explain the decline. Perhaps the most notable aspect in this geopolitical factor is the incredible resistance and military value that those Ukrainians that remained in the country have been demonstrating. This feature is undoubtedly fomenting a reinforced national character, and therefore, mounting the capacity of the society to come together against the opponent.

Concerning the political structure, although a highly corrupt system¹, the Russian political structure is efficient with assertive foreign policy, particularly towards the countries of former Soviet space (e.g. CIS, CSTO, SCO, EEC, etc.). It can count with the support of several countries, specifically oriented in an anti-Western front. It is also noteworthy to remind that Russia holds a seat on the UN Security Council. In addition to this, Russia knows how to extract benefits from its resources through a thick statist ideology and mindset, which permeates an autocratic political system that shows no major internal resistance, leaving the geopolitical agent with a widespread space for maneuvering.

Equally with a corrupt political system, Ukraine succeeded to cultivate the sympathy of most of the Western countries tough. This “sympathy” is not detached from NATO’s expansionist agenda but the fact that the external parties (Western liberal democracies) do not demand any accountability from Ukraine – especially when presidential elections should have taken place in October 2023 and did not because of the martial law – is quite revealing of their tolerance. Ukraine’s diplomacy and intelligence system wisely capitalized from this context trying to overcome Ukrainian political system’s traditional instability.

Russian military and security service personnel eventually counts with 1.1-1.3 million personnel (900,000 active-duty troops by February 2022). They are equipped with domestically produced weapons systems, complemented by substantial amounts of imported military equipment from countries like Iran and North Korea. The Russian military industrial complex is a heavy weight in artillery production, air, land, sea and missile systems, with a formidable capacity in innovation and mass production. Russia is ranked second in the list of exporters of military hardware (2024). Concerning nuclear arsenal², Russia possesses the world’s largest number of stored warheads (2,670) and the second largest of deployed warheads (1,710).

Ukraine’s military concept is a defensive one. Hence the importance given to a NATO membership. With up to 300,000 active-duty personnel until February 2022 the unbalance with the Russian Armed Forces is massive. It seems that not even the flexible and resistant type of military command, plus the good levels of training, readiness, and morale (in contrast with the inflexible and chaotic Russian one, and the unpreparedness of many soldiers sent to the front) would be enough to revert that unbalance. Finally, Ukraine gave away its nuclear weapons in 1994.

¹ <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/russia>

² <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/role-nuclear-weapons-grows-geopolitical-relations-deteriorate-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now>

As for systemic stimuli, the Russian part stated after the Bucharest NATO Summit 2008 that it would not tolerate the further expansion of NATO, namely to Ukraine and Georgia³. To the Russians, the minimum conditions demand to maintain Ukraine neutral. In this context, the western perspective of, for example, “tremendous efforts by the West to deter Russia’s aggression against Ukraine” (Minzarari, 2022) fail to understand the previous point. To Ukraine, NATO membership represents a guarantee of state survival and territorial integrity. Adding to the substantial cause of maintaining Ukraine’s neutrality, as mentioned, the official “reason” given by Putin, in his speech of 22nd of February 2022, of seeking the protection of the Russian populations in Ukraine, materialized in the objectives of “demilitarize and denazify Ukraine” and “to bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians”⁴ is offered as *casus belli*. Besides all these, one of the authors identified that the possibility of an ongoing re-creation of a Eurasian Empire inspired by the Neo-Eurasianist geo-ideology (Morgado, 2022) cannot be discarded either. Nevertheless, the immediate empirical evidence suggests that in the sequence of (i) the Bucharest NATO Summit 2008, (ii) the 2013 EU Association Agreement to be signed with Ukraine, which refusal by Ukrainian President Yanukovich originated the Euromaidan protests, (iii) the 2014 flee of Yanukovich, its subsequent removal from power by the Ukrainian parliament, and the hardening of the new Ukrainian geopolitical agents’ behavior against Russia, (iv) the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the commencement of the Donbass War with Russian irregular troops, and (v) the signature of the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine on May 2014, all coupled with (vi) a weak US Biden administration, created the permissive environment that allow Russia to start the full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022.

For a more fine-grained explanation, it matters to consider the Russian geopolitical agent’s (i.e. Putin’s) perception of space, coherence in the discourse, and intentions – as the part that acted. In his interview in February 2024⁵, Putin gave a historical incursion. Among many imprecisions, twists, and bias he repeated that Ukraine is “historically Russian lands” and, consequently – one deduces that – according to Putin, Ukraine does not have the right to exist as an independent country free to make its choices. Concerning NATO’s expansion, in the

³ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm

⁴ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOCWBhuDdDo&t=3s>

same interview, Putin repeated that a US-German verbal promise was given to USSR/Russia in 1990 that NATO would not expand to the former eastern bloc countries. An idea that he has repeated since his 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference. That guarantee was personally debunked by Gorbachev, the Soviet president at the time.⁶ Despite this, Putin's threat perception of Russian encirclement by NATO seems to be factual, being that "promise" just a twist to enforce a narrative, which does not, however, deviates from the crucial point of a material pressure by NATO over Russia.

Concerning the geopolitical agent's capacities, as Putin rules over an autocratic political system there is no substantial balances against his policies. Moreover, his statist ideology and long experience in office cement his position, and so does the fact that he includes the War in Ukraine into the long-term dynamics of Russia's struggle for survival and sovereignty.

Conclusion

From the point of view of an analysis of capabilities and systemic constraints – meaning specifically NATO pressure over Russia by attempting to make Ukraine join the organization – and geopolitical agent's perceptions and capacities it was relatively reasonable to assume, before 2022, that **the Russians were possibly going to take some kind of aggressive action against Ukraine**. In this line, it is fair to assume this (a) even before the Russians starting to move their troops to the border, and (b) while taking into consideration the dissatisfaction of the Russians since at least the Bucharest NATO Summit 2008. For roughly thirteen years the Russians insistently warned about them perceiving Ukraine joining NATO a security threat⁷.

Moreover, from the same geopolitical qualitative analytical viewpoint, results seem to suggest that **Russia will succeed in the aftermath of the war**. Among other reasons, (a) the Russian capabilities (e.g. firepower, airpower, demographics) guarantee a greater ability to continue to feed the war efforts in a war of attrition, (b) the Western support to Ukraine will decrease and eventually fade away at some point in time, (c) the Russians clearly stated that they will not stop the aggression until is clear that Ukraine will cease looking for a NATO membership and, as stated in point (a), the Russians have the capabilities to accomplish it. Russian problems, among others: (1) inadequately trained and unmotivated forces, (2) poor logistics and lines of

⁶ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/did-nato-promise-not-to-enlarge-gorbachev-says-no/>

⁷ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24>

supply, and more recently (3) militarization of the economy and its infrastructural and social consequences, and (4) western countries intelligence which monitors Russian operations and passed down the information to the Ukrainians are not forgotten. Yet, at the present conditions, these problems do not seem enough to stop the Russian war machine towards its victory.

OTHER IDEAS THAT CAN BE INCLUDED IN THE TEXT:

1. Description of the War (2022)

The war waged by Russia against Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022 had the straightforward objective of quickly defeating Ukraine, through an overwhelming demonstration of military force. It resembled the *Blitzkrieg* used by Hitler's Germany, although the latter has demonstrated far superiority in terms of military management and logistics. Maybe the Russian aspiration was indeed an "operation" that would quickly subjugate Ukraine. Russia moved roughly 150.000 soldiers, vehicles and artillery through more than five combat fronts in the Ukrainian territory. The movement of boots on the ground was complemented by the Russian Air Force and cruise and ballistic missiles that assure not only great destruction of critical Ukrainian facilities, but also contributed to enhance the general common panic of the population that characterize any war. In two days, the Russians were around Kiev and other important cities like Kherson or Kharkiv seemed to be falling soon.

However, the Ukrainians resisted, and in March, the Russians withdrawn from the north of Ukraine to the east (Donbas region) and to the south (north of Crimea). The level of the Ukrainian resistance has been undeniably surprising. It cannot be explained only by the strong will of defense – or reconquest of the territory (which Vicens Vives explained well) – of the Ukrainians, or the high morale of the Ukrainian troops, or a resilient leadership by the Ukrainian authorities – although all these factors have certainly its importance. However, had the assistance of western countries – financial, economic, political, military – failed, the course of the war would have necessarily been very different. The Russians acknowledged that the first phase of the war and its initial objective failed – not through Putin's words, but through that mentioned retreat and re-organization of the military efforts. Likewise, the Russian appeals to the Ukrainians to rebel against their government were also put forth without major effect.

Between May and July 2022, the Russians have re-taken the military offensive and occupied the region of Luhansk. The operation required some potential from the Russian side

and, therefore, imposed a period of attrition warfare in which the Russians did not advance much. By the end of August and beginning of September 2022, through a diversion maneuver, the Ukrainians simulated a military move in the south, towards Kherson. The Russians seem to have taken the bait, having relocated forces to Kherson. Nonetheless, the real counter-offensive happened swiftly in the region of Kharkiv, with another retreat of the Russians. In roughly six days, the region fell under Ukrainian control. Moreover, the Ukrainians saw territorial gains in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia too.

2. Further details about the geopolitical agents

Having into consideration all the above-mentioned military operations, the text advances to the analysis of the geopolitical agents, their perceptions, and capabilities. From the Russian side, Putin is at the command, unwilling to accept any humiliation or defeat. Any concession in that direction would not only weaken his position concerning the “Corporation of the Secret Police Operatives” – to use Andrei Illarionov’s expression – which is the main structure of power in Russia (and could *in extremis* even remove Putin from power), but at the same time weaken Putin’s international position, namely in the relations to China, Iran, and other allies. Apart from these perceptions, it is noteworthy the fact the Putin controls the Russian political system with an iron hand and, therefore, Putin is able to pass laws through the Duma (eventually even a Constitutional reform), Putin enjoys influence over judicial processes, and he has the Armed Forces in a short leash. Putin’s supremacy over the intelligence community (*i.e.*, state police), which is in charge of the administration and the control of the country closes the circle.

In the Ukrainian side, Zelensky, a former actor, is in the command. According to his rhetoric, his perception is that the Ukrainians are fighting for freedom and sovereignty and that, therefore, the demand is to repossess all the territories that were Ukrainian in 2012, Crimea included. He declared martial law in February 2022, which not only included the mobilization of males from 18 until 60 years old, but also a large concentration of power in the office of the president and commander of the armed forces.

In this state of things, because Putin will not accept any defeat, and taking into account the successes of the Ukrainian counter-offensives, three main scenarios are likely to happen, at this moment (mid of September).

3. Scenarios (written in September 2022)

The first is the mobilization of the Russian population, either total mobilization with the effective declaration of war against Ukraine, or partial, using some subterfuge by the Russian authorities. The mobilization could reach roughly 1 million men or even more, it would reinforce the authority of the state even further, forcing men to leave their homes and families to integrate the armed forces, and it would also represent a gigantic financial pressure on the already weakened Russian economy. Either partial or total, this mobilization would mean that Russia implicitly recognizes that the war is not evolving as well as Russian authorities claim, and Russian propaganda announces. Still, the mobilization would allow Russia to flood Ukraine with thousands of men, similarly technique that the Soviet Union applied against the Nazi invasion. The overwhelming existence and movement of such a human mass against the artillery of the enemy makes virtually impossible to defeat in a conventional way. For this reason, once the Russian mobilization is announced, it is expected an increase of the violence in the combats on the front by the Ukrainians who, in a renovated effort, would try to advance as much as possible and to consolidate their positions, before the arrival of the Russian massive forces. As it happened once in World War II, the price would certainly be again countless dead bodies of Russian unprepared soldiers against heavily armed artillery, but the Russian military and the political victory would rest assured.

If, by some unforeseen reason, that measure would fail, the second scenario to avoid a Russian defeat would entail the retreat of the Russian forces to Donbass and other “Russian” territories. Unlike the Russian retreat from Kiev – which Putin painted as secondary, having claimed that Kiev was never a military objective – this second Russian retreat would actually make Donbass virtually impossible to be conquered by the Ukrainians, as the pressure of this tremendous military presence would be incredibly hard to neutralize. Even if Kherson and Zaporizhzhia would return to Ukrainian hands in the meantime, Putin could simply repeat the same speech he did about the withdrawal from Kiev. Russia would then win the war by achieving the objective of controlling Donbass and possibly other regions too. With this scenario the war could end in the short term.

The third scenario to avoid a Russian defeat would plainly be the use of nuclear weapons against Ukraine, most likely in Kherson and Kharkiv. This option should not be excluded, as

if Russia integrates Ukrainian regions as its own territory, then Russian authorities are able to claim that the Russian territorial integrity is in a security risk. In that case, the Russian Constitution gives the green light for the use of nuclear weapons. That would prove itself as a devastating widespread death of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians. The international reaction to that measure would most likely be a Chinese “appeal to peace” and any direct military response by NATO seems unlikely. And Russia would, again in this scenario, win the war.

Summing up, the Russian objectives are (a) a total win over Ukraine, meaning regime change and annexation of Ukrainian territories, or (b) the latter only, if perceived in Russia as a crucial victory. In addition, there is also the objective (c) of making Ukraine a no-man’s land, *i.e.*, a country unable to join both the EU and NATO, remaining a buffer-state between Europe and Russia.

4. Discussion

As to the Russian authorities Russia’s security depends on stopping NATO expansion and on the expansion of Russian borders towards the West and the South, and as Russia perceived weakness of the West – and although Russians are not wrong about this, they definitely underestimated the commitment that the West would show in the course of the war until now – the resolve of the Russians to maintain the war will continue until Putin’s demands are attended: (a) international recognition of Crimea as part of Russia, (b) Donbas and other Ukrainian regions independent first, annexed to Russia after, and (c) neutrality of Ukraine. A final objective – (d) regime-change in Ukraine – was firstly demanded by Putin and apparently then abandoned.