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Invasion. How Russia Has Lost Ukraine and Itself

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On 24 February 2022, Russia has invaded Ukraine in a blatant breach of all international norms. The invasion followed a Russian military build-up along Ukraine's border since the previous summer. It came after weeks of Vladimir Putin's, the President of Russia, escalating denunciations of Kiev (or Kyiv) for its pro-Western policies. By closing the door on diplomacy, Putin has jeopardized hundreds of years of Russian-Ukrainian, albeit at times conflictual, but still mostly friendly relations;[1] the two countries will now be bitter enemies. In this context, the invasion is first and foremost the sign of Russia's weakness and lack of political and economic attractiveness. Russia is trying to bully Ukraine into being its friend because it has failed to woo Kiev any other way over the years. Whatever the war's outcome, Russia will never get a friendly or even a neutral Ukraine. The most it could expect is to keep it or parts of it as unwilling hostages in its standoff with the West.

The Insoluble Post-Cold War Dilemma

The roots of the Ukrainian conflict are easy to find: they lie in the dissolution of the USSR. Once described by Putin as the "biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century",[2] it was the original trauma that marked the Russians of Putin's generation. For the *siloviki* – a Russian word used to mean the people from the security agencies, military, and intelligence – the Soviet collapse was even more painful. It marked the crumbling of their ideals and of the organisations such as the KGB and the Red Army to which they had dedicated their lives. Putin himself has often bitterly reflected on what it meant for him to leave East Germany as the USSR, in his mind, had admitted defeat to the West without a fight and quietly dissolved.[3] Returning to Russia, Putin had discovered a country that was pro-Western and despised people like him, ex-KGB men who had been pillars of the brutal communist regime.

However, the political situation remained fluid in Russia. The pro-Western leaders centred on prime minister Egor Gaidar and foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev were unable to gain popular support as their economic policies failed, not helped by the West's half-hearted support. By the start of the First Chechen War in 1994, many would be replaced by Soviet-era bureaucrats and hardliners from the *siloviki* in Boris Yeltsin's, Russia's first president, team. By the late 1990s, this process would take an ominous turn. In 1998, two former intelligence chiefs successively became prime ministers of Russia during Yeltsin's second mandate (1996-2000) before a third one Putin took their place in August 1999.

To people like Putin, the world had not changed that much after the USSR's end. The US and NATO were still the enemy; they had defeated the USSR thanks to help from the inside. In response, Russia had to, first, consolidate its regime at home by forgetting about democracy; second, rebuild its army; and, third, re-establish its influence in the post-Soviet space, its "near abroad". These three pillars would largely determine Putin's policies for the next twenty years.

In foreign policy, Putin's goal was to counter the West's expansion into Russia's backyard. Accusing Russia of having been a threat to them throughout their history, former Warsaw Pact countries pushed to join NATO and the EU in the 1990s. Among former Soviet republics, the Baltic states (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia) did the same. Others stayed for the time being closer to Russia. In Moscow, NATO's enlargement to the East was seen as adding insult to injury. Russian politicians of all political currents argued that, in exchange for the Soviets withdrawing from East Germany and accepting it to join NATO, the US had promised Moscow that there would be no enlargement. In the West, that promise, if it had ever been made,[4] was forgotten as NATO expanded. Each country had the right to join any alliance it wanted, the US argued.

The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland hence joined NATO in 1999. Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia did the same in 2004. Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020 followed. Moscow resented each new enlargement, even more if it included former Soviet republics or Warsaw Pact allies. To the neo-Soviet elites who had consolidated power during Putin's tenure, NATO was encircling Russia. This encirclement was a testimony to the US duplicitous nature and embodied the main geostrategic threat to Russia, they argued. The Kremlin judged the situation to be especially critical when both Ukraine, which had seen a revolution that had brought Westerners to power, and Georgia had expressed interest in joining NATO and received an aspiring member status in the 2010s. In many aspects, the Russia-Georgia War of 2008 had at the time been a first sign that Russia was drawing a red line on NATO's enlargement.

The dilemma was indeed unsolvable. The US and the EU had missed the chance to anchor the Russia of Gaidar and Kozyrev with the West, a fact some American policymakers regretted in retrospect.[5] Now, it refused to use the categories of the Cold War to deal with Russia. It continued to believe and argue that the world had irremediably changed in 1992, that soft power had replaced hard power in Europe, and that every country could freely choose its alliances. Putin's revanchist regime was in return increasingly prepared to do whatever it took to prevent any NATO enlargement. Its growing authoritarianism at home, successful wars in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria, and growing military power only reinforced its belief that it could successfully oppose the West. In this context, Ukraine was the ultimate prize for Putin. Along with Belarusians, Ukrainians were the post-Soviet people who were ethnically and culturally closest to Russians. Ukraine was to be the geostrategic centrepiece of Moscow's anti-Western bloc.

Ukraine Irremediably Moved West

Ukraine, however, has been steadily moving away from Russia and closer to the West during the last decade. The more the Kremlin has tried to woo Kiev, the more Ukrainians have been pushing for integration with the EU and increasingly NATO. The reality is that authoritarian Russia with its faltering extraction economy is not an attractive model on the post-Soviet space. Autocrats who are concerned by the preservation of their corrupt regimes may want Moscow's support, but few look up to Russia among the people of Central Asia, the South Caucasus, or Eastern Europe. The West's soft and economic power is by contrast extremely strong.

Ukraine has seen a first pro-Western revolution (the "orange revolution") in 2004-05. The latter brought to power president Viktor Yushchenko who, thanks to popular mobilisation, won against the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovych. When Yushchenko proved ultimately unable to fulfil his anti-corruption and economic promises, his pro-Western revolution faltered. Yanukovych's tenure was meanwhile marked by at least four disputes over gas prices with Russia. While Russia was trying to gain Ukraine's support by promising it cheaper gas prices, Kiev tried to use its strategic position to raise the transit fees for Russia's gas going to Western markets. In 2010, Yanukovych was elected president as Ukraine balanced back toward Russia.

This sequence of events interestingly illuminated several aspects. First, the pro-Western party in Ukraine was strong and many people were ready to challenge the longstanding ties with Russia. Second, Russia had seen the limits of its capacity to sway Ukraine back into its fold. The promises of cheap gas had helped but it appeared increasingly clear that Moscow could not win a bidding game for Ukraine with the West, and had little else to offer.

Third, Ukraine was divided between East and West in its foreign policy and domestically. Ukrainians were split between proponents of a pro-Western democratic regime and nostalgics of the USSR and the alliance with Russia, between those who felt culturally closer to Poland and the West and those who, speaking sometimes only Russian and no Ukrainian, felt closer to Russia, between groups who had unequally benefitted from the (re)distribution of economic resources and political power in the post-Soviet era, between regions more or less connected to the central authorities in Kiev.

Yanukovych's inept government only exacerbated these tensions. While he tried to both build ties with Eastern Europe and reassure Russia of his overall loyalty, Yanukovych quickly ended up at an impasse. As before Russia could only try to offer Ukraine a larger economic package to prevent it from increasingly looking to the West, this though now proved to not be enough, especially as Russia appeared more than ever as a corrupt authoritarian country. In November 2013, a new revolution (the "revolution of dignity") began in Kiev after Yanukovych suddenly decided to abandon the Association Agreement with the EU in exchange for Russian economic help. In the following weeks, the protests escalated and clashes with security forces occurred. In February 2014, the Ukrainian parliament, in a move that was not necessarily constitutional, voted to remove Yanukovych, leading to him fleeing Ukraine for Russia. In May 2014, Petro Poroshenko became President as the Ukrainian government again became overtly pro-Western.

The Kremlin saw this new Ukrainian revolution as a geopolitical disaster, anticipating that it would mean the definitive loss of Russian influence in Ukraine. Putin then apparently assumed that Russia's attempts to buy Ukrainian loyalty had failed. Following Yanukovych's removal, Russia moved to annex the peninsula of Crimea in February – March 2014. In its aftermath, Russia built on diffuse protests in Eastern Ukraine against the central authorities to support pro-Russian armed groups against Kiev. Following protracted conflict, two small pro-Russian separatist republics consolidated around Luhansk and Donetsk near the Russian border. By February 2015, a new agreement between all the belligerents was signed in Minsk under the auspice of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe that essentially froze the conflict. The agreement was bounded the separatists, Ukraine, and Russia to search for a peaceful solution. Donetsk and Luhansk were to remain part of Ukraine. In the meantime, the West had introduced sanctions against the Russian economy and part of its elites. Moscow had done the same, ironically further crippling its own economy.

This new sequence of events was again rich in lessons. First, Russia had now clearly moved to using blunt force to coerce Ukraine into doing its bidding. It had also readily annexed Ukrainian territories. Putin had hence broken his own repeated promises that Russia would not challenge Ukrainian borders.[6] Second, Russia had internalised the idea that Ukraine was irremediably moving West. Its own support in Ukraine was dwindling. In fact, it seemed that the Kremlin had expected much larger support in Eastern Ukraine, stretching to cities such as Odessa, but the separatists had only been able to consolidate small dominions and even that with the help of Russian troops.

Third, Russia hoped that, while it wanted Ukraine to accept Crimea's annexation as final, it could use the Luhansk and Donetsk republics as bargaining chips to prevent Ukraine's further integration with the West. The latter proved however to be wrong. The war in the Donbass, the name of the larger region bordering Russia, had only made Kiev more eager to seek Western support and modernise its military to prepare for another conflict with Russia. The West in turn appeared ready to back Ukraine economically and did not entirely close the door for it joining NATO. All Russia's attempt to extract a promise of non-membership from either the US, or Kiev proved futile. While exchanges of fire and armed clashes along the contact line between the Donetsk and Luhansk republics and Ukraine continued until 2022, the political situation remained stuck.

Fourth, the Western sanctions, although not as extensive as once imagined, continued to affect the Russian economy even after the Minsk agreements. This created problems in Russia and fuelled a diffuse contestation of Putin's regime.[7]

Putin's Closing Window of Opportunity

The current war must be analysed against this rich historical background. Having manoeuvred himself into an impasse and unable to get a friendly Ukraine in any other way, Putin invaded Ukraine in a last attempt to secure a Russia-friendly regime there. While we do not know at this stage what is his endgame, one can easily imagine that Russia would either wish to have a puppet regime in Kiev on the Belarus model, or at least split Ukraine into two parts so that it can install a pro-Russian ruler or simply annex the Eastern bit. Both options would, in Putin's opinion, reinforce Russia's geostrategic security by creating a larger buffer between Moscow and NATO. At the same time, the conflict itself will certainly create new problems for the West as millions of Ukrainian refugees are predicted to move into the EU.

In this context, the timing of the Russian intervention is especially remarkable. For several reasons, Putin may have believed that the window of opportunity for a military solution in Ukraine was closing. First, because of Russia's own inept and brutal policies, Ukraine had become increasingly pro-Western. No doubt that in a few years it would have further integrated politically, economically, and militarily with the EU and NATO while bolstering its defences against Russia.

Second, Russia, despite Putin's repeated talk about its new gained strength, is weakening. Its economy is faltering, support for Putin at home is uneven with several mass protests having happened over the past few years. Within the regime, there seems to be little to no alternative political figures to Putin as the surreal and ridiculous demonstrations of fealty before the recognitions of the Luhansk and Donetsk republics' independence has shown.[8] Yet, no one knows what will be Russia's situation in five years. The increased political and economic strains may lead to more opposition to Putin's regime.

Third, even though he is at 69 years old not one of the oldest political leaders in the world, Putin is aging and there are persistent rumours about his ill health. He may have felt that here too the situation would not be better in five years.

Fourth, there is also probably in the Kremlin the growing belief that NATO and the West in general have lost their grip as exemplified by their failure in Afghanistan and the transatlantic dissensions of the Donald Trump-era. Russia may have assessed that the western military alliance was now at its weakest point while it, after successful wars in Syria and Ukraine and with China's tacit support, was at its peak. In short, the Kremlin likely believed that invading Ukraine was its only remaining option to get what it wanted and that the sooner the better.

Yet, this desperate attempt by Putin's regime to secure a Russia-friendly Ukraine is in fact an admission of weakness. It is likely to lead to troubles for Moscow for years to come. Even if its military manage to quickly take over the country, Russia may face a popular insurgency in Ukraine, a country of 44 million people. Regarding this, the US willingness or not to arm anti-Russian insurgents will be a determining factor.

Whatever happens next, Moscow will also be facing a level of opposition from the West unseen since the early 1980s and the war in Afghanistan. Compared to the USSR, Russia is however much less economically and industrially resilient and more exposed to Western economic sanctions and criticism. Its ruling elites, its companies, its people are integrated with the West. Cutting them off will be painful for the West, but not as much as it will be for Russia. The war in Ukraine seems hence like a bet made by Putin in which the stakes are the future of Ukraine, but also the future of Russia. Otherwise said, whatever happens now, while Ukrainians will suffer most from the war, ordinary Russians will be on the losing side of globalization for years to come.

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[1] There are numerous books on Russia-Ukraine relations, including on the current conflict. Paul D'Anieri, Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War (London: Cambridge University Press, 2019) ; Nikolay Koposov, Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia (London: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Elizabeth Wood, Roots of Russia's War in Ukraine (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). See also the two articles written by Pierre du Bois on Ukraine that this website will soon re-publish with a commentary: "La question ukrainienne (1917-1921)", Revue suisse d'histoire 33 (1983): 141-167; "Les Ukrainiens (1848-1920)", Etudes danubiennes 12 (I) (1996): 43-57.

[2] Vladimir Putin, "Poslanie", Kremlin.ru, 25 April 2005. http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/36354/page/1

[3] See the analysis in Catherine Belton, Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

[4] The topic has led to endless historical debates. See for a summary of the NATO-Russia relationship, Vincent Pouliot, International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[5] Secretary of Defence William Perry, Private Virtual Lecture, Stanford US-Russia Forum, 30 May 2020.

[6] Putin calls Crimea part of Ukraine here for example. Vladimir Putin, "Stenogramma", Kremlin.ru, 25 October 2006. http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23864

[7] Vassily A. Klimentov, "Vladimir Putin: Twelve More Years?", Current Affairs in Perspective, October 2020. https://www.fondation-pierredubois.ch/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-no9-Klimentov.pdf

[8] See Russia's Security Council meeting on YouTube (see for example at 1h22 minutes for Putin admonishing a senior official). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOGDfBmKB-o

[9] The author is against the war in Ukraine and condemns Russia for its intervention.