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# Russia's War Against Ukraine: Context, Causes, and Consequences

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**ABSTRACT**

The reasons for Russia's attack on Ukraine have become a much-debated topic. In this introductory article to this special issue, we identify three types of explanations that focus, respectively, on (1) Putin's imperial ambitions, (2) domestic factors inside Russia, and (3) external pressures. We show that each perspective offers valuable insights but fails to provide a convincing stand-alone account. Building on this, we put forward an integrated, multi-causal explanation of why Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022.

## Introduction

Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 has sparked the largest military conflict in Europe since the Second World War. As of this writing, tens of thousands of people have lost their lives and millions have been forced to flee their homes. While the full effects of the war are still unraveling, it seems safe to say that they will shape Europe's strategic landscape for years, if not decades, to come. Thus, understanding the context, causes, and consequences of Russia's attack is a central analytical task, not only for academic purposes, but also for its potential policy implications.

This special issue contributes to that endeavor by addressing the following questions: Why did Russia launch a large-scale invasion of Ukraine? What are Moscow's objectives and motivations? Why did many Western military experts initially overestimate Russian military capabilities? What explains Ukraine's foreign policy before and during the war? How has Russia's invasion affected the willingness of Ukrainians to resist and fight? To what extent and how is Belarus supporting Russia's war in Ukraine? What are the war's implications for the wider European security order and, in particular, for so-called in-between states like Georgia and Moldova?

These questions are at the core of this volume, which, we should note at the outset, is a bit less international than we had hoped; it was slated to include articles from one Ukrainian and one Russian scholar. Unfortunately, they were unable to complete their intended contributions. Our collection of articles may as a result encounter the objection of Westsplaining (Hendl et al. 2023)—that is, the practice of Western pundits to provide hard-and-fast explanations of Russia's war against Ukraine (often coupled with policy advice), even though these pundits have no grounding in Eastern European studies. That charge, however, would be unfair and misguided. This special issue brings together scholars who have worked on Ukrainian and/or Russian foreign and security policy for many years.

The purpose of our introductory article is to set the scene. To this end, we address head-on the, arguably, most controversially discussed question of the conflict: What are the principal drivers, or causes, of Russia's February 2022 attack? In what follows, we show that it is possible to identify three major perspectives in the literature. The first explains Russia's invasion with reference to President Vladimir Putin's worldview and imperial ambitions. A second perspective suggests that regime security considerations account for the Kremlin's decision to attack Ukraine. A third group of scholars explains Russia's war in "realist" terms, describing it as a strategic response to Ukraine's growing geopolitical alignment with the West. Of course, there are accounts that do not fit neatly into any of the three camps, but most recent arguments and interpretations correspond to one of these perspectives.[1]

In the next three sections, we take a closer look at them in the indicated order and assess their explanatory power. Our analysis shows that each perspective offers some valuable insights. On its own, however, no one is fully persuasive. All three explanations suffer from analytical and evidentiary problems. In the fourth section, we suggest how scholars can overcome the identified shortcomings. Taking the recent turn to analytical eclecticism in international relations (IR) seriously, we argue that one promising avenue is to explore the interconnections between Putin's personal worldview, regime security considerations, and geopolitical pressures. This, however, is easier said than done. After all, building synthetic explanations comes not without its pitfalls. In particular, doing so runs the risk of producing "eclectic mush" (Checkel 2013, 234); if everything matters, nothing really matters. Thus, we go beyond the conclusion that multiple factors are "somehow" relevant for explaining Russia's decision to attack Ukraine. Instead, we offer an integrated approach that explicates the relative weight and interrelationship of the various factors and, by extension, demonstrate its analytical purchase. The article's final section summarizes the main findings, and it briefly previews the other contributions included in this special issue.

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.
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## Explanation 1: Putin's Imperial Ambitions

One set of explanations focuses on the worldview and belief system of President Putin. Specifically, many observers suggest that Putin's personality combined with his imperial ambitions are the root cause of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As Torbakov (2022) puts it, Russia's attack is attributable to Putin's "imperial fantasies, historical nostalgia, and resentment towards the West." Melvin (2022) likewise holds that Putin is "driven by a sense of a historic mission to rectify perceived injustices and to regather lost Russian lands." Along the same lines, Khrushcheva (2022) notes, "Putin seems to have succumbed to his ego-driven obsession with restoring Russia's status as a great power with its own clearly defined sphere of influence." Motyl (2023) goes even further, arguing that "there are piles of evidence demonstrating that Putin has had expansionist designs from his first days in office."

Such Putin-centered explanations have several merits. For one thing, Russia has become a highly centralized and personalistic political system. Putin is clearly the ultimate decider; accordingly, his personal ambitions and ideas should have a huge impact on the formation of policy. Indeed, the limited evidence available suggests that the decision to invade Ukraine was made by Putin and a small circle of handpicked advisers, who did little more than reinforce his preconceived beliefs (Casey and Gunitsky 2022; Galeotti 2022). Furthermore, there are strong indications that Putin is a leader with unusual aspirations. Putin, for instance, frequently has bemoaned the loss of empire. He also openly likened himself to Peter the Great, saying that he shared the czar's goal of "taking back" lost Russian lands (Roth 2022a; Zorin 2022). Finally, Putin has a long record of making controversial statements about Ukrainian statehood. Already in April 2008, at the NATO summit in Bucharest, he reportedly told U.S. President George W. Bush that Ukraine was not a "real" country (RFE/RL 2008). Another example is Putin's June 2021 treatise, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," in which he provides an extended review of selectively chosen historical events before concluding that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" (Putin 2021). Putin, in other words, appears to regard Ukraine not so much as a truly sovereign state but as part of the same Slavic nation.

Against this backdrop, a strong case can be made that Russia's February 2022 attack is attributable to Putin's deep-seated imperial ambitions and his misguided convictions about Ukrainian nationhood. On closer inspection, however, several major caveats must be added.

First, Putin-centered explanations struggle to adequately account for the timing of the attack. After all, if Putin's misguided convictions about Ukraine are such a powerful force, one may ask why he did not invade Ukraine in, say, 2004, 2014, or at any other point during his 22-year-long reign. To fill this gap, some observers suggest that Putin, in the run-up to the war, had lost touch with reality. Indeed, it is well known that Putin took extreme measures to isolate himself during the COVID-19 pandemic. Residing for the most part in his dacha outside of Moscow, Putin is said to have spent a lot of time reading history books and discussing history with a small circle of entrusted advisers. This, so the argument goes, reinforced Putin's belief in Ukraine's belongingness to the Russian civilization and pushed him over the edge (Gutterman 2022; Roth 2022b; Seddon 2022; Sharafutdinova 2022).

Yet, while it is easy to conclude that Putin has come to live in his own world, this remains a matter of conjecture. Putin may or may not be mentally deranged. Notable in this context is that Putin accepted that things did not go as he had expected in the first phase of the war and then adjusted to the new reality. Rather than squander Russian military resources by making a hopeless dash for Kyiv or trying to defend Kherson City on the west bank of the Dnipro River, Putin greenlighted an orderly retreat. Moreover, after Russian forces were routed from large parts of Kharkiv region in September 2022, Putin agreed to shift—temporarily at least—to a more defensive battlefield posture and ordered the creation of layered defenses (including trenches, fortifications, and mine fields) to ward off the impending Ukrainian counteroffensive. This casts doubt on the claim that the Russian leader has lost touch with reality.

Second, and related, Putin-centric explanations have difficulty explaining the massive scope of the February 2022 attack. To be sure, in the past, Putin has displayed a penchant for using force. For the most part, however, he has been calculating and opportunistic—not a reckless risktaker. As Rumer (2022) astutely points out, "Despite being described as reckless, Putin is anything but. He has used military power in calculated ways: in Syria, where his brutal air campaign took the lives of countless civilians but minimized Russian military losses; in Libya, where he deployed mercenaries who could be written off as expendable if wounded or killed; or most recently in Kazakhstan, where his high-profile deployment was in reality small and very low-key." Even the 2014 takeover of Crimea was conducted with a minimum of force, as Russia could and did take advantage of extremely favorable circumstances (including a largely pro-Russian population, the presence of Russian military bases on the peninsula, and a woefully unprepared Ukrainian army). Thus, it seems a stretch to argue that Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022—the biggest land military operation in Europe since the Second World War—was simply the latest manifestation of a long-established pattern of Russian foreign policy under Putin.

Third, Putin's preconceptions about Ukraine did not arise *ex nihilo*; they rest upon and reflect longstanding tropes about Ukraine among parts of Russian society. Since the early 1990s, there has been a striking measure of consensus among Russia's political elite that Ukraine is, or ought to be, part of Russia's self-proclaimed sphere of influence (Götz and Staun 2022, 485–486). In addition, Russian nationalists of different hues (including renowned intellectuals such as the famous writer and Nobel laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn) have long stressed Ukraine's cultural and historical belongingness to Russia (Owolade 2022; Tolz and Hutchings 2023). This suggests that at least some of Putin's ideas about Ukraine reflect a broader strand of Russian thought—not his very own, unique personal convictions.

This raises a larger analytical issue: Many of the above-noted accounts fail to interrogate how Putin's personal aspirations interact with factors at the domestic or international level. This omission is problematic inasmuch as, although

human behavior is voluntary, there are always external constraints and stimuli. Indeed, several seasoned Russia watchers have warned for the tendency to overemphasize the Putin factor in explaining Russian foreign policy. A few months before the war, for example, Mankoff (2021) argued, "Lost in this Putin obsession is the reality that the challenge Russia presents to the West rests on deeper historical, geographic, and political foundations." Along the same line, Frey (2021, 26) concluded, "The debate on whether great individuals make history or history makes great individuals is long and inconclusive. But it is safe to say that our . . . debate on Russia has overplayed the individual at the expense of other factors." Noble and Schulmann (2021, 94) similarly pointed out that "by focusing on Putin as an individual, observers can all too easily ignore the structural conditions that help shape his thinking." In other words, accounts that focus on Putin's personal ambitions without controlling for the impact of domestic and international factors suffer from what is called in the language of social science methodology the omitted variable bias. This means that researchers leave out one or more potentially relevant variables, which, in turn, skews their findings.

Of course, the claim that Putin and his personal preferences are the proximate cause of Russia's decision to go to war is true in the definitional sense: Only individuals act in the literal sense of the word. But the claim is also, on its own, unsatisfying. After all, individuals always work within limits set by external constraints and incentives. The key question thus becomes: To what extent is Putin a free "agent" (pun intended) acting on his own volition, and to what extent are his choices shaped by underlying material, social, and cultural factors? As it stands, the purveyors of individual-level explanations of Russia's war against Ukraine have failed to properly address that issue. All of this suggests that knowing something about the personality of Putin is necessary for understanding the causes of Russia's attack, but it is not a sufficient explanation.

## Explanation 2: The Regime Preservation Imperative

A second group of observers holds that Russia's war against Ukraine is driven by domestic political factors and considerations. This line of argumentation comes in two varieties. One holds that the Kremlin was concerned that a democratizing Ukraine could serve as an inspiration for Russians to rise up against the Putin regime, given the geographical, cultural, and social closeness between the two countries. Seeking to defuse the impending threat of a "democracy contagion," the Kremlin decided to go to war, or so the argument goes. As Kramer (2022, italics in original) puts it, "Putin's fear of a successful, vibrant, *democratic* Ukraine on Russia's border is the real reason for the invasion." Stoner (2022) similarly concludes, "Kyiv represents a threat to Putin's cronyistic autocracy not because it might become a NATO member . . . but because it is struggling to be what Mr. Putin's Russia is not: a free, democratic society that could serve as an example to an increasingly restive segment of the Russian population" (see also Person and McFaul 2022).

The second domestic politics argument is that the Kremlin's decision to invade Ukraine was an attempt to deflect the Russian population's attention away from growing internal problems. In the words of Gomza (2022), "It was no surprise that after a tumultuous (albeit rigged) electoral victory in 2018 and mounting discontent over Putin's corruption, Putin looked again for popularity through military adventures abroad." Along the same lines, Orttung (2022, 2) contends that "the first source of Putin's foreign aggression [against Ukraine] is his deteriorating position at home." Likewise, Matovski (2023) holds that Russia invaded Ukraine "not to achieve any foreign policy objective nor grand utopian vision, but to distract the population" (see also Ferraro 2024).

No doubt, these claims are intuitively compelling and have a certain prima facie plausibility. After all, in the years preceding the invasion, the Putin regime experienced economic and political challenges at home. Moreover, Kremlin elites have repeatedly voiced concerns about a "color revolution" in Russia (German 2020). On closer inspection, however, one can also identify several shortcomings with this line of reasoning.

To start with, by all objective measures, the risk of a prodemocracy spillover from Ukraine into Russia has been, and remains, low. The reason is simple: Putin and his cronies have developed a sophisticated regime-defense apparatus, consisting of heavily armed National Guard forces (Rosgvardia), the FSB, and a raft of paramilitary groups prepared to suppress any internal upheaval (CSIS 2020). Moreover, over the course of the last decade, the Kremlin has been able to silence voices of liberal dissent through a combination of preventive repression, information control, and co-optation. As a result, nationalist groups of various stripes—not liberals pushing for Western-style democracy—dominate domestic opposition in today's Russia (Barber 2022; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2016).

In addition, there is little to suggest that ordinary Russians see Ukraine as a role model worthy of emulation. Just the opposite: Ukraine is associated with the kind of hardship, chaos, and poverty that plagued Russia in the "chaotic" 1990s. No doubt, the Kremlin is deliberately peddling this narrative (Marples 2016). Still, it appears to have struck a chord with many ordinary Russians. According to polling by the independent Levada Center, a sizable share of the Russian population sees the idea of a Maidan-like revolution in Moscow as a threat rather than a path to liberty (Levada 2016). Of course, given the limitations of polling in Russia, such surveys must be taken with a grain of salt. Overall, however, it seems safe to conclude that the risk (or chance, depending on one's perspective) of a prodemocracy spillover from Ukraine to Russia was fairly low. This is difficult to square with the first strand of the regime security perspective.

The second strand—that the Putin regime wanted to create a rally-round-the-flag effect—is not fully convincing either. For one thing, although Putin's popularity ratings had somewhat dropped in the years prior to the war, they still hovered around 60 percent (Levada 2024). This is by any international standard a very high number. There was, in other words, no urgent need for the Putin government to initiate a war to bolster its domestic position.

For another, public opinion polls conducted before the war indicated that a large-scale military intervention in Ukraine

would be unpopular among a majority of the Russian population (Hale et al. 2022; Kolesnikov 2021). For sure, immediately after the start of the war, large swathes of the population rallied around the leadership. Putin's domestic approval ratings shot up to over 70 percent. But beneath the surface, tensions are brewing. Unlike in 2014, when many ordinary Russians were euphoric about the takeover of Crimea, nothing of this sort is happening today (Smeltz et al. 2022). Instead, soldiers' wives and mothers make widespread appeals for more rotations for troops on the frontline, for better conditions, and sometimes even for ending the war (Kirillova 2023; Noble and Petrov 2023).

At the same time, ultranationalist hardliners and prowar groups have emerged who criticize the Putin government for being too soft and who push for a more aggressive agenda. They argue in favor of a full mobilization of Russian society, large-scale missile strikes against Ukrainian population centers, and if need be, the use of tactical nuclear weapons. As Stanovaya (2022), a Russian political analyst, writes, "A prowar opposition could become one of the most serious challenges to the regime since that of destroying the non-systemic [liberal] opposition" (see also Barber 2022). In other words, the decision to attack Ukraine has created more domestic political problems for the Putin regime than it has solved. Indeed, before the war, something like the Wagner Group's march on Moscow led by mercenary leader Prigozhin during the summer of 2023 would have been next to impossible. The mutiny failed, of course, but it clearly demonstrated the growing fragility and vulnerability of Putin's system of governance (Glantz 2023; Marten 2023). While an imminent breakdown is unlikely, what all of this shows is that Moscow's "special military operation" puts enormous strain on the regime.

Viewed as a whole, then, the argument that regime-security considerations are the key driver of Russia's large-scale attack on Ukraine is difficult to sustain. This is not to deny that Russia has become an increasingly repressive authoritarian state or to suggest that domestic factors are of no consequence in the making of Russian foreign policy. Quite the contrary, as shown below, domestic factors likely played an important role in Putin's decision to attack Ukraine. However, the oft-made argument that Putin and his government went to war exclusively, or even mainly, for reasons of regime security stands on shaky ground.

## Explanation 3: Balancing the West

A third group of scholars explains Russia's attack in geopolitical terms, describing it as a natural and near-automatic response to aggressive actions by the West. In particular, it is argued that efforts by the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to build a close military–strategic alliance with Ukraine elicited the ire of Moscow. The most prominent exponent of this view is Mearsheimer, who contends that "the United States is principally responsible for causing the Ukrainian crisis . . . The United States has pushed forward policies toward Ukraine that Putin and other Russian leaders see as an existential threat . . . Specifically, I am talking about America's obsession with bringing Ukraine into NATO and making it a Western bulwark on Russia's border" (Mearsheimer 2022).

According to this perspective, any other great power when confronted with the same circumstances would have acted in the same or a similar manner. As Lieven (2022) puts it, "Russian fears about expansion of a potentially hostile military alliance to Russia's border should be understandable to any American who has heard of the Monroe Doctrine." Likewise, Walt (2022) asserts, "Great powers are never indifferent to the geostrategic forces arrayed on their borders, and Russia would care deeply about Ukraine's political alignment even if someone else were in charge." Stephen van Evera (2022, 1) concurs with this argument: "Major powers," he notes, "never calmly accept the close approach to their borders of unfriendly powers or alliances. Russia is no exception. It will not accept a settlement that leaves open the possibility of Ukraine in NATO or NATO in Ukraine."

At first blush, this line of reasoning appears quite convincing. For one thing, President Putin, Defense Minister Shoigu, and other high-ranking Kremlin officials have repeatedly stated that Ukraine's growing alignment with the West was a major reason for initiating the so-called special military operation. Furthermore, in the run-up to the war, Moscow listed a series of demands to de-escalate the crisis. These demands included, most importantly, Ukrainian neutrality and written assurances that NATO would not expand into the post-Soviet space (MFA 2021a, 2021b). Indeed, Russian strategists and policymakers have for decades complained about the eastward expansion of NATO, describing it as a national security threat (Black 2000; Götz 2019). Finally, existing studies show that Russia went to war with Georgia in August 2008, at least in part, to derail Georgia's NATO ambition (Mankoff 2009, 255–264). In that sense, Russian leaders have spoken, and acted, in tune with the logic of the geopolitical argument. But on its own, this argument, too, fails to yield a fully convincing explanation for at least three reasons.

First, available evidence suggests that Moscow is guided not just by defensive considerations, but also by offensive aims and objectives. According to captured war plans and intelligence reports, Moscow's goal was to enforce a regime change in Kyiv and to occupy portions of eastern, southern, and central Ukraine (Jones 2022). Moreover, two days after the war's outbreak, the state-owned news agency RIA Novosti published an apparently preprepared editorial celebrating Russia's swift victory over Ukraine. The piece, which was later removed from the news agency's website, applauded Putin for "gathering the Russian world" and reestablishing Russia's "historic borders" in Europe (Coleman 2022).[2] This clearly indicates that Russia's attack was about more than balancing NATO.

Second, if Moscow's primary aim was to push back Western powers from Russian borders, the attack has been in many ways self-defeating. After all, the war has only reinforced Ukraine's desire and urgency to join Euro-Atlantic institutions in general and NATO in particular. Relatedly, Russia's military actions have provoked concerns on the part of other neighboring states, pushing them to build closer ties with the Western alliance. The most obvious example is the NATO accession of Finland and Sweden. Worth noting in this context is Russia's

muted response. To be sure, Moscow announced that it would take unspecified "military-technical" countermeasures; it instigated a refugee crisis on the Finnish border; and it reestablished the Leningrad Military district (Gera and Tanner 2023; MFA 2023; Tass 2024). Yet Russia has shied away from issuing any direct military threats (Jack 2022). In purely geopolitical terms, it is difficult to understand why decision-makers in Moscow would be gravely concerned about the potential NATO membership of Ukraine while showing comparatively little concern about the NATO applications (and subsequent membership) of Sweden and especially Finland, which has a long border with Russia.

More generally, Russia's war against Ukraine has reinvigorated NATO, which appears more unified and determined than it has been for many years. Among other things, NATO has announced to massively increase its rapid reaction forces to over 300,000 troops; it has drawn up plans to boost its military presence in Central and Eastern Europe; and it has stepped up its air policing over the Baltics and the Black Sea (Foy 2022; for background and discussion, see Matlary and Johnson 2024). In short, Russia's attack on Ukraine has triggered precisely the troop buildup on its borders that it supposedly wanted to prevent.

Third, there appears to be an element of miscalculation on Russia's part, not only about the strategic consequences of the war, but also regarding the local balance of military power. Notwithstanding adamant statements by Kremlin officials that the war is going according to plan, virtually all military analysts agree that at least the initial phase of Russia's campaign was a failure. There are certainly many reasons for this, including poor logistics, low morale, and faulty intelligence (Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg 2022; Jones 2022). But perhaps most important were flawed assumptions about the willingness and ability of the Ukrainian military and its citizens to resist—a point to which we will return later.

This leads to a larger, theoretical issue. The geopolitical argument is informed by realist international relations theory, according to which states are strategic or rational actors. Some care is required here. As realists correctly point out, to assume strategic behavior or rationality is not to assume foresight or success (Mearsheimer and Rosato 2023, 66–68; see also Schmidt and Wight 2023). Especially in military conflicts, there is an inherent level of uncertainty, the proverbial "fog of war," which can result in miscalculations. However, to assume rationality is to say that states (or more accurately, the statespeople acting on their behalf) carefully weigh the costs and benefits of different policy options. As Rathbun (2018) in his study about realism's micro-foundations shows, "rational thinking, based on objectivity and deliberation, is a necessary condition for Realpolitik." The available information, however limited, suggests that the Kremlin's decision to attack Ukraine did not emerge from a deliberative and uninhibited decision-making process. On the contrary, vigorous debate seems to have been short-circuited as alternative voices were muffled. Take the meeting of Russia's Security Council three days before the invasion, which was aired on "live" TV. The broadcast showed, in the words of one analyst, "a series of visibly fearful officials trying to come up with statements they thought were expected of them. None of it suggested that many of them were consulted in advance" (Liik 2022). This does not sit well with the strategic-actor assumption that undergirds many realist-inspired explanations of Russia's war in Ukraine.

In sum, there is much to recommend to the balancing argument. Clearly, Russia seems to have been concerned about the growing level of political–military cooperation between Ukraine and the West. Yet, at the same time, the argument encounters serious difficulties on both empirical and analytical grounds.

## Toward a Multicausal Explanation of Russia's Attack on Ukraine

The preceding sections have shown that all three perspectives shed light on the causes of Russia's attack on Ukraine. Independently, however, no one is able to provide a fully convincing explanation. Hence, we may arrive at a more complete and comprehensive account by integrating elements from each of the three approaches. In fact, although most scholars focus on one set of factors, they tend to acknowledge, usually in passing, that Russia's decision to attack Ukraine is best explained by a combination of systemic, domestic, and individual-level factors (see, e.g., Ferraro 2024, 187; Götz and Staun 2022, 492; Matovski 2023, 17).

This kind of analytical integration is consistent with the recent trend toward eclecticism in the field of international relations. An increasing number of scholars are coming around to view that a combination of factors drawn from different perspectives—rather than stale paradigm wars—is likely to increase our understanding of particular events (Checkel 2013; Cornut 2015; Sil and Katzenstein 2010). That said, analytical eclecticism is no silver bullet; it comes with its own challenges and limitations. In particular, advocates of eclecticism are not always careful to specify exactly how factors drawn from different perspectives fit together in a way that creates a logically consistent and integrated whole. As a result, their accounts sometimes turn into so-called laundry-list explanations, where factors are "merely noted like items on a grocery list or partitioned in a large-n regression" (Legro 2005, 179). Thus, scholars who advance eclectic models and explanations need to specify exactly how factors from different perspectives work together and weigh their causal importance.

Heeding this admonition, we outline the contours of a compound model to explain why Russia attacked Ukraine. This model merges elements from the above-described perspectives, extended to include some additional insights from area studies scholarship—but it does not devolve into an "everything matters" approach. Instead, the resulting explanation distinguishes between three types of causes, which we call —drawing on Nye (2005, 74–75)—deep, intermediate, and proximate. In brief, the deep causes are Ukraine's strategic and historical–civilizational importance to Russia, which provide any government in Moscow with a powerful incentive to maintain some form of control over Ukraine. The intermediate causes are Kyiv's increasingly pronounced westward drift and the dwindling influence of pro-Russian political actors inside Ukraine. These two developments, we argue, go a long way to explain why Russia resorted to more and more assertive measures to keep Ukraine in its self-proclaimed sphere of

influence. Finally, the proximate causes are Putin's misguided belief about Ukrainians' willingness to resist and Russia's highly personalized political system. These two factors in combination can account for Putin's decision to initiate a large-scale invasion— rather than a more limited military campaign. Figure 1 schematically depicts the model's causal sequence.

In what follows, we elaborate on these propositions and outline how they relate to each other. Before proceeding, however, two quick remarks are in order. First, by offering this kind of multicausal explanation, we do not seek to justify or legitimize Russia's war against Ukraine. The purpose here is purely analytical, which is to say that we seek to improve our understanding of why Russia is acting in the way it does, nothing more and nothing less. Second, the overarching caveat for anyone seeking to explain Russia's attack is the scarcity of reliable sources. Russia has become an increasingly closed political system. This has restricted opportunities for interviewing Russian government officials as well as for institutional research cooperation. Moreover, given the topic's contemporary nature, access to internal policy documents and other primary source material is limited. Still, investigative reports by journalists, official policy papers, and think tank analyses provide a substantial amount of information. Based on this, it is possible to piece together a preliminary, plausible picture of why Russia went to war in February 2022.

## Deep Causes: Ukraine's Strategic and Symbolic Importance for Russia

The starting point of our multicausal model is the observation that the pursuit of regional primacy has long been a centerpiece of Russian foreign policy, preceding the coming to power of Putin. After a brief period of soul-searching in the early 1990s, the Russian elite—including President Yeltsin and his team—more or less openly expressed its ambition to dominate the post-Soviet region. Moscow wanted to circumscribe the ability of smaller neighbors to act independently, especially on matters of foreign and defense policy, but without denying their formal sovereignty (Hill and Jewett 1994; Porter and Saivetz 1994). Since then, the pursuit of regional primacy has figured prominently in almost every official Russian foreign and security policy document, including all iterations of the Russian Military Doctrine (1993, 2000, 2010, 2014), Foreign Policy Concept (1993, 2000, 2008, 2013, 2016, 2023), and National Security Strategy (1997, 2000, 2009, 2015, 2021). It is also worth stressing that the aspiration to establish itself as the region's preponderant power was, and still is, widely shared in the Russian policymaking community. Of course, there are occasional disagreements about specific policy issues and how best to pursue regional primacy. In general, however, there is broad-based agreement among Russian politicians of different ideological coloration that the attainment of regional primacy is a cardinal objective of Russian foreign policy. It is, in short, deeply ingrained in Russian strategic thinking (Götz and Staun 2022, 485–486).

That said, it is also clear that not all post-Soviet states are equally significant from Moscow's point of view. The most critical and important country is Ukraine for two principal reasons. First, seen from Russia's perspective, Ukraine holds vast military–strategic significance. A peek at the map shows why. Russia shares a border with Ukraine that is over 2,000 kilometers long. Moreover, Ukraine's border is roughly 500 kilometers away from Moscow, and it is critical for protecting the ground approaches to Russia's Volga-Don region. Ukraine also has a long coastline and thus can serve as a staging area for Russian military activities in the wider Black Sea area. In other words, Ukraine serves both as a natural shield for Russia and as a springboard for projecting influence into regions further afield (Götz 2015, 3–4).

Second, according to Russia's predominant national-identity narrative, the Kievan Rus (a medieval confederation

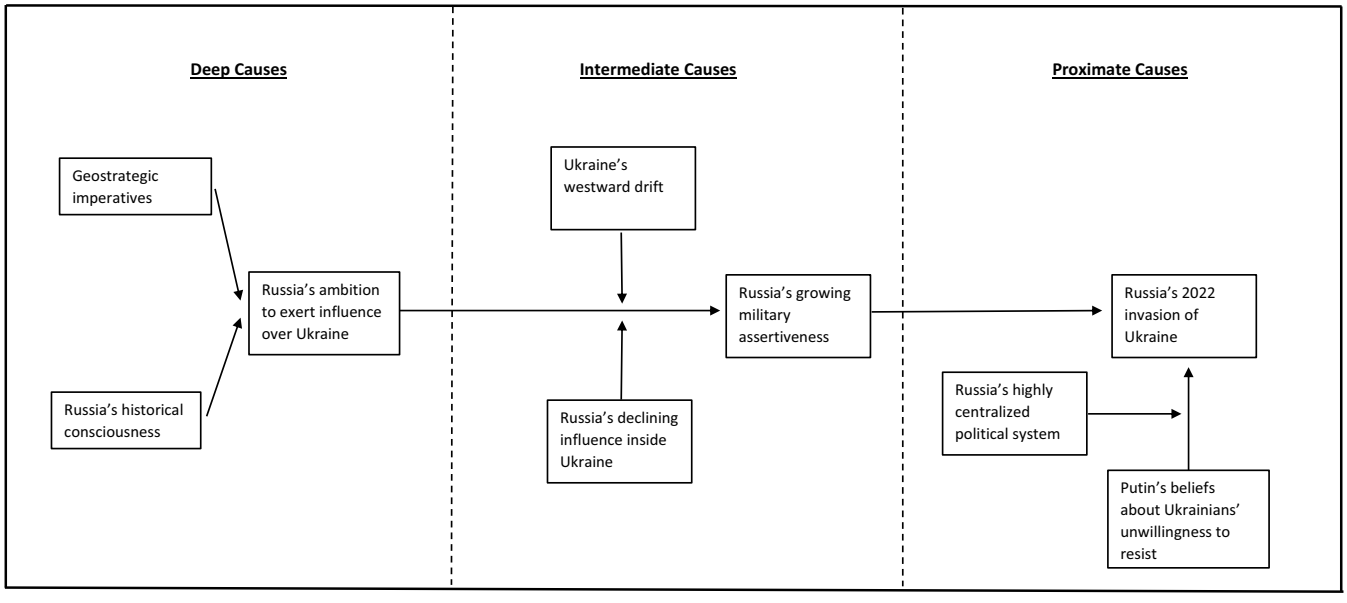



**Figure 1.** Russia's attack on Ukraine: A multicausal explanation.

of Slavic tribes centered around contemporary Kyiv) is the historical epicenter and birthplace of Russian statehood. Ukraine has therefore enormous civilizational meaning for many Russians. Moreover, in various manifestations, Ukraine was part of the imperial core of the Czarist Empire and the Soviet Union for many centuries. This is still prevalent in the Russian national consciousness, which is why much of the Russian political and intellectual elite—along with some quarters of the general public—have maintained a kind of proprietary attitude toward Ukraine (Mankoff 2022; Owolade 2022; Tolz and Hutchings 2023).

In essence, Ukraine holds tremendous military–strategic and symbolic importance for Russia. Seen against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that for most of the last three decades, Russia worked hard to make Ukraine part of its desired sphere of influence. To this end, it employed a wide range of diplomatic, intelligence, trade, energy, and financial tools (for overviews, see D'Anieri 2019a; Götz 2016) but shied away from the large-scale use of force. What, then, led Russia to change gears?

### *Intermediate Causes: Kyiv's Westward Drift and Russia's Dwindling Influence Inside Ukraine*

The intermediate causes of Russia's 2022 attack are Kyiv's increasingly pro-Western stance and the loss of Russian influence to shape Ukrainian politics, and thus its foreign-policy orientation, from within. In conjunction, these two factors go a long way to explain Russia's growing military assertiveness.

To provide a brief background: The Maidan Revolution in 2013–2014 resulted in the sudden collapse of the Moscow-backed regime of Viktor Yanukovych and its replacement by a staunchly pro-Western government. This, coupled with the pending EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, caused anxiety in Moscow. Rightly or wrongly, decision-makers and strategic thinkers in Moscow feared that Ukraine was decisively moving out of Russia's self-proclaimed sphere of influence. As previous studies have shown, seeking to prevent this from happening was one of the major driving factors of Russia's decision to annex Crimea in March 2014 and to instigate an insurgency in eastern Ukraine (Bukkvoll 2016; Götz 2022b, 1751–1753; Menon and Rumer 2015, 87–106).

Moreover, in August 2014, following heavy losses of the rebels on the battlefield, Moscow more or less openly deployed Russian military units into eastern Ukraine. Although exact numbers are unavailable, Western experts estimate that 3,000 to 10,000 Russian regular troops, organized into battalion tactical groups (BTGs), were at that point present in the Donbas. Within days, they turned the tide of battle in the rebels' favor and pushed back the rapidly advancing Ukrainian government forces (Czuperski et al. 2015; Olearchyk and Buckely 2014).

Being on the defensive, the Poroshenko government grudgingly agreed to the Minsk II peace plan, which was brokered by France and Germany. The plan brought an end to the worst of the fighting, but it left roughly one third of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions outside Ukrainian control. Moreover, the Minsk agreements obligated Ukraine to undertake a constitutional reform aimed at granting significant autonomy to the eastern regions—and perhaps even provide them with a veto over Ukraine's foreign-policy orientation. This is why Russia advocated so strongly for the "full implementation" of the Minsk agreements (Allan 2020; Dumoulin 2024).

Parallel to that, Moscow consolidated its influence over the two regions. Among other things, it started to distribute passports and deployed political advisers, so-called curators, in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics. Moscow also began to reorganize the poorly disciplined rebel forces into formal military units, which effectively came under Russian command and control. Local commanders who resisted incorporation were either demoted or died under mysterious circumstances (ICG 2016; Losh 2016).

The overall situation seemed to suit Russia well. Either the Minsk II agreement was implemented, which would turn Ukraine into an asymmetric confederation wherein the Moscow-controlled regions had extensive autonomy and likely even a veto on the country's foreign policy and alignment choices. Alternatively, Ukraine was left with a "frozen conflict," providing Russia with a de facto insurance that Ukraine would not become a member of NATO. After all, according to NATO's own rulebook, countries with unresolved ethnic or territorial conflicts are barred from joining the alliance (NATO 1995, paragraph 6).

Events, however, took a different turn. To start with, neither the Poroshenko nor the Zelensky administration were inclined to adhere to the Minsk agreements. Instead, both pursued a firmly pro-Western foreign policy. This might have been expected, considering Russia's annexation of Crimea and its role in the Donbas conflict. What unsettled policymakers in Moscow, though, was the gradual but steady rise in diplomatic, economic, and military support from the West to Ukraine (see, e.g., Lavrov 2018; Russian Institute for Strategic Studies 2017; Simes 2018).

For example, in July 2016, NATO's defense ministers decided to enhance the alliance's backing for Ukraine by approving a comprehensive assistance package (NATO 2016). There also was a rise in practical defense collaboration, encompassing various military exercises and training programs. As the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) noted, "Since 2014 the militaries of the United States and other NATO members have trained Ukrainian Army combat units at the Yavoriv Combat Training Centre at a rate of about 6–7 battalions (about 4000 soldiers) every year. The training has the double aim of making Ukrainian forces an effective military again and making them interoperable with NATO forces" (Wezeman and Kuimova 2018, 5). Furthermore, in June 2020, Ukraine became a member of NATO's Enhanced Opportunity Partners Program. This involved frequent discussions on security issues, participation in interoperability initiatives, and close collaboration during periods of crisis (NATO 2020). As a result, Russian strategic thinkers were no longer assured that the unresolved conflict in the Donbas would suffice to prevent the formation of a close geopolitical alliance between Ukraine and the Euro-Atlantic West. As Foreign Minister Lavrov put it, "NATO member states are systematically transforming Ukraine into a military foothold against Russia,

building their bases there and using its territory for military exercises" (quoted in Sputnik 2021).

To make matters worse, at least from Moscow's vantage point, Russian influence in Ukrainian domestic politics dwindled. This was partly a self-inflicted wound. The annexation of Crimea and the Donbas conflict had removed a significant portion of voters from the Ukrainian electorate —roughly 3.75 million—who used to cast their votes for pro-Russian candidates and parties. This made the return of a Moscow-friendly government in Kyiv, via the ballot box, next to impossible (D'Anieri 2019b). In addition, Ukrainian state authorities took measures to rein in the remaining pro-Russian political forces. Most importantly, in February 2021, the Zelensky government moved against several individuals with close connections to the Kremlin, including business tycoon Viktor Medvedchuk, a personal acquaintance of Putin (Putin is the godfather of Medvedchuk's daughter) and leader of the pro-Russian Opposition Platform–For Life party. Zelensky also ordered the shutting down of three popular Russian-speaking television networks (ZIK, News One, and 112) for promoting propaganda (Socor 2021). In consequence, Russia had fewer and fewer levers of influence left with which to shape Ukrainian politics, and thus foreign policy, from within.

In March and April 2021, the Russian leadership deployed approximately 80,000–100,000 troops along Ukraine's border. This move was likely intended to demonstrate escalation dominance to decision-makers in Western capitals and to the Zelensky government (Lee 2021). With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that this overt display of coercive diplomacy proved ineffective. If anything, it bolstered the political and strategic cooperation between Ukraine and the West. In June 2021, the United Kingdom and Ukraine signed a Memorandum of Implementation on a major arms deal worth GBP 1.7 billion to enhance the latter's naval capabilities (UK Ministry of Defense 2021). In October 2021, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited Kyiv expressing strong support for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic ambitions and its right to join NATO. In November 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba signed at a meeting in Washington a U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership (US Department of State 2021). All of these actions directly counteracted Moscow's ambition to keep Ukraine in its sphere of influence or, at minimum, to prevent Ukraine from teaming up with "outside" powers.

In response, Russia initiated a second military buildup, deploying as many as 200,000 troops (including irregular forces) along Ukraine's borders. Shortly after, on December 17, the Kremlin dispatched letters to the White House and NATO headquarters, demanding written assurances that Ukraine would not be invited to join the alliance, that practical defense cooperation with Kyiv would cease, and that NATO military infrastructure would be removd from Eastern Europe (MFA 2021a, 2021b). Essentially, the Kremlin requested the West to acknowledge Russia's self-proclaimed sphere of influence—but with no success.

As a result, tensions were near a boiling point in late 2021 and early 2022. Given Ukraine's civilizational and geostrategic importance for Russia, any government in Moscow would have likely increased its pressure on Kyiv—though not necessarily embarked on a large-scale invasion. Russia, for example, could have enforced a naval blockade of Ukrainian ports or made a limited push along the Sea of Azov to Crimea, thereby creating a land corridor to the peninsula. Moscow, however, decided to "go big" and launched a full-scale assault.

## Proximate Causes: Putin's Misperceptions and Russia's Personalized Power System

According to our model, the proximate causes of Russia's invasion are the personal preferences and beliefs of Putin coupled with Russia's highly centralized and personalized political system. In conjunction, these two factors can account for the massive scope and scale of Russia's attack.

As noted above, the initial battle plan was to make a dash for Kyiv, depose the Zelensky government, and replace it with a reliably pro-Moscow regime that would reorient Ukraine toward Russia. In hindsight, it is clear that the Kremlin's expectations about a quick and easy victory did not play out. Russian planners may be forgiven for having misjudged the military balance of power. Most Western analysts, too, expected that Kyiv would fall in a matter of days. However, Western analysts also stressed that Kyiv's fall would not be the end of the war. Just the opposite: They concluded that any large-scale incursion was likely to trigger armed resistance and partisan warfare—and that the forces Russia had gathered were utterly unprepared for that (see, e.g., Dobbins 2022; London 2022; Nagle 2022). According to any standard military handbook, successful counterinsurgency campaigns require approximately 20–25 troops per 1,000 inhabitants. Going by this metric, a simple back-of-the-envelope calculation shows that Russia would have needed roughly 880,000 to 1,100,000 soldiers to occupy Ukraine—rather than the assembled 180,000 to 200,000 troops. There are also reports that Russian officers marching on Kyiv had packed their ceremonial uniforms for a victory parade in the Ukrainian capital (Ponomarenko 2022). All of this indicates that the whole campaign was predicated on the assumption that large parts of the Ukrainian population would not resist, perhaps even greet the Russian troops as liberators.

This is an odd assumption. Even before the war, a wide range of publicly available surveys and sociological studies showed that Ukrainians had formed a strong national identity over time, especially after Russia's takeover of Crimea in 2014. Opinion polls also suggested that the majority of the population, including the majority of Russian-speaking Ukrainians, were prepared to fight a Russian invasion (KIIS 2021).

This raises the obvious question: How could the leadership in Moscow get it so wrong? Given the limited access to internal policy documents, it is impossible to answer this question conclusively. Based on circumstantial evidence, however, it seems reasonable to suggest that Putin's personal belief system was a central factor. When he announced the "special military operation" in a televised message, Putin urged the Ukrainian forces to lay down their arms. One could simply write off his comment as war propaganda. However, this remark was

consistent with other statements by him, and thus could also be seen as a window into Putin's calculations. Putin, as mentioned above, has repeatedly put forth the argument that Ukrainians and Russians are essentially one people. This theme was reiterated in his war speeches on February 21 and 24 (Putin 2022a, 2022b). The speeches were highly emotional and passionate but also rambling; it seems likely that Putin himself had written them. It is of course impossible to know exactly what was in Putin's mind prior to the attack. The fact is that the way in which Russia launched the war fits with the pattern of Putin's belief that there is no such thing as a Ukrainian nation, and hence, there was no robust resistance to expect (Jones 2022).

This leads to the next question: Why did nobody in Putin's inner circle warn him that the belief about an easily winnable war was misguided? It is here that domestic political factors enter the picture. In Russia's centralized political system, no checks and balances were in place that could have prevented Putin from ordering a large-scale attack. What is more, in recent years, Putin has surrounded himself with a coterie of handpicked loyalists, many of whom have a background in the security and intelligence services. Hence, one would expect to find a significant risk of groupthink. Putin and his close associates may have become wedded to basic assumptions about Ukrainians' unwillingness to resist and, by extension, unduly confident about the possibility to conduct a large-scale attack—without engaging in a robust and candid debate about the risks involved (Casey and Gunitsky 2022; Galeotti 2022).

Quite plausibly, it also might be the case that some members of Putin's inner circle simply were afraid to challenge his preexisting views for fear of reprisal. There are indeed strong indications of self-censorship. Take the live broadcasting of the abovementioned session of Russia's Security Council. Several of the Security Council members appeared frightened, afraid to voice any divergent views. The most vivid example was the presentation by Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) director Sergei Naryshkin, who was dressed down by Putin after having suggested that one might consider giving the West "a last chance" (Vasilyeva 2022; for the full text of the meeting, see Kremlin 2022).

There are also indications that Russian intelligence analysts reported to Putin what he wanted to hear. According to the London-based Royal United Service Institute (RUSI), in the run-up to the war, the Fifth Service of the FSB conducted a study about the feasibility of removing Zelensky from power. The FSB concluded that internal divisions and general lack of support for Zelensky made Ukraine an easy target (Watling and Reynolds 2022). Indeed, before the war, Zelensky's approval ratings had fallen to less than 25 percent, and he faced numerous domestic problems ranging from high unemployment to political infighting. Yet, domestic political infighting and low popularity of a sitting government rarely, if ever, translate into support for an invading force. On reflection, it is bewildering that trained intelligence officers could produce such shoddy analysis. While lack of accessible records makes it difficult to know for certain, it seems likely that the FSB's military-intelligence analysts tailored their estimates to Putin's view of Ukraine (Dylan, Gioe, and Grossfeld 2023).

Taken collectively, the available evidence suggests that Putin's misguided view about Ukraine, coupled with overly centralized decision-making structures, go a long way to explain the choice of Russia's intervention strategy. In other words, while almost any Russian government would have felt impelled to counter Ukraine's westward drift through coercive means and instruments, it seems unlikely that another leader in the Kremlin would have launched a large-scale ground invasion. It is in this sense, we argue, that an integrated approach combining international, domestic, and individual-level factors can provide a "fuller" explanation of the underlying drivers and scope of Russia's attack on Ukraine.

## Conclusion

The debate about the motives behind Russia's war against Ukraine is in full swing. This article has taken stock of this debate and identified three sets of explanations: decision-making accounts focusing on Putin's mindset and his neo-imperial designs; domestic political accounts emphasizing the importance of regime security; and geopolitical accounts suggesting that Ukraine's growing politico-strategic alignment with the West was the principal reason for Russia to attack. The article has shown that all three perspectives provide some important insights but also that each perspective displays analytical shortcomings and limitations.

Building on this, the article has argued that a "fuller" explanation requires us to explore the interrelation of different factors. Moving beyond the general claim that "everything somehow matters," we offered an account focusing on the interplay of three sets of factors: first, Ukraine's strategic and historical-civilizational importance to Russia; second, Moscow's declining influence in and over Ukraine; and third, Putin's misguided views on Ukrainian statehood coupled with Russia's highly centralized and personalized political system.

The previous section has demonstrated that this compound model provides a plausible explanation for the underlying drivers and scope of Russia's attack. That said, we readily acknowledge that the analysis is suggestive rather than conclusive, as it relies largely on circumstantial evidence. Thus, further research and testing is needed if and when more evidence comes to light, such as official minutes, private memoranda, and diplomatic cables. Of course, there are other ways in which systemic, domestic, and individual-level factors can be combined to explain Russia's attack. What is clear, however, is that explanations focusing on a single factor fall short of providing convincing accounts. On reflection, this should not be a terribly controversial claim. After all, few major foreign policy decisions and events in international politics have a single cause. Russia's war in Ukraine is unlikely to be an exception to that rule.

The contributions that follow provide some in-depth analyses about different aspects of the multicausal model outlined above, but they also go beyond it and offer additional insights. In the first article, Elias Götz asks how Belarus could become a bridgehead of Russia's large-scale attack on Ukraine, given that the Lukashenka government a few years earlier appeared to be moving out of Moscow's orbit of influence. Arguing that existing explanations centered on regime type and ideology are

incomplete, Götz proposes a realist patron–client theory to explain the causes, conduct, and consequences of Russia's Belarus policy. In addition, he briefly discusses what this means for the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The second article, penned by Bettina Renz, provides a nuanced analysis of why Russia's poor military performance during the initial stages of the war came as a surprise to many in the West. She shows that following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, prevailing Western narratives created an unrealistic image of the Kremlin as an almost mystical strategic actor. Moreover, Renz reminds us of the general challenge of assessing and measuring non-material factors in military affairs, such as morale, corruption, and leadership. In addition, she highlights the complexity of strategy and discusses how contingency, chance, and the two-sided nature of conflict make it difficult to predict the outcome of any war. In conclusion, Renz warns against basing future assessments of Russian military power solely on its performance in 2022.

In the third contribution, Per Ekman unpacks the mechanisms that underpinned Ukraine's shift to a firm pro-Western foreign policy in 2014, which occurred after two decades of balancing between Russia and the West. This shift, he argues, was partly a result of the fragmentation of the Donetsk elite after the Euromaidan Revolution. Relatedly, territorial losses due to Russia's occupation of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk excluded millions of Ukrainian voters, which weakened the support for pro-Russian political forces inside Ukraine. Furthermore, Ekman shows that events in 2013 and 2014 led to changes in Ukraine's existing discursive landscape, as the country's predominant foreign-policy narratives became increasingly pro-Western and anti-Russian.

In the fourth article, Tor Bukkvoll and Frank Brundtland Steder examine Ukrainians' willingness to fight and resist. Presenting original survey data, they show that Ukrainians' willingness to fight and resist increased dramatically after Russia's 2022 attack. Moreover, Bukkvoll and Steder suggest several factors to explain this trend, including a rise in civic, but not ethnic, sense of national pride; increased trust in Ukrainian political institutions; a rise in trust in the Ukrainian armed forces; and an impression that Ukraine is not alone in its war against Russia.

In the fifth contribution, Tracey German explores the broader implications of the 2022 war by looking at Georgia and Moldova. The article uses the concept of liminality to capture the difficult geopolitical situation of the two states. She notes that while Russia's war against Ukraine has reinforced the EU's commitment to support these "in-between" states, it has also resulted in increased pressure from Moscow. At the same time, there continue to be domestic political challenges in both Georgia and Moldova. As a result, German concludes that the two remain in a liminal condition, both spatially and temporally, which is to say that even though they have rejected their post-Soviet pasts, they are still not fully included into the European community.

In the final article of this special issue, Roy Allison takes on the important task of critically deconstructing the legal, pseudo-legal, and political arguments used by Russia to legitimize the war against Ukraine. Allison identifies a realpolitik core of Russia's legal claims and discusses the weaknesses of this line of argumentation. He then moves on to examine the Kremlin's political rhetoric – such as Putin's frequent references to the notion of "historic justice". Allison concludes that Russia's abuse of legal and normative arguments poses not only a threat to Ukraine, but also to the existing system of global rules and norms.

Taken together, these articles offer a range of fresh information as well as interpretations and arguments about different aspects of Russia's war in Ukraine. As such, we hope that this volume will serve as a valuable repository of knowledge and a source of inspiration for future research projects.

## Notes

1. This overview extends previous analyses about the causes of Russia's near abroad assertion (Götz 2017, 2022a; Götz and MacFarlane 2019).
2. The original RIA editorial is still accessible through the internet archive *Wayback Machine* via the following URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20220226051154/https://ria.ru/20220226/rossiya-1775162336.html.

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