

Ukraine as Putin's Ideological Project

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On March 16, two weeks after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin called his advisors to a meeting about Russia's socioeconomic situation. But they did not discuss Russia's growing isolation or the fact that international companies were pulling out of Russia. The discussion—or rather, the Russian president's monologue—developed into a thirty-minute tirade on Ukrainian history, Russia's internal enemies and the West's alleged ambitions to divide up Russian territory.

Historians and political scientists tend to explain war in terms of power balances and dominance. Thus, Russia's aggression toward Ukraine, which began in 2014, has been described as an attempt to secure military strategic assets, or as an attempt to prevent Ukraine from joining the European Union and NATO. In December 2021, when the Kremlin began a diplomatic offensive to revise the European security order, the demands included a retreat by NATO to 1991 borders and the permanent "Finlandization" of Ukraine, i.e. restriction of the country's sovereignty and self-determination.

These strategic aims seemed easy to explain, coming as they did from a state that for decades, even centuries, has believed itself to be under threat. The crux of the matter is that reasons and motives can also easily be rationalized. There are, however, other factors that cannot be ignored, such as ideology and worldview. It is reasonable to assume that Putin's particular ideas about Russia's national identity and place in the world, long seen as curious anachronisms, have come to play an influential role in Russia's foreign policy.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 appeared to increase Putin's isolation, but Russia's president had already adopted a more Manichean and anti-Western worldview. Russia, he has declared, should not be seen as part of Europe, but rather comprises an "indivisible civilization" with its own unique political and cultural heritage and form of governance. He presents the Russian model of society as a spiritual bastion against liberalism and "boundless" freedom at a time when other European countries have supposedly turned their backs on the past. "Rights are the greatest unfreedom," explained the Russian parliamentarian Yelena Mizulina in an Orwellian way in April 2019. "The more rights there are, the more unfree we become."

The Russian president introduced his reflections to an international audience for the first time at an international forum in the Fall of 2013: “We can see how several Euro-Atlantic countries actually reject their roots, including the Christian roots that comprise the foundation of Western civilization.” He laid out his thoughts on Western society in moral decline. Liberal democracies, declared Putin, “deny moral principles and all traditional identities.” By sanctioning same-sex marriage and HBTQ rights, concluded Putin, these countries equate “a belief in God with belief in Satan.”

Putin has long tried to position himself as a paragon of a more “genuine” conservative and illiberal civilization, convinced of the importance of pushing back against what has been described as the Western world’s normative dominance and intolerance for alternative political orders. In this regard he joined a larger anti-liberal avantgarde, sharing a cause with other authoritarian leaders such as China’s Xi Jinping, Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro. Yet the Kremlin’s illiberal values have been tied up with issues of sexuality and geopolitics in an unprecedented way. In the summer of 2021, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov lamented that the world’s civilizations are “under attack.” He claimed that “schoolchildren in a number of Western countries are taught that Jesus was bisexual.” According to Lavrov’s worldview, the United States is the global leader in perversion and decadence, seeking to “drive a wedge into the Orthodox world.” Note that he did not mention NATO, or the arms race. For Lavrov, the threat against the international order emanates from fictitious school instruction in religion, while the West is portrayed as a civilization doomed to permanent decline.

Russian state media have taken a similar interest in Western culture wars. Feminist debates and contentious questions about religion, migration and ethnicity have been used as examples of moral decline. When Putin decried in a recent televised speech how the writer J. K. Rowling had been “deplatformed” in the West (after her Twitter post about transgender athletes), he was not only displaying a peculiar intellectual interest. He identified parallels with his own situation: the West’s sanctions against Russia were, he argued, an example of the same type of unfair deplatforming.

It is difficult to accept the idea of authoritarian leaders who play the martyr on live TV. But this self-image as a target of others’ political agendas holds a strong attraction and aims to situate Russia within a broader history of exclusion and victimization. Standing up for a belief and paying a high price for it is, after all, the definition of personal courage.

Russia has incorporated the culture war into its international diplomacy. A central concept in this discussion has long been the so-called “Russian world,” which is a symbolic geographical concept only nominally associated with ethnicity or citizenship. This image has roots in nineteenth-century Slavophile discussions of the people who had historically lived within the borders of Imperial Tsarist Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet system in 1991, this idea was revived among conservative thinkers and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church as an imagined community extending beyond the borders of the Russian Federation.

The Russian Orthodox Church has used language later adopted by Putin. In his book *Freedom and responsibility* from 2008, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow draws a fundamental civilizational dividing line in Europe between the Russian Orthodox world and Western liberalism—the latter of which has led, according to him, to an “expansion of destructive foreign social and cultural factors.” The core of the Russian world, he explains, was comprised by Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The Russian struggle for influence in this area thus acquires a deep civilizational, almost existential, significance.

Ukraine has played an essential role in the thinking of the Kremlin as well as that of the Russian Orthodox Church. Medieval Kievan Rus, which adopted Orthodox Christianity from Byzantium, has been claimed as the cradle of the Russian state. During a pilgrimage to Kiev in July 2013, Putin began to speak of Russians and Ukrainians as “a common people” with a “unique system of Orthodox values,” separated merely as a

consequence of “historical circumstances.” Less than a year later, Russian special forces annexed the Crimean peninsula and initiated a war in Eastern Ukraine.

It is hardly surprising to hear Putin legitimate the invasion of Ukraine with reference to the need “to protect the Russian-speaking population” and its “traditional values.” In a verbose essay from last year he avers that Russians and Ukrainians “cannot live without each other.” Ukraine, he continues, are a part of the united state that once was the tsarist empire and thus shares a common history, church and language. Ukraine’s independence is described as a historical coincidence, orchestrated by Western infiltrators, a mistake that must be corrected.

In this way, Putin’s rhetoric combines his critique of the West with an idea of a “genuine” Russia that must be defended. At the same time, it activates familiar Soviet propaganda tropes of internal enemies conspiring with foreign powers against the Russian state. Images have been borrowed from Stalinism and the Moscow show trial indictments. This form of conspiracy thinking has always exerted an attraction by promising order and suggesting that all problems—real or imagined—can be traced to a small clandestine group with evil intentions.

Nikolai Patrushev, long-time director of the Russian security service FSB and one of Putin’s right-hand men, claimed in 2015 that the United States wanted to see the Russian state disappear so that it could take over its natural resources. In support of his claim, he referred to a statement by Madeleine Albright, who as Secretary of State purportedly said that Siberia does not belong to Russia. The quote was false, but it has since been repeated in the Russian debate. The idea of a world out to steal Russian territory has even been repeated by Putin.

Accusations of biological weapons are another recurring motif. In Fall 2018, the Russian president claimed that “someone” was collecting “biomaterial” from the Russian population in order to develop biological weapons that target ethnic Russians. He even accused American agencies of conducting such research in a Georgian laboratory. The same claims have been made in recent months about Ukraine. Without presenting any evidence, Putin has said that the Ukrainian government is conducting “experiments with samples of the corona virus, anthrax, cholera, African swine fever and other deadly diseases,” as well as weapons that kill only ethnic Russians—a particularly bizarre claim in light of his simultaneous rhetoric about Russian and Ukrainians as one and the same people.

All these accusations about the West’s intentions and biological weapons give rise to urgent questions. The spreading of disinformation and conspiracy theories has generally been seen as a tool for sowing confusion and doubt. The Russian security service (and before it the Soviet one) has a well-established reputation as a leading actor within this area. The best-known examples of disinformation campaigns in modern times include Russian interference in the 2016 American presidential election and the KGB’s claims, in the early 1980s, that HIV was developed by the Pentagon.

The question is to what degree members of the Russian elite have become convinced by their own propaganda. Putin speaks of “denazifying” Ukrainian society, which is led by a president of Jewish heritage, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Putin speaks of internal “national traitors” and “fifth columnists” who must be “purged” like “scum.” This form of enemy rhetoric can only serve to prolong the military conflict with Ukraine and lay a foundation for even more authoritarianism in Russia. If Russian politicians believe the rhetoric, it is safe to assume that it also plays a role in their decision-making.

From this perspective, the Kremlin’s willingness to put Russia’s international position on the line through the war with Ukraine is understandable. Putin’s underestimation of Ukrainians’ resistance and national unity is in keeping with his denial of the existence of a Ukrainian nation. Likewise, the will to invade a European neighbor is consistent for someone who distrusts the West’s ability to respond with unity in support for the victim of the aggression, and with harsh economic sanctions against the aggressor.

Finally, the idea of a need to dominate Ukraine is consistent for someone who has convinced himself of a grandiose and righteous historical mission and the need to avenge perceived injustices and violations in order to restore some form of historical justice. In Putin's authoritarian political rule, there are no mitigating voices who might be able to convince him of the opposite. He is entirely surrounded by yes-sayers and sycophants.

The destruction of Mariupol, like the mass executions of Ukrainian civilians in places like Bucha, become conceivable in an ideological context that seeks to dehumanize Ukrainians. The image of Nazis, after all, stands for the worst kind of evil. Crimes against humanity in Ukraine are not considered relevant in a context in which the Kremlin tells its own population that such a country does not really exist.

The implications of this do not inspire optimism among observers who wish to see an end to Russian aggression against Ukraine, as well as to the confrontation between Russia and the West. Conventional incentives based on a mix of calibrated sanctions and concessions are not likely to be sufficient for the establishment of a lasting peace. There is no diplomatic formula according to which Ukraine could cede territory or sign a neutrality agreement in exchange for guaranteed continued stability. Isolated and in conflict with the international community, Putin has created a breeding ground for a confrontation that could well become prolonged and difficult to resolve.



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