



# Why the Russo-Ukrainian War Started Already in February 2014

Julia Kazdobina, Jakob Hedenskog & Andreas Umland  
22 February 2024

## Executive Summary

Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine is not two but ten years old. It began with the armed occupation and illegal annexation of Crimea in February–March 2014 and continued with a covert intervention in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions from April 2014. Moscow's denial of its role in Ukraine, a power vacuum in Kyiv in the initial stages of the invasion, a complicated local context skilfully exploited by the invaders and a western unwillingness to respond resolutely or forcefully allowed the situation to deteriorate and then explode in 2022. The large-scale invasion that started two years ago is perceived by many as a turning point (*Zeitenwende*) but was in fact a continuation of the Russo-Ukrainian War that had begun almost exactly eight years before – on 20 February 2014.

Three ideal-typical narratives seek to reject, question or diminish the significance of the events of February–April 2014 as the start of the war. The three approaches are usually mixed with each other and can be observed in both Moscow's worldwide Russian propaganda campaign to justify its aggression and non-Russian apologists' discourses that rationalize the apathy, equivocation or enmity of their own country vis-à-vis Ukraine. The deep impact of these three narratives on international outlooks on the Russo-Ukrainian War is the main reason why many people outside Ukraine believe that the Russo-Ukrainian War began on 24 February 2022.

The first misleading narrative or approach asserts that it was local and not foreign impulses that started the territorial conflict between Russia and Ukraine. This interpretation takes seriously the Kremlin's theatre play staged to cover up the critical role of Russian regular ground troops and Kremlin-guided irregular armed groups in the initiation of Russia's annexation of Crimea in February 2014 and of Moscow's covert, delegated interstate war in the Donets Basin in April 2014. A second approach sees Russia's capture of Crimea not as an act of war, but as a peaceful transfer. Typically, such narratives also assert the civil and domestic rather than delegated and international nature of the Donbas War of 2014–2022. A third approach does not deny the start of an interstate conflict in 2014 and Russia's crucial role in it, but sees Moscow as provoked into intervening militarily by the impermissible behaviour of Ukraine, the West or both.

This report debunks these three naive or manipulative narratives on the start or origin of the Russo-Ukrainian War.



## Introduction

Many politicians, diplomats and other commentators around the world inadvertently or deliberately date the start of the current Russo-Ukrainian War to 24 February 2022. However, Russia's military attack on Ukraine using regular ground troops and irregular armed groups started almost exactly eight years earlier, in the second half of February 2014. Russia's illegal occupation by force of Ukraine's Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol did not lead to large-scale fighting at the time. This blurs the fact that this hidden military operation by Moscow – and not the so-called special military operation that commenced eight years later – constituted the beginning of the largest war in Europe since 1945. Several weeks after the capture of Crimea, in early April 2014, the first intense fighting in Donbas was triggered by Russian irregular groups delegated by the Russian state to invade mainland Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

Three narratives – principally shaped by Moscow's worldwide disinformation about its armed takeover of Crimea and covert intervention in Donbas – account for this misunderstanding that has been self-perpetuating now for 10 years. Some still follow the early Russian propaganda line – later disavowed by the Kremlin itself – that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine, as well as the outbreak of fighting in Donbas soon after, were determined by local dynamics rather than foreign interference. A second narrative reproduces Russia's bizarre story about allegedly “polite people” (*vezhlyvye liudi*) – or unmarked Russian troops – taking over the Black Sea peninsula by peaceful means. These commentators might not deny Russia's key role in the fateful events in Crimea and the Donbas but date the beginning of war to April 2014. They typically also see the fighting that began then as a civil rather than an interstate war. A third line of argument partly acknowledges the illegal and violent nature of Moscow's attack but presents it as triggered by events in Kyiv. Ukrainian actions are alleged to have left Russia no other choice but to take responsibility to protect Russophone inhabitants of Crimea and Donbas. Although, from this perspective, the war may indeed have begun in February 2014, the initial aggressor was Ukraine and not Russia, which had merely been provoked. We briefly address the inadequacy of all three of these storylines below and formulate some recommendations based on this critique.

## A “Local Uprising” Rather than a Foreign Occupation

The Ukrainian Parliament has officially identified 20 February 2014 as the day the Russo-Ukrainian War began and Russian armed forces first violated officially agreed regulations for their movements on Crimea.<sup>2</sup> At the time, the pro-Russian President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, was still in power, and the eventual outcome of the ongoing Euromaidan uprising in Kyiv was still unclear. Nonetheless, disregarding the terms of the Agreement Between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the Status and Conditions of the Russian Federation Black Sea Fleet's Stay on Ukrainian Territory, a convoy of armoured vehicles illegally left the base of the 810th Marine Brigade of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in the Cossack Bay of

---

1 Jakob Hauter, “Delegated Interstate War: Introducing an Addition to Armed Conflict Typologies”, *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2019), pp. 90-103.

2 “Verkhovna Rada vyznala ofitsiynu datu pochatku okuptsii Krymu: 20 liutoho 2014,” *Radio Svoboda*, 15 August 2015. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news/27249979.html>.

Sevastopol.<sup>3</sup> The Russian Defence Ministry's medal for the return of Crimea lists 20 February 2014 as the starting date of Russia's annexation operation.

Less than two months later, on 17 April 2014, Putin publicly admitted for the first time that Russian special forces had been involved in the February–March events in Crimea.<sup>4</sup> Still later, during festivities to mark the fifth anniversary of the annexation, the de facto head of the Crimean occupation cabinet, Sergei Aksyonov, told a rally in Sevastopol, that Putin himself oversaw the peninsula's annexation. Aksyonov stated that the annexation of the peninsula was a "unique operation", and that everything happened "so quickly, boldly, audaciously that our opponents did not have time to come to their senses".<sup>5</sup> In early 2021, the European Court on Human Rights (ECHR) established that Russia – then still a member – had taken effective control of Crimea by 27 February 2014.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of these and other assessments of the events of late February 2014, some commentators continue to assert that the breakaway of Crimea from Ukraine and its accession to the Russian Federation were driven by local dynamics. The typical reference and matter of dispute in such debates is the pseudo-referendum in Crimea on 16 March 2014. Whatever the assessment of this dubious voting procedure, however, it happened after Russia's occupation of the Crimean Peninsula three weeks before.<sup>7</sup>

By the time of the pseudo-referendum, unmarked regular soldiers of the Russian army had, with some Russian and pro-Russian irregular groups in a secondary role, already completed Moscow's illegal takeover of Crimea. Only after Russia's military capture of the Black Sea peninsula were its inhabitants asked, in no uncertain terms, to ratify this violent act in a sham vote. The illegal annexation was the result not of a dynamic political development within Crimea, but of an audacious operation from outside. It was an act of war.

The story of the continuation of Russia's war in Donbas one month later is somewhat different. It is, however, also a story not of a local uprising, but of Russia skilfully manipulating outside observers into believing it was one. These methods of manipulation involved bringing Russian citizens from the neighbouring Russian Roskov Oblast to pose as pro-Russian protesters. There is no doubt that the war in Donbas was instigated by Russia. On 25 January 2023, the ECHR ruled that Russia exercised effective control over the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, nominally held by "separatist forces" since 11 May 2014. The court cited extensive evidence to support this conclusion, including the presence of Russian military personnel from April 2014 and the large-scale deployment of Russian troops from August 2014. The ruling debunked Russian attempts to depict the so-called separatist republics as legitimate representatives of the local population in Donbas.<sup>8</sup>

---

3 Andriy Klimenko, "Okupatsiya Krymy. Yak tse bulo", *Istorychna Pravda*, 23 February 2023, <https://www.istpravda.com.ua/columns/2023/02/23/162420/>

4 "Putin: V Krimu deystvovali rossiyskie voyennye", *Radio Svoboda*, 17 April 2014, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/25352506.html>

5 "Aksionov pro aneksiyu Krymy: nichoho by ne byshlo, yakby Putin ne keruvav tsieyu operatsieyu", *Radio Svoboda*, 17 March 2019, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-aksenov-putin/29826226.html>

6 Lawfare.gov.ua, "Ukraine vs. Russia (re Crimea)", <https://lawfare.gov.ua/cases/ukraine-vs-russia-crimea>

7 For more on the annexation, see Andreas Umland, "Inwieweit war Russlands Anschluss der Krim historisch gerechtfertigt? Zur Problematik 'realistischer' Annexionsnarrative," *SIRIUS – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2018, pp. 162–169. doi.org/10.1515/sirius-2018-2006.

8 Zakhar Tropin, "ECHR ruling confirms Russian invasion began in 2014", *UkraineAlert*, Atlantic Council, 14 February 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/echr-ruling-confirms-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-began-in-2014/>

Regular Russian troops did not play a major role in south-eastern mainland Ukraine until mid-August 2014. The main actors there were irregular Moscow-led, directed, financed and/or encouraged groups, typically a mix of Russian and Ukrainian paramilitary adventurers, Cossacks, extremists and mercenaries, aided by the Russian secret service. With the Kremlin's encouragement and help, these disparate bands started a chaotic armed conflict that became known as the Donbas War.<sup>9</sup> A mix of high- and low-intensity warfare in the Donets Basin between April 2014 and February 2022 constituted a distinct episode in Russian-Ukrainian relations. However, this period of alternating Russian armed and hybrid operations in the Donets Basin was merely one phase in Moscow's overall war, which started on 20 February 2014 and continues today.

## A “Peaceful Transfer” Rather than the Start of a War

While there is still an ongoing debate about the origins of the Donbas War in April 2014,<sup>10</sup> expert assessments of Russia's takeover of Crimea, which began in February 2014 as an armed invasion, are unanimous. For instance, a 2017 RAND study concludes that “Russia's operation to annex Crimea represented a decisive and competent use of military force in pursuit of political ends”.<sup>11</sup>

Proper assessment of the events in Crimea of February–March 2014 is complicated by the fact that Ukrainian journalists were threatened and harassed, and their equipment and materials sometimes confiscated by armed Russian or pro-Russian personnel on the peninsula. People filming what was happening near Russia's military bases on Crimea were very often attacked. Russian propaganda outlets, on the other hand, moved freely on the peninsula and produced a distorted picture. Nonetheless, it is possible to put together a clear picture of events.

About 20,000 Russian troops took part in the occupation of Crimea. Prominent among them were the 45th Special Forces Airborne Regiment, normally based in Kubinka, Moscow Oblast, which captured the Crimean Verkhovna Rada (Supreme Council) building in Simferopol on 27 February 2014. Together with some pro-Russian irregulars, including the notorious Igor Girkin, it forced Crimea's parliament to initiate the annexation procedure. In August 2014, another Russian army unit, the 76th Air Assault Division, permanently based in Pskov, was decorated with a Suvorov Order by Russia's Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, for its role in the “return of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation”.<sup>12</sup>

To reduce the likelihood of an armed response, Russia took advantage of the local context, that the Russian Black Sea Fleet bases in Crimea were located next to Ukrainian military

---

9 Jakob Hauter, *Russia's Overlooked Invasion: The Causes of the 2014 Outbreak of War in Ukraine's Donbas* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2023).

10 Jakob Hauter, ed., *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014–2020* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2021).

11 Kofman, Michael, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, Andrew Radin, Olesya Tkacheva, and Jenny Oberholtzer, *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1498.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1498.html). Also available in print form.

12 Maksim Solovov, “Pskovskikh desantnikov nazgradili za vozvrashchenie Kryma i drugie zazlugi”, RBC, 22 August 2014, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/22/08/2014/5704210a9a794760d3d40e38>. Ukraine's Military Prosecutor's Office has identified the full array of the Russian military units involved in capturing Crimea, see <https://atr.ua/news/164141-vperve-nazvany-podrazdeleniya-vooruzhennyh-sil-rf-anneksiroyavshih-krym>.

bases and the servicemen knew each other. The family members of Ukrainian servicemen were often Russian by ethnicity or citizenship. Ukrainian servicemen were intimidated and threatened that something might happen to their families. Some were promised that if they joined the Russian army, they would be paid higher salaries. Russia's blockade and takeover of Ukrainian military bases involved sending unarmed irregulars with civilian machinery to break open the gates ahead of the military.

These and other "hybrid" methods made it hard for Ukrainian officers on the spot and political leaders in Kyiv to assess and react to the situation. According to Ihor Tenyukh, appointed Ukrainian Defence Minister on 27 February 2014, there were 15,000 Ukrainian military personnel in Crimea at the end of February 2014, but the number of those soldiers who would have obeyed an order of armed resistance against the annexation was 1,500-2,000.<sup>13</sup> However, such an order from Kyiv was never given. Among the regional Ministry of the Interior troops, the Berkut special forces were the only ones to side with Russia. The rest of the police initially obeyed the Ukrainian government and carried out Kyiv's orders. Whereas there were no reported Russian casualties during the occupation of the peninsula, two Ukrainian servicemen died at this time.

According to the Ukrainian Intelligence Service, there were three stages to Moscow's Crimea operation. In the first, special forces were deployed throughout Crimea from 20 to 28 February 2014. In the second stage, on 2–10 March 2014, the Russian military group in Crimea was brought to the highest level of combat readiness and reconnaissance was carried out. Ships and aircraft were used to counter a potential defence operation by the Armed Forces of Ukraine and NATO standby forces in the Black Sea region. The annexation operation was completed between 10 and 18 March 2014, during which a joint command post was established at the Gvardeyskoe Airfield and a forward command post was set up near Dzhankoy. Over 7,000 military personnel, primarily paratroopers and special forces, were transferred to Crimea by sea and air.<sup>14</sup> Former Russian Security Service (FSB) officer Igor Girkin (alias "Strelkov") – an irregular actor in both the annexation of Crimea and the covert intervention in Donbas – has admitted that only the heavy presence of Russian forces made the so-called referendum on Crimea's annexation on 16 March 2014 possible.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the distinctly military character of Crimea's transition to Moscow's control, some western observers still insist on the salience of local socio-political opinion in the secession. This plays down the external, illegitimate and militaristic nature of the annexation operation. It is typical in such narratives to refer to opinion polls conducted in Crimea in the aftermath of the illegal transfer by various sociological agencies. These seemingly show overwhelming support for the annexation.

However, these apologist narrations of Crimea's capture by Russia do not address some thorny methodological issues. Public opinion research on Crimea before the start of the annexation operation did not reveal an overwhelming drive for secession even among the

---

13 Krym.Realii, "Na moment aneksiyi v Krymy bylo 2 tis. virnykh krayini viyskovykh proti 20 tisykh rosiyskykh soldativ – Tenyukh", 22 February 2016, <https://ua.krymr.com/a/news/27567231.html>

14 Dmitrii Ilitskii, "Kak Moskva gotovilas k anneksii Kryma: dannye razvedki", liga.net, 22 February 2016, [https://news.liga.net/politics/news/kak\\_moskva\\_gotovilas\\_k\\_anneksii\\_kryma\\_dannye\\_razvedki](https://news.liga.net/politics/news/kak_moskva_gotovilas_k_anneksii_kryma_dannye_razvedki)

15 "Russian FSB colonel admits Crimean MPs forced to vote for referendum," *Ukraine Frontlines*, 27 January 2015. <https://ukrainefrontlines.com/opinion/interviews/russian-fsb-colonel-admits-crimean-mps-forced-to-vote-for-referendum/>

ethnic Russians on the peninsula. As late as mid-February 2014, a few days before the start of Moscow's operation to capture the peninsula and at the height of the Revolution of Dignity in Kyiv, only 41 percent of Crimeans approved in an opinion poll, of the prospect of a unification of all of Ukraine with Russia. This, moreover, is a change of status for Crimea that would have been far less disruptive than the peninsula's political and economic separation from the Ukrainian state.<sup>16</sup> In the summer of 2013, a comprehensive qualitative field investigation of sentiment in Crimea by a British researcher found little for the breakaway of the peninsula from Ukraine even among otherwise pro-Moscow and ethnically Russian Crimeans.<sup>17</sup>

This and other research results confirm an earlier trend of a gradual and soft political "Ukrainization" of Crimea's population since 1991. Russia's capture of the peninsula by force in February 2014 was therefore timely for Russia. It was designed to prevent both a growing allegiance to the Ukrainian state and ad hoc resistance to annexation by Crimea's population. However, the seemingly peaceful character of Russia's swift military occupation and political annexation does not diminish its status as an illegal act conducted by Russia's armed forces. It was the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War that continues today.

## A "Defensive Reaction" Rather than an Offensive Action

The most subversive distortion of the origin of the Russo-Ukrainian War concerns less its start date than its political origins. This approach maintains that an existential threat to the Russian nation emanated from – or at least was perceived by Moscow as emanating from – events in Ukraine in early 2014. Both the Russian state and ethnic Russians in Ukraine were allegedly gravely concerned by the putative "coup" in Kyiv and its repercussions for Ukrainian domestic as well as foreign affairs. This narrative is not a naive historical mistake, but rather a deliberate political excuse for the Kremlin's behaviour.

It might not in principle question that the war did indeed start in April or even February 2014, but this apology lays the blame for the war's beginning at the door of Kyiv and the West. According to this portrayal of the nature of the conflict, Moscow was merely reacting to impermissible events in its neighbourhood. Some supporters of this tale go so far as to support Moscow's allegation of a fundamental discontinuity of the Ukrainian state in 2014. The supposed coup invalidated various formal Russian recognitions of Ukrainian territory and independence in several bilateral and multilateral agreements signed by Moscow. However, the 2013–2014 uprising was not illegitimate, as it is still often portrayed. Nor were its repercussions for Russia and ethnic Russians in Ukraine as dramatic as was frequently asserted.

First, the Revolution of Dignity of 2013–2014 was not an anti-Russian riot but a popular protest against President Viktor Yanukovych's increasingly authoritarian rule, as well as his regime's crackdowns on the political opposition, pressure on business, centralization of power, pervasive corruption and estrangement from the EU, among other things. The initially peaceful demonstrations escalated in January–February 2014 when government forces started firing at unarmed protesters. Hundreds were shot dead or seriously wounded,

---

16 Olena Podolian, "The 2014 Referendum in Crimea," *East European Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2015), pp. 111–128.

17 Eleanor Knott, "Identity in Crimea before Annexation: A Bottom-Up Perspective," in: Helge Blakkisrud and Pal Kolsto, eds., *Russia Before and After Crimea: Nationalism and Identity, 2010–17* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 282–305.

including at least 10 law enforcement officers, although no pro-Yanukovych demonstrators were killed.

The uprising ended abruptly when an agreement was reached between Yanukovych and the opposition, and the fighting in Kyiv stopped on the morning of 21 February 2014. Despite the restoration of order, the unpopular president hastily left the capital without resigning his post as head of state. His departure took place several hours after he had signed an agreement with the political opposition, witnessed by the foreign ministers of Poland, France and Germany, as well as Moscow's envoy, the veteran Russian politician Vladimir Lukin. Yanukovych immediately violated a crucial part of this agreement when he failed to sign a law re-establishing the semi-presidential 2004 version of the Ukrainian Constitution, under which Yanukovych had himself been elected in 2010.

Ukraine was still in crisis and events in Crimea were already unfolding. As Yanukovych had left the capital without resigning his post, the hitherto pro-Yanukovych Ukrainian Parliament voted to remove him from office. A formal impeachment process according to the Ukrainian Constitution would have been impossible in this time of crisis, as it would have taken several months.<sup>18</sup> Instead, parliament declared Yanukovych unable to fulfil his duties and he was deposed as president.

Power in Kyiv transitioned temporarily to the Chair of the Verkhovna Rada, Oleksandr Turchynov, who, with the wide support of parliament, became acting president. At the same time, new presidential elections were announced within the constitutionally prescribed three-month period. Ukraine's fifth President, Petro Poroshenko, was elected on 25 May 2014 with a 54.70 percent share of the votes in the first round. The presidential elections were recognized as free and fair by Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), of which Russia is a participant. The course, results and aftermath of events in Ukraine in the first half of 2014 were dramatic but can in no way be seen as justifying Russia's capture of Crimea or covert intervention in eastern Ukraine.

A second, psychological argument emphasising Moscow's threat perceptions is equally misleading. This asserts a crucial role for the existential fear triggered by the Revolution of Dignity at the start of the war on 20 February 2014 but ignores the larger historical context. These apologists follow the Kremlin's line of argument that events in Kyiv provoked Moscow's intervention in the Black Sea. Russia's appetite for Crimea, however, had little to do with a putative change in the peninsula's status in post-Soviet Ukraine, where it was and would remain an Autonomous Republic with special rights for ethnically non-Ukrainian residents. What stood behind the annexation was less the victory of the Revolution of Dignity and its possible repercussions than Russian imperialism, nationalism and irredentism.

The exact timing of Yanukovych's above-mentioned departure from Kyiv, the evening of 21 February 2014, is an important data point. At that moment, Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea was already under way, as it had begun the day before. Russia started its war against Ukraine even though its pro-Russian president was still in power and his demise not yet inevitable. The invasion unfolded at a time when Yanukovych was still present in Kyiv, recognized as Ukraine's head of state and engaged in open-ended negotiations with the

---

18 Maria Popova, "Was Yanukovych Removal Constitutional?", *Commentary*, Ponars Eurasia, 20 March 2014, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/was-yanukovych-s-removal-constitutional/>



opposition and foreign politicians.

The preparations for the takeover of the peninsula had in fact started long before the Revolution of Dignity. Russia had already begun moving modernized military equipment – after signing the so-called Kharkiv Agreement – to its Sevastopol navy base in 2010. In 2012, four brigades of career soldiers were formed in Crimea, equipped with new models of weapons and equipment. Their intensive special training began at the same time.<sup>19</sup> The swiftness and purposefulness of Crimea's takeover in February–March 2014 suggests detailed preliminary planning.

It is possible to go further back. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, there had been many official and unofficial, individual and collective statements by Russian politicians pre-announcing Russia's annexation of Crimea. One event that took place on the Black Sea 11 years before is little known outside Ukraine. The 2003 Tuzla Incident is extremely telling. In this short but characteristic episode, Moscow attempted to dispute Ukraine's ownership of the tiny Tuzla Island in the Kerch Strait, which had been recognized as part of Ukrainian territory. This inconclusive foray of 2003 foreshadowed the operation to occupy and annex Crimea in 2014, and Moscow's full-scale invasion eight years later.<sup>20</sup>

The third and perhaps most popular narrative often acknowledges the start of the war as 2014, but apologists for Russia's behaviour use the well-known justification of NATO's eastern enlargement. This widely shared approach is, of the misinterpretations reviewed above, also the most speculative. Ukraine has until now not moved much beyond NATO's vague 2008 promise that it will one day become a member. Kyiv has not been given a so-called Membership Action Plan or any other clear roadmap for accession.

In the past two years, moreover, the Finnish case should have led to a correction of this apology for Moscow's behaviour in 2014. While the Russian-Finnish border is not quite as long as the Russian-Ukrainian border, it is still very long. In 2022–2023, Finland announced its intention to join NATO, submitted an application and waited just a few months for ratification of its accession.

Finland's accession to NATO has now roughly doubled the length of the NATO-Russia border. In 2022–23, it was about to bring, and has now placed, the Russian leadership's hometown of St Petersburg in a precarious geostrategic position. St Petersburg is now half-encircled by NATO – from Estonia in the west and Finland in the north.

Nonetheless, Moscow's response to this NATO enlargement remained purely rhetorical. Instead of military countermeasures to Helsinki's and Brussels' rapprochement, Russian army units were withdrawn from bases close to Finland in 2022–2023, in the western and northern Military Districts. While Ukraine's nebulous NATO membership perspective is claimed to have triggered the largest war in Europe since 1945, Finland's actual and successful accession to the North Atlantic Treaty did not result in any material reaction from Russia.

Another instructive example of how Moscow behaves vis-à-vis the former Soviet republics has been its approach to Moldova since the early 1990s, when Putin was still a minor

---

19 Center for Countering Disinformation, "Istoriya povzuchoyi aneksiyi Krymu: 2010-2014 roki", 15 March 2023, <https://cpd.gov.ua/articles/istoriya-povzuchoyi-aneksiyi-krymu-2010-2014-roky/>

20 Hanna Shelest, "Lessons from Russia's First Assault on Ukraine: 20 Years Since Tuzla, CEPA, 10 October 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/lessons-from-russias-first-assault-on-ukraine-20-years-since-tuzla/>; Jakob Hedenskog, *Crimea After the Georgian Crisis*, Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2008, pp. 42-43.

bureaucrat in St Petersburg. In 1992, the commander of the 14th Russian Army, the late Aleksandr Lebed, justified his troops' intervention in an inter-Moldovan conflict by the allegation that Moldova's new government was behaving worse than the SS had done 50 years before. Lebed therefore provided more than 30 years before the explanation that Putin would later give for his invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Russian military support for pro-Russian separatists in Moldova led to the consolidation of a separatist pseudo-state, the Transnistrian-Moldovan Republic.

To resolve the issue, Moldova and the West did in the 1990s what many non-Ukrainian observers have been advising Kyiv, Washington and Brussels to do since 2014. Chisinau entered negotiations with Moscow and involved international organizations such as the OSCE in conflict resolution. The West neither economically sanctioned Russia nor supported Moldova by providing weapons.

In 1994, Chisinau signed a treaty with Moscow on the withdrawal of Russia's troops from Moldova. Moreover, in its new constitution adopted in the same year, Moldova defines itself as a bloc-free country, thereby excluding any future accession to NATO. Nonetheless, the remnants of Lebed's 14th Army, now known as the Operational Group of the Russian Forces, are still in Transnistria. They continue to uphold the separatist quasi-regime even though the Moldovan Constitution includes a neutrality clause that precludes NATO accession.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The fateful events in Crimea in February–March 2014 were not a local uprising, a peaceful transfer of territory or an ad hoc Russian reaction to a Ukrainian provocation. They were driven by imperial expansionism and constituted a pre-planned and already full-scale invasion of the Black Sea peninsula. They were a military operation to illegally expand the Russian Federation's territory by force at the expense of Ukraine, and thus the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Moscow's initially cautious use of limited military means was not a sign of unwillingness to escalate. Instead, it was designed to take advantage of Ukraine's unstable situation in the last phase of the Revolution of Dignity, and to dampen Ukrainian as well western responses to armed aggression. This Kremlin strategy has remained effective to this day.

Many observers mistake February 2022 as when the war started. Further journalistic, scholarly and other research is needed on the preparation, course and effects of Moscow's attack on Ukraine in early 2014. Media, political, academic, civic and other commentators should make sure they get the dating of the war correct. Politicians, diplomats and other actors interested in Ukraine's future should explicitly and continuously insist in their public and non-public statements that Crimea's armed occupation in February 2014 was the start of today's war. As Carl Sagan once aptly put it: "You have to know the past to understand the present".



### **Julia Kazdobina**

Visiting Fellow at SCEEUS during January-March 2024. Julia is a Senior Fellow at Ukrainian Prism's Security Studies Program. As former Advisor to the Information Policy Minister of Ukraine (2016-2019), Julia coordinated the drafting of the government information strategy for Crimea, adopted by the Cabinet in December 2018.



### **Jakob Hedenskog**

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.



### **Andreas Umland**

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

### **About SCEEUS**

The Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) is an independent Centre, funded by the Swedish Government, established in 2021. The Centre conducts policy relevant analysis on Russia and Eastern Europe and serves as a platform and meeting place for national and international discussions and exchanges on Russia and Eastern Europe. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

Cover photo: AP Photo/Alexei Alexandrov

### **Previous SCEEUS Publications:**

**Russia in the South Caucasus: Losing, Adapting, Overcoming by Giorgi Badridze, Mahammad Mammadov, Sergei Melkonian & Murad Muradov**

*SCEEUS Guest Report No. 2, 2024*

**Russia and Africa's Middle Powers: Influence beyond the Wagner Group by Ivan U. Klyszcz**

*SCEEUS Guest Report No. 1, 2024*