

1 The Sources of Conflict over Ukraine

But our idea is that the wolves should be fed and the sheep kept safe.

Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

In the early morning of February 24, 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine along four axes with over 150,000 soldiers backed by aircraft, missiles, drones, artillery, and armor. While press around the world said that Russia had “invaded” Ukraine, Ukrainians and their supporters stressed that the invasion had actually begun eight years earlier, in 2014, when Russia seized Crimea and attacked Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, a war which killed over 13,000 people. By the autumn of 2022, despite thousands of casualties on both sides, the war showed no signs of abating. Instead, informed observers were girding for a long war.

What started as a “civilized divorce”¹ when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 became the largest war in Europe since 1945, with consequences that ricocheted around the world. Ukraine’s independence in 1991 took place without bloodshed. The East–West tensions that defined the Cold War had fallen away. For years, Russian leaders stressed that Russians and Ukrainians were one people. Yet in 2014, Russia invaded, seizing Ukrainian territory and bringing Russia and the West to what many saw as a new Cold War. And in 2022, Russia escalated the war dramatically, targeting civilians and calling for the destruction of the Ukrainian state and nation.

How did this happen, and why? How did two states as deeply connected as Ukraine and Russia come to war? How did their relationship come to drive the West’s conflict with Russia? How we answer these questions will determine in large part how actors on all sides approach the choices yet to come, including how to find peace between Ukraine and Russia and how to rebuild post-war relations between Russia, its

¹ The term “civilized divorce” was used to describe the dissolution of the Soviet Union even prior to its collapse, and was used repeatedly throughout the early post-Soviet period.

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neighbors, and the West. There is a great deal at stake in how we understand this conflict, but prevailing understandings are deeply at odds with one another: one school sees the conflict as being caused by Russian revanchism; another attributes it to Putin's need to bolster his autocratic rule; and another blames western expansionism and Ukrainian nationalism. The first two views point to a western strategy of waiting for Putin to leave the scene, while containing Russia in the meantime. The third points to accommodating Russia's claimed security needs by acquiescing to its desire to control Ukraine.

This book will show why neither of those strategies is likely to work in the short term. The roots of the conflict are deeper than is commonly understood and therefore will resist a simple change in policy or leadership. War between Russia and Ukraine, and between Russia and the West, was the result of deep "tectonic" forces as well as short-term triggers. Conflict between Ukraine and Russia is based on structural factors inherent to international politics as well as profound normative disagreements. While we can blame leaders for many of the decisions they have made, their mistakes did not cause the underlying conflicts, which were evident even in the 1990s, when post-Cold War mutual trust was at its highest.

Therefore, simply waiting for Putin to depart the stage in Russia, or for a more accommodating policy from the European Union or the United States, will not bring reconciliation. A return to peace and security would require agreement on a new architecture for security in Europe. Such an architecture could not be negotiated even when the Cold War ended and Russia was democratizing. With an increasingly autocratic Russia, deep East–West antagonism, and a brutal war over Ukraine, a new security architecture is even less attainable now than it was a few years ago. Only profound changes, such as a new democratization in Russia or an abandonment of the post-World War II norms of the West, will improve prospects. The border between Russia and Ukraine, and by extension between free and unfree Europe, will be determined on the battlefield. Even when the current war ends, confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, and between Russia and the West, will remain. Whether anyone likes it or not, Ukraine and the West are destined to be in conflict with Russia for many years to come.

This book has two connected goals. The first is to explain how and why this conflict came about. The second is to provide an account of the relationship between Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the United States from the end of the Cold War in 1989 until the war of 2022. The chronology is a goal in its own right, for no such overview of Ukraine–Russia relations exists. It is also essential for understanding the conflict, since

one of the primary contentions of this book is that the problems that led to war in 2014 and 2022 emerged at the beginning of the post-Cold War period and became increasingly salient over time. The decisions to go to war in 2014 and again in 2022 rested with Vladimir Putin, but the underlying causes of conflict were much deeper. This book focuses on the underlying causes, not because they made the war inevitable, but because they show why Putin and the Russian leadership found that they could not achieve their goals without war.

Competing Visions and Interests after the Cold War

To boil down the argument to its simplest version: the end of the Cold War set in motion two forces that were necessarily in tension: democratization in eastern Europe and Russia's quest to regain its "great power" status and its domination over its neighborhood. Ukraine was the place where democracy and independence most challenged Russia's conception of its national interests. It was not inevitable that this conflict would lead to violence, but neither was it likely to resolve itself.²

While Russia was determined to remain a great power and a regional hegemon, Ukraine was committed to independence. Even those Ukrainian leaders who pursued close economic ties with Russia staunchly defended Ukraine's sovereignty. As long as Russia's definition of its great power status included controlling Ukraine, Russia and Ukraine would be at odds. That was true in 1991 and has not changed fundamentally since.

Two broader dynamics – one a traditional problem in international politics, the other new to the post-Cold War era – connected the Russia–Ukraine conflict to broader European affairs in ways that made both harder to deal with. First, the security dilemma, an enduring problem in international relations, meant that the steps that each state took to protect its security were inevitably seen as threatening by others, spurring a cycle of action and reaction. Russia's "peacekeeping" in Moldova and Georgia was one example. The eastward enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was another.

Second, the spread of democracy fed the security dilemma, making states in the West feel more secure but undermining Russia's perceived national interest. Because they believed in the importance of democracy, and because they believed that democracy strengthened security, western leaders promoted the extension of democracy and the institutions

² On conflicts of interest between Russia and the West, see William C. Wohlforth and Vladislav Zubok, "An Abiding Antagonism: Realism, Idealism, and the Mirage of Western–Russian Partnership after the Cold War," *International Politics* 54, 4 (2017): 405–419.

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that supported it. While Russia did not appear to oppose democracy itself, it felt threatened as new democracies sought to join the principal institutions of European democracy, NATO and the European Union. The further this process went, the more resentful Russia became, and Ukraine was more important to Russia's perception of its interests, to its national identity, and to Putin's regime, than any other state. Fyodor Lukyanov wrote that "[I]n their [Russians'] view, Russia's subordinate position is the illegitimate result of a never-ending U.S. campaign to keep Russia down and prevent it from regaining its proper status."³

This merger of democracy and geopolitics was new, but it had an effect that looked familiar. To the extent that Russia turned away from liberal democracy while Europe embraced it, it was inevitable that there would be some border between democratic and nondemocratic Europe. In an earlier era, this had been called the "iron curtain." Would a new dividing line be Russia's border with Ukraine, Ukraine's border with Poland, or somewhere else? Could a zone of neutrals provide a "buffer" between Europe's democratic and nondemocratic regions? Perhaps, but no one wanted to be in that zone, and the idea of it clashed with European norms. A new division of Europe could be avoided only if Russia consolidated democracy and gave up its great power aspirations. The first of these failed and the second was rejected. It has been Ukraine's bad luck to have the conflict played out on its territory, as has so often been the case throughout history.

Debating the Causes of the War

Since the outbreak of conflict in 2014, a great deal of literature has emerged on it, which has three defining characteristics. First, much of it focuses on assigning blame. Second, much of it focuses on events beginning in 2013, and examines earlier developments only selectively. Third, it tends to focus either on the international or domestic sources of behavior, rather than investigating how they interact.

While much of the work published in the West takes it for granted that Russia is responsible for the conflict, a strident minority takes a position, closer to that of the Russian government, that the West and Ukraine forced Russia into a corner where it had no choice but to act.⁴

³ Fyodor Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place," *Foreign Affairs* 95, 3 (May/June 2016): 30–37.

⁴ The tendency to focus on blame is discussed in Paul D'Anieri, "Ukraine, Russia, and the West: The Battle over Blame," *The Russian Review* 75 (July 2016): 498–503. For other reviews of the literature, see Peter Rutland, "Geopolitics and the Roots of Putin's

While assigning blame is irresistible, work that focuses on prosecuting one side or another tends to choose facts and assemble them selectively in ways that are at best one-sided and at worst misleading. Even excellent scholars have resorted to simplistic renderings of blame: John Mearsheimer stated that “the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault,” while Andrew Wilson wrote that “the Russians went ape.”⁵

Assigning blame leads us to attribute considerable freedom of choice to leaders, minimizing the constraints they faced. Even those works that are more balanced in assigning blame tend to stress the ability of leaders to shape events and to underestimate the international and domestic political constraints on their policy choices. Some authors criticize the West for what it did, others for not doing more,⁶ the common assumption being that leaders had a great deal of latitude to choose. Examination of the debates at the time makes clear that leaders frequently did not see the situation that way themselves. Policy makers often felt tightly constrained. The explanation developed here explores those constraints, which include the security dilemma, the impact of democratization, and domestic politics.

Second, much of the scholarship on the conflict has been incomplete temporally. Much of it has focused, quite reasonably, either on the

Foreign Policy,” *Russian History* 43, 3–4 (2016): 425–436 and Michael E. Aleprete, Jr., “Minimizing Loss: Explaining Russian Policy: Choices during the Ukrainian Crisis,” *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 44 (2017): 53–75. Among those blaming the West and Ukrainian nationalists are two very prominent scholars of Russian politics, Richard Sakwa and Stephen Cohen, and two prominent scholars of international security, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, as well as the scholar of Russian foreign policy Andrei Tsygankov. See Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014); Katrina Vanden Heuvel and Stephen F. Cohen, “Cold War against Russia – Without Debate,” *The Nation*, May 19, 2014; John Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, 5 (September/October 2014): 77–89; Stephen M. Walt, “What Would a Realist World Have Looked Like,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, January 8, 2016; and Andrei Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin’s Last Stand: The Sources of Russia’s Ukraine Policy,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, 4 (2015): 279–303. For those who put the blame on Russia, see Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); Taras Kuzio, *Putin’s War against Ukraine: Revolution, Nationalism, and Crime* (Toronto: Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Toronto); Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia’s New Nationalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); and Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), especially chapter 23. For a work that assigns blame more evenly, see Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁵ Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault,” 1; Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis*, vii.

⁶ See Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, “Who Lost Russia (This Time)? Vladimir Putin,” *The Washington Quarterly* 38, 2 (2015): 167–187.

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period from November 2013 through spring 2014 or the outbreak of war in 2022 (about which scholarship is just beginning to emerge). Daniel Treisman zeroed in on Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Crimea, identifying four schools of thought: "Putin the defender," responding to the potential for Ukraine to join NATO; "Putin the imperialist," seizing Crimea as part of a broader project to recreate the Soviet Union; "Putin the populist," using the annexation of Crimea to build public support in the face of economic decline; and "Putin the improviser," seizing a fantastic opportunity.⁷ Exploring that decision is crucial, but it does not explain how we got to that point, or why Putin then pursued a much wider conflict in 2022.

The conflict of 2014 was not caused simply by the overthrow of the Yanukovich government any more than World War I was caused only by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. In both cases, deep mutual fears that the status quo in eastern Europe might change irreversibly prompted leaders to be more risk acceptant than they normally would be (the crucial difference was that in 2014, unlike in 1914, the other European powers did not rush to join the war). Similarly, the much larger war of 2022 was not caused by the crisis that emerged in late 2021, or even by events since 2014, but by dynamics that emerged when the Cold War ended.

Because the long-term antecedents of the invasion are crucial to our overall understanding of the conflict, this book chronicles the evolution of Ukrainian–Russian relations since 1991, showing that while violence was never inevitable, conflict over Ukraine's status emerged prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union and never receded. Similarly, while the collapse of communism ended the Cold War, it did not create a shared understanding of Russia's role relative to the West in post-Cold War Europe. While it seemed reasonable to believe that these disagreements would be resolved over time, the opposite happened, and we need to understand the forces that widened differences rather than narrowing them.

Third, the complexity of the relationships involved has been neglected, because it is difficult to focus at the same time on internal affairs in Ukraine and Russia, on their relationship with each other, and their relationships with the West. However, doing so is essential, because by

⁷ Daniel Treisman, *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2018), chapter 11. Treisman finds problems with all four explanations, and ends up arguing that the primary goal was preventing the loss of the naval base at Sevastopol. He points out that while the military part of the operation seemed well prepared and ran very smoothly, the political arrangements, including who would be in charge in Crimea and whether Crimea would seek autonomy or to join Russia, seemed chaotic and improvised.

the time of the Orange Revolution in 2004, Ukraine's domestic battle between pluralism and authoritarianism was tightly connected both to its battle for greater autonomy from Russia and to Russia's burgeoning conflict with the West. This conflict is neither simply a domestic Ukrainian conflict that became internationalized nor a great power conflict fought over Ukraine. It is first and foremost a conflict between Ukraine and Russia, but is connected to domestic politics in both countries and to both countries' relationships with Europe and the US.

Locating the Sources of International Conflict

Few of the existing works make use of the large literature on international conflict. Using that literature, we can reframe the question in terms of where we look for sources.⁸ One set of works locates its explanation inside of the Russian government, in the nature of the Putin regime itself. A common argument is that Putin's need to bolster his autocracy was a driving force in the decision to go to war. In this view, Putin has a great deal of agency.⁹

Two other schools of thought see Russia responding to external rather than internal factors. One of these sees Russia as seeking expansion, but for international rather than domestic reasons. Another sees Russia as reacting against western expansion. While these approaches put the blame on different actors, they both fit into the school known as "defensive realism," which posits that states can usually manage the challenges inherent in the anarchic international system, absent an aggressive "rogue state." The assumption that conflict depends on aggression leads these authors to identify one side or the other as taking actions to undermine the region's security.¹⁰

The school of "offensive realism" is more pessimistic, in that it sees the international system as bringing even nonaggressive states into conflict, as states that seek only security unintentionally cause security threats to others. In this view, one does not need to identify an aggressor to explain conflict. This book takes that perspective seriously. Russia chose to attack Ukraine, both in 2014 and in 2022, but it did not do so in a

⁸ This categorization follows loosely that of Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51 (October 1998): 144–172.

⁹ Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis*, and Stoner and McFaul, "Who Lost Russia," share this perspective. A deeper discussion of this perspective is in Chapter 9.

¹⁰ Not all the authors who advance these arguments have always been identified with defensive realism. Mearsheimer's extensive scholarship generally falls into the school of "offensive" realism, but his argument that the misguided West provoked the war in Ukraine is consistent with "defensive" realism.

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vacuum. While Russia, Ukraine, and the West can all be criticized for the policies they chose, there were, I contend, dynamics in post-Cold War Europe that resisted resolution. While Russia was at fault for resorting to force, it is important to recognize that it perceived security challenges that caused considerable concern. One does not need to see Russia's desire to control Ukraine as a "legitimate interest," as some authors do, to acknowledge that Russia considered the loss of Ukraine to be intolerable. Similarly, even if one considers NATO enlargement to have been a mistake, it was a response to a security problem that did not have another easy solution.

The focus on international and domestic sources need not be mutually exclusive. It seems likely that invading Ukraine advanced both international and domestic goals for Putin and may have been especially attractive because it did. Therefore, this book seeks to analyze how international and domestic factors interacted. Among the key themes are the way that the state of democracy in Ukraine interacted with its international orientation, and the fact that the Ukrainian state was always weak, and then nearly collapsed in 2014. The Russian state, after going through a period of decay in the 1990s, gradually strengthened such that by 2014 it could deploy a highly effective "hybrid" war in Ukraine and by 2022 it could launch a massive invasion.

Overall, then, the approach here is consistent with the school of thought known as "neoclassical realism," which finds that the security dilemma conditions international politics, but that internal factors influence how states respond to it. This approach differs from prevailing interpretations by acknowledging that the various leaders saw themselves as being constrained by both international factors and domestic politics, such that they had less freedom of maneuver than many analyses have attributed to them. We should be more cautious in charging aggression or stupidity. In order to understand these constraints, we need to examine both the security dilemma that existed in Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the domestic politics of the various countries involved, especially Ukraine. In particular, we need to understand the ways in which democratization became merged with geopolitics, repeatedly disrupting the status quo and putting a core value of the West at odds with Russia's sense of its security.

The Approach: Historical and Analytical

This book combines historical and social science approaches. The questions of what happened and why are tightly linked. Therefore, we combine a chronological narrative with a set of social science concepts that

help reveal the dynamics and patterns that connect events over more than thirty years. The book is not, strictly speaking, a work of history, as it is not based primarily on archival sources. But considerable attention is given to describing what happened, and to looking at how the actors at the time explained what they were doing. Their views are gleaned from the statements they made at the time, as well as later accounts and interviews conducted in Ukraine.

The narrative account, which traces the evolution of Ukraine–Russia and Russia–West relations since 1989, is structured by a set of analytical themes that identify the underlying dynamics of the conflict, and that show the connections between this case and broader patterns in world politics. This approach requires a theoretical eclecticism that brings multiple theories to bear on the problem rather than insisting on fitting the complexities of the case into a single perspective.¹¹

Analytical Themes

The conflict that turned violent in 2014 and escalated in 2022 was rooted in deep disagreements about what the post-Cold War world should look like. Those differences emerged with the end of the Cold War and have endured. They constitute each side's perception of what the status quo was or should be. Actors were willing to take heightened risks when it appeared their conception of the status quo was under threat. Three dynamics explain why those conflicts of interest could not be mitigated despite the presumably benign environment after the end of the Cold War. First, the security dilemma, a common phenomenon in international politics, meant that actions that each state took to preserve its security created problems for others and induced fears about actors' intentions. Second, the spread of democracy complicated matters considerably. Because new democracies sought to join Europe's democratic international institutions, the European Union and NATO, democratization took on geopolitical consequences that the West saw as benign and that Russia saw as threatening. With Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution the merger of democratization and geopolitics became nearly complete. Moreover, the progress – and the backsliding – of democratization in the region meant that the status quo was repeatedly disrupted, raising new fears and new conflicts. Third, regardless of the level of democracy in the various states, domestic politics repeatedly undermined cooperation

¹¹ Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics: Reconfiguring Problems and Mechanisms across Research Traditions," *Perspectives on Politics* 8, 2 (2010): 411–431.

and concessions. In the United States, in Russia, and in Ukraine there was almost always more to lose and less to gain domestically from taking a conciliatory policy than from taking a harder line. Moreover, the fact that Russia rebuilt a strong state after 2000, while Ukraine's remained weak and divided, made it increasingly possible for Russia to see a military solution as viable.

In sum, while the end of the Cold War resolved some questions, it created several more, including the status of Russia and Ukraine in relation to each other and to Europe more generally. Traditional security challenges such as the security dilemma remained, and a new one – the merger of democratization with geopolitics – emerged. Oddly, the end of the Cold War did not make conciliatory policies popular with voters or elites in the United States, Ukraine, or Russia. Taken together, the recipe was corrosive: conflicts of interest were reinforced and where strong, skilled leadership might have reduced conflict, leaders repeatedly faced countervailing domestic pressures.

These dynamics have been largely ignored in accounts of relations between Ukraine, Russia, and the West, but if we take them seriously, we need to look much less hard for someone to blame for the fact that Russia's goals collided with those of Ukraine and the West. The actors were impelled to step on each other's toes whether they wanted to or not. This did not make war inevitable or justifiable, but it did guarantee a certain amount of friction, and it meant that unusual leadership would be required to manage the conflicts of interest and hard feelings that resulted.

Competing Goals and Incompatible Perceptions of the Status Quo

As the Cold War ended in 1989–1991, leaders in Russia, Europe, and the United States perceived a dramatic reduction in tension and an increasing harmony of interests and values. But Russia and Ukraine held vastly different expectations about whether their relationship would be based on sovereign equality or on traditional Russian hegemony. Similarly, while the West believed that the end of the Cold War meant that Russia was becoming a “normal” European country, Russia strongly believed that it would retain its traditional role as a great power, with privileges like a sphere of influence and a veto over security arrangements.

The actors had very different understandings of what the status quo was, and therefore which changes were “legitimate” or “illegitimate,” which were benign or harmful, and which were signs of bad faith or aggressive intent on the part of others. While most Russians welcomed the end of