



The Long Shadow of the Soviet Union: Demystifying Putin's Rhetoric Towards Ukraine

BJÖRN ALEXANDER DÜBEN



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Demystifying Putin's Rhetoric
Towards Ukraine

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With tensions running high in Eastern Europe, analysts the world over are trying to gauge what strategy the Russian government is pursuing towards Ukraine. Having deployed military units from all over Russia amassing close to 120,000 battle-ready troops, around 40% of Russia's deployable army, near the border, the decision on whether or not to invade Ukraine (again) essentially hinges on one man. In Russia's authoritarian political system, such decisions are not made by parliament or through public opinion, are based on the decisions and perceptions of Vladimir Putin and his closest confidants. Whatever goes on in Putin's head we cannot know. However, it is possible to analyse the Kremlin's own public claims and statements regarding Ukraine, contextualising them with reference to past Russian conduct, and to try deciphering what might be the most likely motivations for Putin's military brinkmanship on Europe's eastern edge.

What are the Kremlin's claims about Ukraine?

In trying to justify its unprecedentedly threatening force posture, the Kremlin's narrative in recent weeks has essentially revolved around two distinct claims:

Claim 1:

Kyiv is planning a large-scale offensive attack against the separatist territories in eastern Ukraine.

For years, the frontlines in the Donbas region have essentially been frozen, but in recent months Russian state media and officials have [complained](#) in ever shriller terms

of alleged Ukrainian atrocities against the ethnic Russian population located there. Putin himself went as far as to equate Ukraine's conduct in the region to a ['genocide'](#). While both parties have fought each other with similar levels of brutality (as extensively [documented](#) by an international observer force in the region), none of it appears remotely close to some of the grim depictions of alleged Ukrainian misdeeds found in Russian government and state media releases. Ironically, such accounts are far more reminiscent of events during Russia's own reconquest of separatist Chechnya in the early 2000s—a war which, under Putin's leadership, was fought with [utmost](#) brutality. It also bears remembering that in 2014 the Kremlin had [invoked](#) alleged mass human rights abuses by Ukrainian authorities to justify its invasion and annexation of Crimea. At the time, international (including United Nations) observers could find no evidence to substantiate these claims; instead [documenting](#) countless human rights violations committed by Crimea's new Russian authorities. Beyond its alleged plans to [retake](#) separatist regions in Donbas by force, some Russian state media have suggested that Ukraine might be planning a military incursion into Russia itself—but even a superficial glance at the [balance](#) of military forces (not to mention Russia's massive nuclear deterrent) makes it abundantly clear that Ukraine would never be in a position to launch such an operation by itself. The numbers of troops Moscow is currently amassing, far outnumber those that

would be needed to repel a Ukrainian offensive against separatist-held territories in eastern Ukraine. The bulk of Russia's military contingents are stationed far away from the separatist-held territories, [stretching](#) along the entire length of Ukraine's eastern borders, from occupied Crimea in the south to Belarus in the north, which does not suggest that their purpose is to repel Ukrainian operations against the separatists.

Claim 2:

The second claim, that Ukraine is on a path to joining NATO and would therefore pose an unacceptable threat to Russia's national security, is much less easy to refute. The Kremlin's concerns about Ukraine's involvement with NATO and specifically the US have more substance and appear more genuine. Recent high-level negotiations between Moscow and the West, about deescalating the situation surrounding Ukraine, have overwhelmingly [focused](#) on discussing this claim alone, which therefore merits further scrutiny.

How much substance is there to Russian complaints about NATO enlargement?

For many years, Putin has made it abundantly clear that he considers the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO an unacceptable red line. What is puzzling, however, is why the Kremlin has chosen this exact moment to up the ante

regarding Ukraine's NATO ambitions. Ukraine's post-Maidan governments have openly pursued NATO membership, which the Western alliance had first pledged to Kyiv (albeit as a distant goal) in 2008. But there has been no noteworthy progress in this direction for many years, let alone in recent months. In some core NATO member states, public opinion remains firmly [opposed](#) to Ukraine joining the organization, and NATO's own regulations would probably [prohibit](#) such a step in the foreseeable future. More broadly, while NATO has continued to expand in recent years by admitting several small states from the western Balkans (Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia between 2009-2020), the last time the alliance has expanded eastwards, closer to Russia's borders, was nearly 18 years ago, in March 2004, when multiple Eastern European nations (including the Baltic states) joined the alliance.

So why has Ukraine's relationship with NATO become such a point of contention all of a sudden? It appears as though Putin finally wants to make progress on various issues that have irritated him for a long time. He has long claimed that Washington broke a post-Cold-War promise to refrain from expanding NATO into the territories formerly controlled by the Soviet Union. Whether or not such a promise was actually made remains a matter of [controversial debate](#) to this day. No written treaty to this effect exists, although there exists some evidence supporting Putin's claim that [informal](#) guarantees were given at the time. What bears remembering in this context, however, is that around the same time, in 1994, Moscow had made a pledge of its own, in writing, formally signing and ratifying the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances. In this document, the Russian government [guaranteed](#), alongside the US and the UK, to refrain from threatening the sovereignty and territorial integrity of newly independent Ukraine, in exchange for Kyiv renouncing its Soviet-era stockpile of nuclear weapons.

What also bears remembering, is the context in which NATO's enlargement in Eastern Europe in the late 1990s

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and early 2000s occurred. The process was not so much driven by expansive designs in NATO headquarters or in Washington, but by the active and relentless [efforts](#) of the former Eastern Bloc states themselves to attain full NATO membership—whatever the costs. Their clamouring for membership was largely motivated by historic fears of Russia, which had spent the better part of three centuries invading, subjugating, and colonising these states. Following the end of the Cold War, Moscow could have attempted to assuage these fears and mend its ties with its former client states through confidence-building measures and by honestly confronting its troubled and violent history as an imperial occupier throughout this region. But Moscow took very few such steps.

Instead, subsequent years seemed only to demonstrate that Eastern Europeans’ fears about Russian aggression and expansionism had been well-grounded. Russian troops repeatedly violated the territorial sovereignty of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, while the Kremlin made increasingly concerted efforts to [whitewash](#) Russia’s imperial and Soviet histories. This whitewashing was so pervasive, that historical research into the worst excesses of Stalinism (both at home and abroad) is now effectively being suppressed or even [criminalised](#) by the Russian government. With increasing regularity, senior Russian officials and lawmakers have made ultra-nationalist and overtly neo-imperialist statements about their neighbours. As one of countless examples, in mid-January the Deputy Chairman of Russia’s State Duma, Pyotr Tolstoy, [stated](#) that “Russia should be restored within the borders of the Russian Empire” and that the Baltic states and Finland would then “come crawling” to be back under Russian rule. In light of this, few people in Poland or the Baltic states today doubt that joining NATO was a correct, indeed a necessary choice.

Has NATO enlargement propelled Russia’s military assertiveness, or vice-versa? There is no obvious answer to this chicken-and-egg question. What is certain, however, is

that Russia's current, overtly aggressive posture towards its neighbours has only given greater incentives to those who have not yet joined NATO, to consider doing so. Rather than discouraging further NATO enlargement, Putin's sabre-rattling and aggressive demands have now reignited long-dormant [debates](#) in hitherto neutral states like Sweden and Finland on whether to join NATO after all.

How much of a threat could NATO actually pose to Russia?

Legal and historical questions aside, the Kremlin has made it abundantly clear that it perceives NATO expansion and a purported Western 'encirclement' as a fundamental threat to Russia's national security and, indeed, its survival. Although Moscow disavows any plans to launch an attack against Ukraine, it has consciously [portrayed](#) NATO enlargement as a threat so [severe](#), that it might justify preventive military strikes. It is not surprising that Russia (which has an economic output smaller than Italy) would feel deeply concerned about the growth of a potentially hostile military alliance which, on paper, combines the military and economic power of the United States with dozens of other great and middle powers, along its western flank. However, it is worth pondering how great a military threat NATO could objectively pose to Russia's national security.

There is little to suggest that NATO has

any concrete offensive intentions vis-à-vis Moscow. But even if it did, Russia seems relatively immune to any military threat Washington and its allies could pose. There are few states in the world that can boast a stronger overall deterrent against military aggression and invasion than Russia. As the world's largest state by area, with unmatched strategic depth and access to multiple oceans, Russia is one of very few countries that has not been successfully conquered since the thirteenth century. Besides having one of the world's largest and best-equipped conventional military forces, Russia also possesses one of the world's two largest arsenals of strategic nuclear weapons. Its nuclear second-strike capability is currently being boosted by newly developed hypersonic missile systems which Putin himself [considers](#) 'invincible' and [superior](#) to anything available in the US nuclear arsenals. Moreover, at no time in recent history has Russia been *less* 'encircled' than it is now, as Washington [closed](#) its last military base in Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan) in 2014 and recently evacuated Afghanistan following its 20-year military presence there.

In order to reassure Russia, NATO has long been at pains not to deploy sizable military contingents east of the former Iron Curtain, even on the territory of its own Eastern European member states. This policy was [changed](#) slightly in response to Moscow's 2014 invasion of parts of Ukraine, when NATO began to station around 4,000 'tripwire' troops in the Baltic

states—a [minuscule](#) force compared to the one Russia is currently assembling on the borders of Ukraine. If Putin's rationale for threatening Ukraine is to keep NATO troops and infrastructure far from Russia's borders, then he will likely achieve the opposite, since NATO's response to a renewed, larger-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine would doubtlessly [include](#) a significant expansion of its military presence along Russia's border with the Baltic states and (perhaps) Norway and near Belarus.

Not only is the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO in the near future a very remote one, there have also been no plans to station Western strategic missiles on Ukrainian soil—a concrete threat scenario that the Kremlin has nonetheless repeatedly [invoked](#). To underline its concern about such a scenario, Moscow has [pointed](#) to recent military aid and weapons deliveries to Ukraine by various NATO members. There has indeed been a marked increase in arms sales to Ukraine in recent months, but virtually all of these have been small-scale tactical weapons systems with an obvious defensive purpose, connected to the manifest threat posed by Russian troop concentrations near the border (such as anti-tank missiles). If Ukraine *was* to become a staging ground for Western strategic missiles in the future, it is evident that this would be a matter of utmost concern for the Kremlin. Missiles launched from within Ukraine (whether nuclear or conventional) could be able to hit Moscow within the space of circa, five minutes.

But it is doubtful that there would ever be a clear rationale for NATO to station strategic missiles in Ukraine; if it planned to do so, NATO could already deploy such missiles from the Baltic states—at a similar distance from Moscow and a mere 120 kilometres from Russia's second-largest city, St Petersburg. And with a new generation of hypersonic intercontinental missiles entering Russia's nuclear arsenals—a development that Putin himself has [promoted](#) more strongly than anyone else—dangerously shortened response times to nuclear strikes are already set to become the future norm. It should not go unmentioned that Russia has already unilaterally [deployed](#) nuclear-capable ballistic missiles in its westernmost territory, the exclave Kaliningrad in the heart of central Europe, and has [upgraded](#) its nuclear weapons infrastructure there.

All in all, while Russia's opposition to NATO enlargement is very understandable, there is little to suggest that its geostrategic effects for Russia are remotely as dramatic as the Kremlin presents them to be. Consequently, there are limits to what actions can be regarded as a balanced and reasonable response to that. It is difficult to conclude that developments surrounding Ukraine in recent years pose objective grounds for Putin to perceive a clear and present danger to Russia's national security, let alone one that would justify a pre-emptive invasion of a neighbouring state.

NATO aside, what other motivations might Putin have for considering an attack on Ukraine?

It is also possible (and equally plausible), that the Kremlin's proclaimed fear about a potential future accession of Ukraine to NATO serves as little more than a pretext and that Putin might consider renewed military action against Ukraine for altogether different reasons. The fact that Moscow entered its negotiations with Washington by issuing a range of extremely [sweeping](#) demands, which it could be certain would be rejected—including that NATO refrain from deploying multinational military forces on the territory of many of its own member states—suggests that it might be projecting an image of openness to negotiations merely to convince the world (and its own population) that it was trying to avert an escalation which had long been planned. What could these altogether different reasons be?

One potential reason is *nationalist irredentism*. In recent years, the rhetoric coming out of Russian government circles has been more and more overtly [ethno-nationalist](#), glorifying Russia's historical rule over its neighbouring states through a peculiar mixture of Soviet and Russian-Empire nostalgia. Putin himself has shown a remarkable—some might say obsessive—interest in historical themes. He has taken [time](#) out of his presidential schedule to pen multiple lengthy articles on historical topics, which were roundly [dismissed](#) by foreign historians as unprofessional and poorly researched. Ukraine has frequently been at the [centre](#) of Putin's historical treatises. There is increasing evidence that many among Russia's political elite are beholden to a long-standing nationalist narrative, according to which, Ukraine is not a nation in its own right, but should be considered a historical part of Russia. In a [commentary](#) I wrote in 2020, I explained at length why such views have no basis in historical facts, but why the prevalence of such myths among Russia's political elites has potentially grave implications for Moscow's Ukraine policy. In the following year, the centrality of such motives became even more evident when Putin himself

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penned an [article](#) arguing, at great length, that Ukrainians and Russian are historically one nation. Ominously, Putin's article has since been made a required [reading](#) in Russian military academies.

Is Putin's peddling of such historical myths just a tactical ploy to gain more favour with the nationalist elements in Russian society? Unlikely. Even in unofficial settings, influential members of Putin's inner circle have [espoused](#) such views, explicitly negating Ukraine's historical nationhood. In line with this, Putin and his subordinates have conspicuously [refused](#) to treat or recognise Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's democratically elected president, as a fellow head of a sovereign state.

Putin's apparent nationalist fixation on Ukraine seems to be compounded by the bitter realisation that, the longer the current status quo continues, the more certainly Ukraine will be 'lost' to the Kremlin. Although Putin is unlikely to acknowledge it, this is largely due to the [failure](#) of his own strategic choices. Among its foremost foreign policy goals, Putin's administration has always sought to preserve Russia's political hegemony throughout the post-Soviet space and to exercise direct or indirect influence over these states. One of Putin's preferred strategies in trying to retain dominance over states which sought to pursue a more independent, pro-Western course, has been to deploy regular or irregular Russian military forces to instigate and

perpetuate separatist [territorial](#) conflicts and thus exercise effective control over parts of their sovereign territories. But this strategy has rarely proven as successful as Putin may have hoped. While it has gained the Kremlin control over various breakaway statelets which could then be used as diplomatic leverage and deterrents, its soft power costs have been severe, since it has deeply [alienated](#) the elites and populations of various states that had traditionally been friendly towards Russia, including Georgia and Ukraine.

In the case of Ukraine, Russia's 2014 military intervention yielded control over Crimea and, effectively, large parts of the Donbas, but arguably at the price of 'losing' the rest of the country. Ukrainians have traditionally been divided in their sympathies between Russia and the West, but in 2014 those parts of Ukraine that had traditionally been the most staunchly pro-Russian were effectively severed from the remainder of the state. This, combined with the widespread outrage at Putin's actions and the human toll imposed by the Russian-led military campaign, appears to have decisively [shifted](#) popular sympathies in Ukraine against Moscow. Consequently, there no longer seems to be any prospect of a **democratic** Ukraine moving back into the Russian fold in the near future. This was further underscored in 2021 when Ukrainian authorities [clamped down](#) on some of Putin's remaining key allies in Ukraine, particularly his long-time friend

and confidant Viktor Medvedchuk. All the above might give Putin an added incentive to be toying with the ultimate option—reacquiring control over Ukraine by outright military means.

There is yet another reason why Putin might not be altogether averse to a war with Ukraine, one that is rooted in Russian *domestic politics*, rather than geostrategic concerns for national security. It relates to Putin's apprehensions about preserving his own leadership and the political system he has created to sustain it. For decades, Putin's rule over Russia has drawn its legitimacy predominantly from solid economic growth, which was overwhelmingly driven by consistently rising global prices for oil, gas, and other basic commodities (while the non-resource sector of the Russian economy continued to atrophy). But from around 2013, oil prices began to stagnate and decline, and there are scant prospects that they will return to a *long-term* growth trajectory. Consequently, average annual economic growth in Russia between 2014 and 2020 *shrank* to a mere 0.4 percent, and it appears as though Putin has essentially given up any serious effort to structurally reform the economy. With socio-economic *woes growing* in Russian society, Putin has few means left at his disposal to inspire lasting loyalty among the public. Instead, in recent years there has been a shift to securing Putin's rule through increasingly *overt* authoritarianism and repression in Russia, which appears to be in large part inspired by a realisation that the tools

that had hitherto enabled him to preserve his power within the political context of a 'managed democracy' are becoming less effective.

In this situation, a conflict with the West is something Putin might not actively seek to *avoid*: The one strategy that has consistently worked to boost domestic support for his policies has been *rallying* Russia's population around the flag of resisting ostensible 'foreign aggression' by an implacably hostile West and pandering to the nationalist sentiments shared by many of his compatriots who *cheered* the annexation of Crimea in 2014. An invasion of Ukraine would undoubtedly throw Russia's foreign relations into chaos and devastate its already weakened economy even further, since Washington and its allies are certain to impose harsh sanctions in return. But even this might be a price that Putin is willing to pay, since—at a time when Russia's economic prospects are already very bleak—Putin could cast blame for the ensuing hardships at Western sanctions and distract from his own considerable economic *policy failures*.

Perhaps most importantly, considering his own turn towards overt authoritarianism to preserve his power at home, Putin seems to have a particular dislike for the *example* set by post-2014 Ukraine, namely that of a democratically elected government that grew out of public protests—a 'colour revolution'—against a kindred semi-authoritarian ruler who had *modelled* his own system of governance closely after

Putin's. In light of Ukraine's historical and cultural proximity to Russia, the Kremlin has been at pains since 2014 to portray the Maidan revolt and subsequent democratic rule as a massive debacle for Ukraine—lest it set an unwelcome [example](#) for those in Russia who might clamour for political changes there too. This is compounded by the fact that post-2014 Ukraine has become a haven for countless opposition-linked political [exiles](#) from Russia who continue their agitation against Putin from across the border. It is unclear to what lengths Putin would be willing to go to ensure that the democratic experiment in Kyiv fails, but this likely forms part of his complex strategic calculus regarding Ukraine.

Conclusion

One of the perils of authoritarianism is its concentration of inordinate amounts of power in the hands of a few individuals. The fate of Ukraine now largely rests with Vladimir Putin and his closest associates, and we can at best make educated guesses about their perceptions and intentions. Indeed, there has been some [debate](#) among psychologists whether Putin—after 22 years of near-absolute power and shielded from all those who might dare contradict him—still has a lucid cognitive grasp of what is happening in Russia and the world. In 2014, Germany's then-Chancellor Angela Merkel memorably [stated](#) that Putin seemed to be living “in another world” and “she was not sure he was in touch with reality”. Some useful observations can nonetheless be made based on the statements and prior conduct of Russian officials regarding the general geostrategic environment in which Russia interacts with Ukraine and with NATO. It seems that, in strategic terms, Russia would stand to gain little (and lose a lot) from invading Ukraine. But there are other, equally compelling factors—particularly those pertaining to nationalist convictions and regime preservation—that could be motivating Putin to pursue such a strategy regardless. If that is the case, geopolitical concessions (regarding the future role of NATO, for instance) would be unlikely to significantly shift the balance and change the calculus of the Kremlin, and a more promising strategy to avert further Russian aggression against Ukraine might be to create credible deterrents of sufficient magnitude to convince Putin that the price Russia (and he personally) would have to pay for any invasion would be prohibitively high.



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As tensions between Russia and Ukraine reach an almost-tipping point, Björn Alexander Düben analyses the historical and geopolitical rhetoric Putin and his government have deployed against the post-Maidan Ukraine since 2014. Asking, can this be seen as another Russian assertion of dominance in the post-Soviet region, or could there be reasons closer to home? Why tensions across the border seem to once again be at a breaking point. From global oil prices to regime consolidation, an analysis into the words of Russia's elites could unveil what future Europe is steering towards.



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