

# The Historical and Political Context of the War in Ukraine

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## Abstract

*Perhaps there is no better time to study the past than the present. With monumental events seemingly occurring every six months for the past few years, it is important to take a step back and see how humanity got here. The current invasion of Ukraine will be one of defining events of our century and is far from a spontaneous event. It is the first time in twenty years that one state has invaded another with the goal of total capitulation. The ongoing war, the Orange and Maidan Revolutions, the annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent conflict in the Donbas region of Ukraine, are simply a part of a centuries-long cultural tug-of-war effort between Russia and the lands on its periphery. History shows us that not only is this conflict not random, but it is more than likely not the final act that we wish it to be.*

On December 1, 1991, Ukrainians overwhelmingly voted in favor of leaving the Soviet Union, giving the country's parliament the political backing it needed to formalize its break up with Moscow that had begun on August 24 of that year. Russian influence, however, would continue to be a major part of Ukrainian politics as the country grappled with a legacy of seventy years of Soviet rule. Problems that trace their origins back to the USSR continue to this day and provide for an ideological battlefield between pro-democracy, pro-western Ukrainians, and those aligned with Vladimir Putin's Russia.

## The Revolutions

Revolutions in 2004 and 2014, known as the Orange and Maidan revolutions respectively, sought to counter what Ukrainian citizens had determined to be democratic backsliding in their country and the growing influence of Vladimir Putin on Ukraine. The Orange Revolution in 2004 was the result of a rigged election, made fraudulent by Putin-backed Viktor Yanukovich. The revolution saw over a million Ukrainians brave the winter and take to the streets for seventeen days of protests (Aslund & McFaul, 2006). In the end, the election was overturned and a new one conducted a few months later, this time with numerous foreign observers. Almost a decade later, with Ukraine set to sign a free

trade agreement with the European Union, Yanukovich, elected in 2010, announced that Ukraine would not be signing and yet again, Ukrainians poured into the streets.

For three months there were largely peaceful protests across Ukraine, with hundreds of thousands of participants. Despite popular support for the protests, however, Yanukovich had had enough. On February 19th, 2014, he ordered special police units to begin firing into the crowds of protestors to try to disperse them, eventually leading to the deaths of at least fifty people and injuring many more (Talmazan, 2019). Following the shootings, European diplomats were sent in to broker a settlement between the protestors and the government. Once this agreement was signed, Yanukovich fled Ukraine, eventually turning up in Russia. Following Yanukovich's flight, the parliament voted to remove him from office and instated an interim president until elections could be held. Additionally, the government of Ukraine made moves to make further alignment with the West a top priority (Pifer, 2020). This situation was not ignored by Putin, who had decided that he must act before Ukraine slipped further from his fingertips.

### **Referendums, Annexations, and Separatists**

The annexation of Crimea has been hailed as the "smoothest invasion of modern times" (Simpson, 2014). It went off without a hitch before the world fully processed what was occurring. By transferring troops to Crimea bases in which Russia was legally allowed to operate, Putin was able to place the resources he needed around the peninsula, under the guise of legal action. Once the Russian military had gained control of the peninsula through a relatively bloodless military operation, Moscow staged a referendum that served as the basis and

reasoning for annexation. This referendum is largely considered to be shambolic, as Russia used a veil of free choice, the very same veil it would use in the 2022 annexations of the territory it had captured in its full-scale invasion, resulting in a takeover of the sovereign territory of Ukraine. Following the events in Crimea, Russian-backed separatist movements sprung up in the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.

These separatist movements quickly gained control of large parts of their respective regions, capturing towns such as Donetsk and Sloviansk, with thousands of Russian citizens in their ranks. On May 11th, these groups declared their independence from Ukraine as the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republics (BBC, 2014). Many Western countries viewed these breakaway governments as nothing other than puppets, serving at the whim of Vladimir Putin. In response to this quasi-invasion by Putin, Western countries enacted numerous sanctions on Russia, including a suspension of trade and investment talks as well as military-military communication by the United States government (Gutterman, 2018).

Following months of fighting, with Russia still claiming it was not a party to the conflict and was simply negotiating on the behalf of its friends in the Donbas (Reuters, 2021), negotiators from Germany and France were able to secure a deal between the Ukrainians and Russians, the two alleged belligerents, where both parties agreed on a limited ceasefire. This ceasefire, however, broke down quickly, necessitating the creation of a new one, Minsk II, in February 2015. This new agreement would soon prove to be stabilizing, but ultimately ineffective in stopping the conflict. This ineffectiveness was most likely caused by the fact that both Ukraine and Russia

interpreted the terms of the agreement differently, making full implementation impossible.

The subsequent seven to eight years of conflict was a low simmer, at a constant threat of boiling over into a larger conflict. Abroad, Western countries enacted various sanctions, although they would prove to be largely inconsequential in tempering Putin's actions (Sweet & Hussein, 2022). On the home front, the Ukrainian government overhauled its military and governmental institutions as it looked towards further integration with the West, although problems with corruption persist to this day (Dickinson, 2021). Attitudes towards the current state of play vary widely from country to country. All European and North

American countries have at least enacted sanctions on Russia for its invasion in February 2022, but the majority of nations in Africa, Latin America, and Asia remain in the middle, playing both sides in a highly volatile global economic and geopolitical situation (Haddad, 2023), unconvinced as to whether the fight matters to them or not.

What we find is that these events do not just happen out of the blue. This conflict has been simmering for decades, if not for the entire existence of the idea that the countries of Ukraine and Russia are two separate entities (Plokhly, 2021). Rather than a singular event, this invasion is part of a much larger tapestry that will more than likely continue to be painted.

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