



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**AN INESCAPABLE STRUGGLE:
RUSSIA, THE WEST AND UKRAINE'S BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL**

DAVID BATASHVILI

117

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Russia's ongoing efforts against the sovereignty of Ukraine are undoubtedly among the most significant processes during the present period in international history. The Ukrainian crisis of 2014, coming after the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, confirmed the Kremlin's unpleasant tendency to unilaterally redraw international borders. Even more important is the fact that the struggle for the fate of Ukraine is far from over. It probably has not reached its climax yet, either. As of January 2019, this struggle remains both unresolved and likely to escalate dramatically in the future. The implications of that for European security, and for the international system more broadly, would be huge.

Ukraine is a key battleground of Russia's ongoing attempt at imperial resurgence. Moscow cannot reach its broader geostrategic goals without achieving its objectives in Ukraine. If it does achieve those objectives, Russia will be both empowered and emboldened to arrange the remaining elements of the puzzle, which include dominating its other neighbors and additionally intensified involvement in global affairs.

Putin's Russia shows no sign of retreating from these ambitious goals. At the same time, Ukraine has demonstrated it is not going to be subdued unless its sovereignty sustains critical damage. Ukraine has also demonstrated its capability to offer robust resistance to the Russian attempts to inflict such damage. This dynamic of relentlessly conflicting national purposes and capabilities contains enormous potential of escalation. The ongoing shooting war in the Donbass region and the Russian occupation of Ukrainian territories provide a specific venue where such an escalation might originate, quite literally, at any moment.

A Sample Disinformation Offensive

The world was reminded of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on 25 November 2018, when ships of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) attacked three vessels of the Ukrainian Navy that tried to pass through the Kerch Strait between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. The Russians opened fire on the Ukrainians before boarding and seizing their ships, and capturing the sailors. The attack took place in international waters.¹

The significance of these events goes beyond the Kerch Strait incident itself, because that incident was followed by an aggressive, and potentially very dangerous, Russian propaganda offensive. The Russian disinformation

machine had been targeting the Sea of Azov during 2018,² but after the incident of 25 November, the propaganda effort acquired a new dimension and tempo. Below is a possibly incomplete outline of this campaign:

- 26 November 2018 – Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) **Alexander Lukashovich** says the following at a special meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council:

“Information has surfaced about preparation by the Ukrainian armed forces of a provocation employing **chemical weapons**, with the participation of the foreign intelligence services.”³

- 30 November – A representative of the Russian proxy “Donetsk People’s Republic” (**DNR**) claims that Ukraine is planning to launch an **offensive** in the area of the Sea of Azov port city Mariupol in December 2018.⁴
- 5 December – During a press briefing, the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs **Maria Zakharova** accuses Kiev of intending to “organize another provocation in Donbass,” and to use **chemical weapons**.

Zakharova strives to increase the official air of the accusation by adding: “Such actions can lead to casualties among civilians and violate not only the Minsk agreements, but also international treaties regarding the prohibition and limitation of weapons of mass destruction.”⁵

- 9 December – TASS, a major Russian news agency, reports claims by the **DNR** that the Ukrainians might use their UAVs near the city of Horlivka to stage a provocation with **chemical weapons**, and then blame it on the DNR, using fake videos created by British and Ukrainian military specialists.⁶
- 10 December – Another **DNR** claim, widely reported by the Russian media. The Russian proxies’ representative says that in the following few days, Ukrainians are planning to stage a **chemical** provocation in Mariupol, and then launch an **offensive** in the Sea of Azov area.⁷
- 11 December – The **Russian Embassy in the United States** issues a press release saying: “We call Washington not to turn a blind eye on active preparations of Ukrainian armed forces and extreme right squads along the contact line in Donbass, which may lead to a **bloody scenario**.”⁸

- 11 December – Ukrainian media reports that according to the residents of the Russian-occupied city of Luhansk in the Donbass region, local media outlets are spreading rumors about the coming Ukrainian **chemical attack**.⁹
- 13 December – The spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs **Maria Zakharova** says: “According to our information, in the coming days Kiev intends to stage an armed provocation on the line of contact, in order to... conduct a swift **offensive** in the Mariupol area, with the aim of conquering the Priazovye [the area along the north coast of the Sea of Azov] territories that are under the control of Donetsk, and reaching the border with Russia.”¹⁰
- 13 December – Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OSCE **Alexander Lukashevich** says that Kiev is “ready for further aggressive steps for escalating military hysteria on the eve of the election campaign [for the Ukrainian presidential election scheduled for 31 March 2019].” Lukashevich adds that “there is a danger that Ukraine will not limit itself with the present stage and intends to get maximum dividends through **escalation on the line of contact**.”¹¹
- 14 December – Ukrainian media reports that Russian proxies in Donbass are spreading disinformation about the Ukrainian armed forces preparing a “bombardment of Horlivka with **chemical bombs**”.¹²
- 17 December – Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs **Sergey Lavrov** says: “In the last third of December [President of Ukraine Petro] Poroshenko plans an **armed provocation** on the border with the Russian Federation, on the border with Crimea.”¹³
- 17 December – the **DNR** claims the Ukrainians intend to launch an **offensive** on 24-25 December.¹⁴
- 20 December – Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OSCE **Alexander Lukashevich** says at a meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council that in the areas of Mariupol and Horlivka, Ukrainians had concentrated large forces “that can be used for conducting **offensive operations** at any moment.”
Lukashevich also refers to Donetsk representatives, saying that “according to their data, an act of **sabotage at one of the large industrial facilities** near the line of contact can be used as a pretext for restarting large-scale hostilities in Donbass.”¹⁵

- 24 December – The spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs **Maria Zakharova** says: “We cannot exclude the possibility that in the nearest days the Ukrainian armed forces can launch **large-scale hostilities**.”

Zakharova also suggests that “the Kiev strategists have thoroughly studied and are ready to implement in practice the experience of their foreign curators in staging provocations with the use of **weapons of mass destruction**.”¹⁶

- 25 December – the **DNR** claims the arrival of a train with “strong **chemical poisonous materials**” in the Ukrainian-controlled area west of Donetsk, which “is being unloaded by Ukrainian soldiers.” The Russian proxies’ representative also says that “specialists from the British and American intelligence services that specialize in sabotage” are present in the area.¹⁷

As demonstrated above, during the month following the Kerch Strait incident, Russia’s official representatives and their proxies in Donbass were consistently stressing two messages: Ukraine intends to launch a new military offensive in the near future, and it was going to stage some kind of chemical incident in the process.

The “chemical weapons” scenario had just been tried out by the Russian disinformation in Syria. On 24 November 2018, the Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that Syrian rebels had used chemical weapons (chlorine) near Aleppo. This claim was followed by Russian air strikes against the rebels in northern Syria. On 7 December, however, the US State Department said that the Russian and the Assad regime’s account regarding the rebels’ use of chemical weapons was false, and that in fact the Russians and the Syrians had fired tear gas in the area. The State Department spokesperson said that Russia and Syria used this disinformation as “an opportunity to undermine confidence in the cease-fire in Idlib.”¹⁸

This kind of accusatory disinformation campaign can be extremely dangerous when conducted by the Russians, because it very realistically might be followed by their aggressive action. A Russian-staged provocation involving either real or imagined chemical materials could be used as a *casus belli* for direct and, this time, official use of the Russian armed forces against Ukraine. Indeed, the Kremlin could make a point of bringing up the Western strikes against the Assad regime in response to its use of chemical weapons in an official Russian justification of such military action.

Given the Kremlin's habit of employing information warfare in support of its covert and military operations, and in combination with the growing Russian military might on Ukraine's border, these propaganda broadsides caused the Ukrainians to fear that Russia might be preparing to launch another military attack against their country. Perhaps these fears will not be justified immediately. No major escalation has occurred in Donbass at the time of writing in mid-January 2019. But the Ukrainians' wariness is easy to understand, because similar propaganda preparation preceded the Russian invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and of Georgia in 2008.

The fundamental strategic reality that resulted in those two invasions is still in place. Moscow's goals in Ukraine are far from being accomplished, and therefore the dynamic of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is going to remain volatile. As if to eliminate any possible doubt that this is the case, in an interview published on 15 January 2019, Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev said that continuation by the Ukrainian government of its current policies "can contribute to Ukraine losing its statehood."¹⁹

Why Russia Targets Ukraine - Geopolitical Rationale and Subliminal Dread

Whatever the probability or timing of a potential new Russian offensive against Ukraine, it is clear that Russia has no intention at all of letting Ukraine go - even Ukraine without Crimea, or, for that matter, without the occupied parts of Donbass. The Russian purpose there – both in general and specifically behind the military aggression launched in early 2014 – is to define the fate of all Ukraine for the benefit of the Russian neo-imperial project.

The principal strategic goal of Russia under its present regime is to restore, in some new form, its control over the countries formerly occupied by the Soviet Union. Putin's statement in 2005 that "the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century"²⁰ turned out to be a declaration of intent to largely fix the consequences of that geopolitical misfortune. Under Putin, Russia has been consistently working to expand its influence over its post-Soviet neighbors, employing a wide-ranging arsenal of covert, diplomatic, economic, informational and military means.

Ukraine has a special place within this Russian strategy. Its geographic location along Russia's own core area, its demographic and economic weight, its importance for strategic control over the Black Sea - all contribute to making Ukraine the primary target of Russian expansionism. No Russian imperial project can be truly successful and complete unless Moscow can exercise some form of control, or at least strong influence, over Ukraine. There is no Russian-led "Eurasia" if Ukraine is a truly sovereign country.

On another level, the very existence of the fiercely independent Ukrainian national identity, and of the Ukrainian nation-state, which includes the country's largely Russian-speaking eastern and southern provinces, flies in the face of the whole "Russian world" (*Ruskiy mir*) concept.²¹ The concept which, along with the Eurasianist geopolitical thought, is one of the ideological levers used by Putin's Russia to back its strategic ambitions.

Another source of concern for the Kremlin inhabitants is the possibility that Ukraine might actually be successful in the future. True, it is now drowning in mismanagement, corruption and lingering oligarchic influence (although Ukraine has managed to rebuild its military since 2014 despite all that). But as long as Ukraine stays both sovereign and democratic, it always retains the chance to defeat, or at least mitigate, its socio-political diseases. Then, given its size and potential, Ukraine would be an attractive, dynamic and strong country. If that happens, the authoritarian regime in the Kremlin will have a very unpleasant democratic (and post-revolutionary) success story just 450 kilometers from Moscow. The fact that Russians consider Ukrainians to be close ethnic and cultural relatives will only make this success story worse for the residents of the Kremlin.

Perhaps there is still another, deeper, level of motivation behind the bitter Russian animosity towards the Ukrainian nation-state. A Russian speaker myself, I am following the Russian-language segment of the internet. For as long as I have been present on the global network, I have witnessed the incessant online fight between Russians and Ukrainians. Before the shooting war started in 2014, the main object of the argument was the Ukrainian identity. The extreme intensity of the visceral hatred that many Russians have been expressing all these years toward the very idea of the Ukrainian political and cultural "separateness" from Russia is remarkable. Georgia, the three Baltic nations and others have been getting a lot of this kind of aggression too, but the negative attitude of many Russians to the Ukrainian national project is truly unmatched.

Possibly one of the reasons behind this phenomenon lies in the common roots of the Ukrainian and Russian statehood. Both countries track their historical heritage from the medieval monarchy usually called Kievan Rus', which existed in the IX-XII centuries and had Kiev as its capital. The Russians' version of history, both official and popular, places the origin of the Russian state not in the XV century, when Muscovy united the principalities within what is now Russian territory under its rule, but in the Kievan Rus' period. Basically, Moscow monopolized the heritage of Rus' for its own national mythos. Previous attempts by the Ukrainians to establish their own state were eliminated by Russia in the XVIII century and in 1920, so they had no opportunity to offer serious competition for this mythos. Until independent Ukraine was re-established in 1991, that is.

Modern Ukraine, with its robust national identity, represents the end of this centuries-old monopoly. Moreover, it represents an alternative modern incarnation of Rus', and a very different one in terms of political culture. Russia has been a despotic state for almost all its history. That was the case in Muscovy under grand princes and then tsars, in the superficially modernized Russian Empire, in the Soviet Union, and it is still the case today. Exceptions to this rule have been very short-lived so far.

Ukrainian political culture has always been very different. Since the late medieval period, Ukrainian lands, included in the Polish and Lithuanian states, lived within the culture of European feudalism rather than Muscovy's despotic monarchy. Ukrainian cities enjoyed a degree of autonomy under the Magdeburg rights, which Russian cities emphatically did not. In the early modern era, Ukraine saw development of the Cossack social culture, with its strong emphasis on individual liberty. Unlike in Russia, the Cossacks in Ukraine were not just pioneer residents of peripheral regions but played a central political role.

The consequences of these fundamental differences between the historical paths of Russia and Ukraine have persisted prominently to our days. They are behind the present divergent political realities within these two countries. The Kremlin regime and the parts of Russian society that support their country's traditional imperial and autocratic form of existence find such an alternative model of political culture deeply unsettling in a country with common historical and ethnic roots, located just next to the core area of Russia.²²

From Political Subversion to De-Sovereignization – The Transformation of Russia’s Objectives in Ukraine

Russia’s actions towards Ukraine give a strong impression that there are only two possible modes of existence of that country acceptable to the Kremlin. Either all of Ukraine must be under a strong Russian political influence, or it has to be broken into pieces, some of which are firmly controlled by Moscow, while the remaining ones are kept in a weakened, chaotic and impoverished state that will render them helpless to hamper Russia’s imperial ambition. The eastern and southern parts of Ukraine, envisioned by the Russians for takeover under the second option, are the ones with access to the Black Sea and the major portion of Ukraine’s industrial strength.

Russia did attempt to go with the first option before committing to breaking Ukraine apart. The political crisis that eventually led to the Euromaidan revolution was caused by the last-moment decision of the administration of the Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. The agreement was to be signed in November 2013. Instead, the Yanukovych administration held meetings with the Russian leadership, followed by the declaration that Ukraine’s plans to sign the EU Association Agreement were frozen “in the national interest,” and that instead it would be “renewing dialogue” with Moscow on trade and economic matters.²³ This last-minute U-turn came as a result of relentless Russian pressure²⁴ on the Ukrainian government. It was widely seen as Moscow’s strategic victory, with the Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt tweeting on 21 November 2013: “Ukraine government suddenly bows deeply to the Kremlin. Politics of brutal pressure evidently works.”²⁵

Bowing deeply to the Kremlin was exactly how the action of the Yanukovych administration was seen by the Ukrainian public. It was justifiably understood in Ukraine to represent the country’s strategic realignment in favor of Russia and its geopolitical project. Such realignment proved to be utterly unsustainable in the conditions that existed within Ukrainian society as of 2013. That society was sadly accustomed to the corruption and mismanagement that were rampant under Yanukovych, but moving Ukraine into the direction of the Russian sphere of influence encroached on the core political, cultural and historical identity of far too many Ukrainians. It crossed the red line.

The Ukrainian public quickly responded with protest rallies, which, after a series of intransigent reactions by the Yanukovich administration, transformed into the revolution that ended the Yanukovich presidency. Over one hundred protesters died in the clashes.²⁶ On 20 February 2014, mostly unarmed protesters faced the regime's riflemen, who opened lethal fire from combat weapons, killing and wounding dozens.²⁷ By 22 February, Yanukovich had left Kiev. He then fled to Russia, doing so with the Kremlin's assistance.²⁸

The Ukrainians who faced the bullets on 20 February, who endured many weeks of battles with riot police during the winter of 2013-2014, and who spent numerous nights on the frosty streets of Kiev, did not do all those things for the sake of their country's European integration. They did it in what they saw as the fight for Ukraine's historical fate. The revolution demonstrated vividly that the inclusion of the whole of Ukraine in the Russian sphere of influence was a political impossibility. Ukraine would be decidedly ungovernable under any regime affiliated with Moscow in an obvious manner.

As soon as this reality became clear to the Russian leadership, it launched an attempt to dismantle the Ukrainian state into pieces. Immediately²⁹ after the fall of Yanukovich, Moscow started the invasion of Ukraine in Crimea, declaring the annexation of the peninsula on 18 March 2014. The Crimean operation was followed by Russia's attempt to stage rebellions in the provinces of eastern and southern Ukraine that constituted about a half the country. With the partial exception of the Donbass region, this attempt failed due to resistance from both the Ukrainian public and the Ukrainian security agencies. One crucial factor appeared to be the gross overestimation by the Kremlin of the pro-Russian sentiment among the residents of the targeted regions of Ukraine.

With the failure of this major Russian covert offensive in the spring of 2014, Moscow had to settle with the war in the Donbass region. As of January 2019, the last major military offensive took place in early 2015 (Battle of Debaltseve),³⁰ but despite the so called Minsk II agreement, no actual ceasefire exists. Shooting continues daily, providing a consistent stream of casualties. In effect, stretched across Donbass is a "hot", active frontline during a relatively calm period between major operations.

The Growing Military Threat to Ukraine

Russia's failure to break up Ukraine in 2014 was not the end of the matter. The basic strategic reality has not changed. Russia's geopolitical ambitions are as incompatible with Ukraine's national interests and security as ever. Russia, under its present regime, simply will not fully achieve its strategic goals, unless it somehow subdues Ukraine. Therefore, Moscow's effort against Ukraine's sovereignty continues, and this is not about to change anytime soon.

For this same reason, the conflict is immune to the European-sponsored attempts at negotiated solution. Any hopes for it have been and will, for now, remain frustrated, because too many interests of the Kremlin regime and of the Ukrainian state are mutually exclusive at the present point in history.

The Kremlin will use any new opportunity to destabilize Ukraine. The Ukrainian public's dissatisfaction with the lack of progress against corruption, the unsettled state of the country's internal politics and the oligarchic influences are all dangerous weak spots the enemy might exploit, although since 2014 the Russian aggression has been supplying the Ukrainian body politic with a powerful vaccine against an openly pro-Russian stance. The gravest potential threat for Ukraine's security, however, is the direct military one. If the Kremlin finds it impossible to achieve its objectives in Ukraine through a combination of covert, political and economic means, it is possible that at a certain point, it will employ some kind of new military scenario.

From 2016, Russia began to establish new large military units on the border with Ukraine. The area where no Russian maneuver units had been permanently based before now hosts three new mechanized (or, as Russians call them, "motor rifle") divisions, divided between two new armies.

The Russians have been creating these new divisions by reorganizing and expanding extant brigades. The 3rd Mechanized Division – based in Boguchar, Voronezh Oblast and Valuyki, Belgorod Oblast – was established on the basis of the 9th and 23rd Mechanized Brigades, transferred for this purpose to the Ukrainian border from the Volga region cities of Nizhny Novgorod and Samara, respectively. The 150th Mechanized Division is located in the part of Rostov Oblast situated right next to the Donbass

region. It was established on the basis of the 33rd Mechanized Mountain Brigade, transferred from the western North Caucasus. The 144th Mechanized Division has headquarters in Smolensk Oblast on the border with Belarus, but most of its combat forces are based in neighboring Bryansk Oblast, next to Ukraine. This division was created on the basis of the 28th Mechanized Brigade, transferred from as far as Yekaterinburg in the Ural region.³¹

Created in 2016, these divisions keep growing. For instance, on 1 December 2018, the Russian military reported the establishment of a new mechanized regiment near Rostov, within the 150th Mechanized Division.³² Meanwhile, a news report from 29 October 2018 in a local newspaper in the town of Klintsy, Bryansk Oblast, revealed the existence of the 254th Mechanized Regiment³³ - in addition to the other two mechanized regiments and one tank regiment that the 144th Mechanized Division had already had as of early 2018.

A new Russian military attack against Ukraine would likely involve units from many parts of Russia, but the purposeful forward positioning of whole newly-created divisions on the Ukrainian border is significant nonetheless. It is worth noting that this expansion of the Russian forces and the transformation of their structure is happening at a time when Russia is facing increased financial difficulties,³⁴ showing the level of priority the Kremlin attributes to this process. With Russia's ambitious geostrategic goals remaining unfulfilled and its armed forces getting more aimed at Ukraine, the stakes in the game might be rising.

A Truly Realistic Approach to the Russian-Ukrainian Crisis

Some of the self-styled "realists" in the West effectively disregard Ukraine as a real player in the game and claim that it is pointless to support it against the Russian aggression.³⁵ Presently, the West does give Ukraine financial aid, and helps it with training and equipping its military. The United States, the United Kingdom and Canada play a particularly positive role in this regard. The Western sanctions that have been introduced against Russia as a result of its aggression in Ukraine are also very important. But there are voices in the West calling for what effectively amounts to leaving Ukraine to its fate in the face of Russia's hostility. Such line of thought is fatally flawed and happens to be the direct opposite of realistic.

Ukraine is going to resist Russia in a formidable manner whether the West supports it or not. One should not give credence to Putin's claims that Ukraine is a just a territory, not a state.³⁶ He probably does not do so himself – not anymore. If he ever actually did, it was wishful thinking on his part which backfired painfully in the spring of 2014, when the Kremlin's attempt to organize a Russian-controlled "Novorossiia" in the southern and eastern oblasts (provinces) of Ukraine on an arc from Kharkiv to Odessa met a fiasco and became limited to just a part of the Donbass region.

That Russian enterprise was based on the idea that a sufficient portion of the Ukrainian citizens living in the eastern and southern parts of the country were more loyal to Russia than to their own state. That idea turned out to be fundamentally wrong. Despite the friendly attitude to Russia that many of the eastern and southern Ukrainians had in early 2014, most of them were no enemies of Ukraine's sovereignty. Certainly, they did not wish their country to be dismembered.

The process of the Russian occupation of Crimea in February-March 2014 was met by many eastern and southern Ukrainians first with astonished disbelief, then – when it was no longer possible to disregard the reality of what was happening – with rage. When Moscow next proceeded to attempt staging pro-Russian rebellions in the Ukrainian oblasts designated for its "Novorossiia" project, many of the locals stood with the Ukrainian state in defeating those attempts. Only in the eastern portions of the Donbass region (which includes Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts), where the Russian influence was the greatest and the Russian covert operatives were easily entering Ukraine across the border, did Moscow succeed in launching its shooting hybrid war.

Today, Ukraine has a vigorous national identity, which this country of around 40 million people is defending with determination. Moreover, the ongoing war has been reinforcing this identity. The frontline in Donbass is a unique place where Ukrainians from across the nation fight against the common foe. Every day, numerous people from diverse places like cosmopolitan Kiev, fiercely patriotic Lviv and Russian-speaking cities such as Kharkiv and Odessa, shoot their weapons at the same enemy and shed their blood side by side. And these people on the frontline have family members, friends, relatives and others they communicate with regularly. This is a powerful forge. In its attempt to destroy the Ukrainian nation-state, Putin's Russia has invigorated it.

Given the present mentality and public discourse in Ukraine, it is most unreasonable to imagine that the Ukrainian resistance to the Russian aggression would cease without the Western support. It would not. The Ukrainians are going to fight against both the continued hybrid warfare and the possible future openly Russian military offensives whatever the West does or fails to do. And they are fully capable of putting up a big fight too, especially since Ukraine has greatly improved its defensive capabilities after 2014.³⁷ A hypothetical future lack of Western help could affect the quality of the Ukrainian resistance, but not its vigor.

Presently, Russia shows no signs of planning to cease its aggressive actions against Ukraine, while the latter has no intention to stop resisting them. There is no escape from this reality. The main result of a hypothetical Western failure to give Ukraine proper support would be to embolden Russia to conduct a more direct and larger-scale aggression. Combined with the Ukrainians' will and capability to fight back, this means that the less the West supports Ukraine, the greater is the probability of large-scale warfare in Eastern Europe. The best way to prevent such a scenario is to deter Russia from pressing on. Failing to do so would contribute to making the catastrophe more probable.

This by itself is a good enough reason for the West to give Ukraine all the necessary support and to deter Moscow's designs – if merely defeating Russia's attempt at imperial resurgence and preventing the subjugation of its neighbors fail to provide sufficient motivation.

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 The author uses arguments like “Ukraine’s political loyalties are immensely important to Russia” and “It is simply inconceivable for Putin to allow a large neighboring state — that has historically been a connective tissue to the old Russian empire and the Soviet Union — to drift closer to Europe and act antagonistic toward Moscow.”
 For some reason, the author does not see it fit to take into account what is “immensely important” for *the Ukrainians*, and what is “simply inconceivable” for *them*. One would imagine that it is quite incompatible with any version of realism to disregard the political will and identity of a nation with a population of about 40 million - which is more than the population of countries like Canada and Australia.
- 36 This is a popular talking point among Russian imperialists. Vladimir Putin reportedly expressed it to the US President George W. Bush at the NATO Bucharest Summit in April 2008, telling him: “You don’t understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a state. What is Ukraine? Part of its territories is Eastern Europe, but the greater part is a gift from us.” Among other sources, see: Roland Oliphant, “Fifteen years of Vladimir Putin: in quotes,” *The Telegraph*, 07 May 2015, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/vladimir-putin/11588182/Fifteen-years-of-Vladimir-Putin-in-quotes.html (accessed 14 January 2019).
 Lithuanian Foreign Minister (and former Permanent Representative to NATO) Linas Linkevičius quoted Putin saying the following during a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council in 2008: “With whom are you cooperating? With Ukraine? It’s not a country, it’s some artificial formation, some mistake in history, and you know that it’s not normal.” See: “At 2008 NATO-Russia Council, Putin called Ukraine ‘artificial formation’ and ‘mistake in history’ – Linkevičius,” *UNIAN*, 07 December 2018, www.unian.info/politics/10368393-at-2008-nato-russia-council-putin-called-ukraine-artificial-formation-and-mistake-in-history-linkevicius.html (accessed 14 January 2019).
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