

Reflections on World Politics: Ukraine & Russia - #14

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The Russian-Ukrainian War in Context

The war between Russia and Ukraine did not begin when Putin's armed forces invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. While there have been struggles between Russians and Ukrainians over many decades and even centuries, this particular war has its roots in events that occurred in 2004. It is a conflict that began more than 20 years ago but heated up considerably in 2013-2014. I will shorten this brief history by not including all the names of the key political leaders involved and focusing instead on the issues at stake. First, some preliminary context:

The Color Revolutions: Like most autocrats, popular revolts are a principal threat to rulers like Putin. Balancing the interests of Putin's primary supporters with the demands of the majority of the population is not an easy task, and this is one of the Achilles' heels for autocrats. With the series of popular protests for more freedom in countries that were formerly a part of the Soviet Union – Serbia in 2000 and the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia in 2003 – Putin was convinced that these were all the result of the United States' efforts to force “regime change” in countries with non-democratic governments.

The Orange Revolution: The events in Ukraine in 2004 were viewed by Putin as a major threat to his grand strategy of building a sphere of influence across the territory previously controlled by the Soviet government. When the Ukrainian president deepened his friendship with Moscow and the rigged election for his successor appeared to elect Putin's handpicked candidate, thousands of Ukrainians protested, and the election results were nullified by the Ukrainian parliament. A pro-democratic candidate was elected, and it was a major setback for Putin. Under the new president, relations with the West improved and further efforts were made to integrate Ukraine with the European Union. Unfortunately, little was done to deal with corruption in Ukraine, and Russia continued to undermine Ukraine's independence.

When the presidential elections in 2010 put the former pro-Russian candidate back into power, opponents began to organize as they saw him, his family, and his cronies accumulate huge fortunes and transfer these funds into foreign accounts, estimated at over \$70 billion. The president, a supporter of Putin, forced the parliament to cancel amendments made in 2004 to limit the power of his office and by 2013 Ukraine found itself on the verge of bankruptcy.

Meanwhile, the “Arab Spring” of 2011 took place in the Middle East and dictators were toppled from power. These revolutionary events, combined with the earlier “color revolutions,” were warnings signs that Putin could not ignore. Then, in December 2011, mass protests took place in Moscow and St. Petersburg contesting the results of the election for the Russian parliament – the largest protests in Russia since 1991. These were followed by more protests in early 2012 – the first protest ever aimed at Putin's re-election for president. After he was elected in March,

Putin immediately began to dramatically increase repression against any government opponents and to threaten the use of force in terms of the country's foreign policy. Once again, his earlier failure in Ukraine became his obsession, especially when another revolution occurred in Kyiv.

The Revolution of Dignity: By 2013, the majority of Ukrainians were in favor of signing an association agreement with the European Union, but, with Putin's encouragement, the president decided not to sign the agreement. Thousands of students protested this decision. When the protesting students were brutally attacked by police in the central square in Kyiv, 500,000 Kyivans poured into the city and demanded that the government take the next step to join the EU. This turned into the "Revolution of Dignity" and, when the protestors refused to leave the streets and called for an end to the violence, more bloody encounters with police occurred. On February 18, 2014, 77 protestors were killed by security forces, including some from Russia. Three days later, the pro-Russian president of Ukraine, who was stripped of his power by the parliament, fled the country and sought refuge in Moscow. This was Putin's second set-back in his plan to undermine Ukraine.

Putin's world was starting to unravel and his grandiose plans for reconstructing Russian power over the area previously a part of the Soviet Union was in trouble. Adding to this was the humiliation of Western leaders refusing to attend the Olympics in Sochi in February 2014, which was going to be a demonstration to the world of Russia's renewed global presence.

Russia's Attacks on Ukraine: In a surprise that caught most Western leaders off guard, Putin ordered Russian forces in February 2014 to wrest control of Crimea from Ukraine. Two months later, pro-Russian supporters from Donbas, who were trained and equipped by Russian security, attacked government facilities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and declared their independence from the government in Kyiv. Putin undertook this radical intervention because he doubted the West would respond. With U.S. global leadership in decline, he thought NATO had no backbone.

This began an eight-year war between Russia and Ukraine, which had already taken the lives of more than 14,000 soldiers before this recent invasion. For Ukrainians, the invasion of their country in February 2022, though a surprise to some, is a continuation of the threats from Moscow dating back to 2004. They have been engaged in open warfare with Russia since 2014 and they will never back down. They are done with Kremlin control of their lives, and they will no longer tolerate Russia's brutal repression. My sources tell me they intend to win this battle, and they can do it if the West supports them.

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