How to Understand Russia's Imperialist Attitude Toward Ukraine

written by Hanna Perekhoda | February 16, 2024

On February 24, 2022, the Kremlin launched a "special military operation" with the stated aim of completely eliminating Ukraine's independence as a state and society. The decision by Russian president Vladimir Putin came as a surprise to many observers, as few experts had envisaged such a scenario. Their predictions were often clouded by the prevailing belief that Russia had no "objective motivation" for engaging in a war of this magnitude. Soon after, when Russian forces encircled Kyiv, those who had initially argued that these troops would not cross the Ukrainian border began to argue that Russia simply had no other alternative. They claimed that the invasion was due to pressure from "the West."

Those who support this view adopt, sometimes unconsciously, a neorealist approach to international relations. This approach is based on several fundamental principles, one of which postulates that states are rational actors operating in a hostile and ruthless world, where there is no authority to protect them from each other, and so they seek to maximize their chances of survival. According to this perspective, the Russian state was behaving as a rational actor, and war was a logical response to objective threats from outside. The invasion of Ukraine was thus be a reaction to the "expansion" of NATO, which posed a *real* danger to Russia. If this had not been the case, then why would Putin have started a conflict that could involve the entire West? According to this reasoning, the scale of Russian military aggression *must* correspond to the severity of the perceived threat. Otherwise, Putin's decision would be irrational and therefore impossible to explain.

At this point, it is pertinent to note the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO in 2023, doubling the length of the organization's border with Russia. It is all the more interesting to note that no Russian military presence has been reported along this new border. If Russia really sees NATO as a threat, why don't we see a build-up of Russian troops or propaganda portraying Finland as a military threat with Finns as enemies? Clearly, Finland's accession to NATO, despite its 1,340 km long border with Russia, does not seem to be a major concern for Putin. On the other hand, Ukraine, which was not at the time officially a candidate for NATO membership, was perceived as being so hostile that it must be destroyed militarily. This difference in treatment raises questions about the reasons for this disparity.

It is not new that by focusing exclusively on the structure of the international system, advocates of neorealist analysis tend to underestimate the impact of internal national factors on the behavior of states on a global scale. When Russia invaded Ukraine, adherents of this view struggled to make sense of the situation, resorting to post-event explanations that aligned with their theory rather than acknowledging factual realities. But the political implications of this entrenched mindset are too significant to ignore or leave unchallenged.

From our perspective, in order to fully grasp the motivations behind Russia's aggression towards

Ukraine, it is crucial to look at the internal dynamics of Russian politics. This involves examining the way in which power is exercised between the state, economic actors, and society in Russia, as well as the influence of ideologies and, more generally, imaginaries. As stated by Alexander Wendt, one of the core social constructivist researchers in the field of international relations, actors act towards objects based on the meanings that the objects have for them. Ideology significantly influences how political elites perceive their interests, especially within authoritarian regimes like Putin's Russia, where information is monopolized.

It is worth remembering that Russia under Putin has not always adopted a hostile stance towards the West. Initially, the president was open to cooperation, even going so far as to establish partnerships with NATO and participate in joint military exercises. Some argue that Russian elites genuinely aspired to integrate their state into the international community but were disappointed by an arrogant and hostile West. However, we believe that Putin's stated willingness to cooperate with the West at that time could be better compared to that of a criminal group seeking to establish connections with corrupt law enforcement agencies.

In the early 2000s, Putin aimed to secure his hold in the post-Soviet space made up now of the independent nations of the former Soviet Union. In return, he was willing to offer the Western "policemen," whose hegemony he did not yet challenge, a kind of "bribe." This included the sale of fossil fuels at bargain rates, the opening of the Russian market to foreign investment, as well as the injection of substantial funds, often of obscure origin, into Western companies. To some extent, the Europeans accepted these arrangements: Russian money has flowed through financial circuits without much question about its sources, while gas and oil have flowed to new pipelines. Leaders of the time, such as German chancellor Gerhard Schröder, French president Nicolas Sarkozy, or Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, were conciliatory. However, achieving an absolute monopoly on the post-Soviet backyard proved complex. The United States had not been as involved in this agreement as the European Union. Moscow had also failed to offer its neighbors a truly mutually beneficial model of cooperation: local mafiosi in power in the former Soviet republics have struggled to perceive the benefits of submitting to Russia, a much larger and more predatory mafia cartel. In addition, the people of these countries regularly voiced their dissatisfaction with the autocratic and corrupt leaders supported by Putin. In sum, Putin failed to establish effective mechanisms to maintain control over what he perceived as Russia's traditional sphere of influence.

In 2011, ordinary Russian citizens took to the streets to protest the rise of authoritarianism: Putin had violated the Constitution and was seeking a third presidential term. From that point on, the Russian authorities began to promote an ideology that portrayed Russia as surrounded by enemies, with Putin being the only one capable of protecting the country from this existential threat.

The control of Putin's elites over Russia itself was now threatened. At the time, the regime was trying to suppress any democratic impulse inside and outside the country. Two years later, faced with the failure of its Eurasian economic integration project, the Maidan revolution in Ukraine, and a decline in its political legitimacy in Russia, the regime had shifted from an approach aimed at luring corrupt elites in the states of the former Soviet Union to a strategy of direct control of the territories of neighboring countries, often to the detriment of Russian private sector interests. After the revolution in Ukraine in 2014, Crimea was annexed and the Russian army was deployed in Donbass region of the eastern Ukraine. The message was clear: "Any attempt to overthrow authoritarian rule will be severely repressed." In 2015, Russia backed Bashar al-Assad in Syria, who was engaged in a brutal war against his own people. In 2020 and 2022, the dictators of Belarus and Kazakhstan benefited from Russian support to violently suppress popular movements in their countries, where the influence of the West, especially NATO, was not an issue on the agenda.

But why has Ukraine become the main target of Russian aggression? First of all, Ukraine is one of

the few countries in the post-Soviet space where a popular revolution has not been followed by the return to power of forces politically and economically linked to Russia. Moreover, Ukraine is a country with which ordinary Russians share a great cultural and linguistic proximity. If a country similar in so many ways to their own succeeds in building a democratic and prosperous state, Russians might ask the question: "If Ukrainians, people like us, don't need an authoritarian and repressive state to lead a normal life, why would we Russians need it?"

In addition, Ukraine, which was the second most powerful Soviet republic after Russia, has considerable strategic assets, including its geographical position, fertile land, natural resources, relatively developed industry, and a skilled workforce. Russia's political elites believe that integrating Ukraine into an alliance with Russia and Belarus would make the bloc a major power in world politics. Putin regularly evokes this idea when addressing Ukrainians, stressing that "together we have always been and will be much stronger." However, the drive to maintain control over Ukraine has much deeper motivations.

The Russian president firmly believes that the distinct national identity of Ukrainians is an artificial construct created by enemies. Once separated from Russia, the Ukrainian state, he believes, inevitably becomes a strategic base for hostile forces in the West who use it "as a battering ram" to undermine Russia from within through subversive ideologies, thus hindering Russia's – that is, Putin's – aspirations to occupy its rightful place in this world. According to this view, independent Ukraine, simply by virtue of its separate political existence, is transformed into an "anti-Russian project" and becomes an immediate threat to Russia's very survival, which can only endure as a great power.

The "historic" arguments of this kind put repeatedly forward by Putin in his public speeches should not be seen as ideological junk resulting simply from opportunistic political choices. They have their origins in the collective imaginary forged over time: Ukraine's role in the identity narrative of Russian state elites was shaped in the particular historical context of the nineteenth century.

Indeed, the Russian leadership of Tsarist times believed that the assimilation of Ukraine was crucial in order to strengthen external power and ensure the internal stability of the Russian state. First, in order to compete with modern colonial empires that adopted policies of nationalization in their "home countries," Russia also needed to create and consolidate a "national" community, a Russian nation composed of Orthodox eastern Slavs – Great Russians, Little Russians (Ukrainians) and Belarussians. The integration of Ukrainians into this "nation" built from above was therefore seen as an essential step to increase Russia's power on the international stage.

Second, the Tsarist elites sought to preserve their autocratic regime in a world disrupted by democratic movements, especially after the revolutionary upheaval of 1848 that shook Europe. The Russification of the populations of the western frontier was seen as a way to protect them from the influence of subversive ideologies, thus contributing to the internal stability of the regime. Third, as an ever-expanding continental empire, Russia faced a chronic shortage of loyal populations capable of populating the newly colonized regions of Asia and the Caucasus. Therefore, the assimilation of a vast demographic reservoir of Ukrainians became crucial to maintaining the cohesion of this heterogeneous empire, as this Orthodox Slavic population had to fill the ranks of potential settlers in an empire where ethnic Russians were in the minority.

The current ideology of the Russian state is strongly influenced by the nationalist political imaginary that took shape in the nineteenth century. It continues to be based on the conviction that the assimilation of Ukrainians into the "Russian nation" is a vital necessity for the very survival of the Russian state. It is therefore impossible to understand Russia's war in Ukraine if we limit ourselves to considering only the military and economic aspects of security. What is mainly at stake is the

ontological security of the Russian ruling elite, with Ukraine occupying a central position in their identities and in their representations of the world.

Increasingly, we hear arguments suggesting that in order to end the war, "the West" should address Russia's security concerns, such as guaranteeing that Ukraine or other post-Soviet countries will never join NATO. However, what leads us to believe that simply keeping Ukraine out of NATO or even dividing its territory will appease Putin?

The existence of an independent and democratic Ukraine, whether within its internationally recognized or significantly reduced borders, is unacceptable to a regime whose ruling classes are convinced that Ukraine is a creation of enemies who use it as a basis to corrupt Russians with ideas of individual rights and freedoms and thus destroy the imperial body of a thousand-year-old Russia.

But let us set aside all moral and ethical questions and consider for a moment that the key to world peace lies in the acceptance of the principle that only the "great powers" have the right to sovereignty, while the others are destined to remain in the great powers' "sphere of influence," i.e. to remain colonies or neocolonies. This is what many international relations experts and "pragmatic" politicians tell us, either explicitly or tacitly. But a crucial question arises: where does the Russian sphere of influence that we are supposed to respect end?

We have bad news. Putin's Russia's sphere of influence knows no bounds. For the ruling classes of an autocratic "great power," who live in constant fear of popular revolution, the only way to ensure security is expansion, often in defiance of the demands of a "rational" international strategy.

Russian state ideology and its ruling circles' imaginary are essential elements to keep in mind if we want to understand the logic behind Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and especially if we are looking for possible solutions to end this conflict and ensure lasting peace in the region.