

# Understanding Putin's war of resentment and how to stop it

*Hopes have been raised over recent days that a diplomatic settlement could be reached to end the war in Ukraine. Francesco Duina writes that the first step to reaching a diplomatic solution is to understand the role that resentment of the West plays in Vladimir Putin's worldview.*

As we agonise over the causes of and possible solutions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we would do well to recall the work of sociologist [Liah Greenfeld](#), who was born and raised in Russia, has taught at Boston University for decades, and has devoted her life to understanding nationalism in all its forms.

Greenfeld proposed a while ago that Russia's nationalism was constructed, from the start (with Peter the Great) and then onwards, always in reference to the West, and always with a perceived sense of inferiority given the country's inability to match the economic and cultural prowess of countries like England and France. A project of the elites, Russian nationalism through time thus increasingly became one based on *resentment* toward the West. The goal has consistently been to gain the recognition of Russia as an equal, great nation. Anything short of that has been seen as not simply an unfortunate irritation but an existential matter.

More precisely, Russia has seen its worth and dignity *through the eyes* of the West. It depends on its approval and recognition. Russian nationalism does not stand on its own two feet – as is the case of France (originally resentful toward England but then freed from that complex), England, or the United States. It has always been a referential sort of nationalism.

To make matters worse, Greenfeld reminds us that Russian nationalism is of the ethnic-collective type (as opposed to the civic sorts of nationalism of, say, France or England). It is rooted in the belief in a single mythical group defined by biological and linguistic characteristics. In this regard, it is no different from the German, Japanese, or Scandinavian varieties. This type of nationalism is inherently defensive and potentially aggressive: an attack on one is seen as an attack on everyone. Everything must be sacrificed if the nation's existence is at stake.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is driven precisely by Russian resentment toward the West for feeling it has not been treated as an equal over recent decades – a great power whose needs and aspirations must be accepted by all other powers. It is also clearly predicated on ethnic lines. What is most viscerally at stake for Putin are the ethnic Russians in Ukraine, Russia's nationalistic claims on the land of Ukraine, and Russia's geopolitical security as a great nation that cannot be violated by the presence of Western nuclear weapons at its doorstep. Not coincidentally, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's assertion several days ago in the *New York Times* that, of course, Russia is a great power received ample advertisement in Russian media [outlets](#).

It follows that Putin will not stop his aggression until he feels that the West is treating Russia with the respect he thinks it deserves. The alternative, given that this is seen as an existential matter, is the destruction of Ukraine and possibly much more. The heroism and sacrifices of the Ukrainian people have surely helped slow the invasion down and likely lowered the odds that other dictators in the future will assume invading a country is easy. But compromises at this point have to be made, especially when it comes to Crimea, the Eastern regions of Ukraine, and neutrality (especially since the Ukrainians themselves have started to realise that NATO membership will in any case never happen). Putin needs a trophy of some kind, and the West, along with the Ukrainians, should work hard to figure out what that should be.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [kremlin.ru](#)*

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