



The International System in the Shadow of the Russian War in Ukraine

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The war in Ukraine may hold many lessons, but one rarely mentioned is how difficult it has been for even the best informed experts to forecast how it was likely to unfold. Thus, most analysts never thought Putin would launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in the first place; yet, he did. Many then assumed Moscow would win in a matter of weeks. But it did not. We were then informed that the Russian economy would fold under the pressure of Western sanctions. And so far it has not. The war, we were then told, would prove unpopular amongst Russians. But both the elite and the wider Russian public appear to have rallied around the flag. Finally, quite a few pundits assumed the West would fail to react to Russian aggression in anything like a united fashion. But so far, the opposite appears to have happened, with Finland and Sweden having become members of NATO and Ukraine inching ever closer to membership of the Alliance [1].

The war has also brought into question what many military theoreticians once thought about the nature of war in the modern era. War, the new gurus of conflict told us, would bear little resemblance to the conflicts of old. Major manoeuvres of massed formations, tank battles and prolonged artillery exchanges would be replaced by cyberattacks, high-tech sabotage conducted from satellites up in space and the use of artificial intelligence (AI). Even territory and its defence or capture had become passe in an era of so-called new wars. Yet, as Christopher Coker shows in his essay, the conflict in Ukraine has been something of a wake-up call for those who might have hoped that the old style of war was a thing of the past. Comparisons with World War I can be overdone. Even so, the ‘orgy’ of destruction that has been visited upon Ukraine with its ‘trench-scarred landscape’ now littered with millions of mines suggests that modern war might not be so modern after all [2].

Meanwhile, as the war grinds on, the most we can do at this stage is provide an interim report on the conflict and its wider significance. One rather badly informed American politician with presidential ambitions told his followers in the spring of 2023 that because the war in Ukraine was only of local significance, it was not of ‘vital’ importance for the United States [3]. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the longer the war has gone on, the greater the impact it has had and will continue to have on the international system as a whole. At the start of the war, it was fairly normal to talk of the conflict changing the security landscape in Europe [4]. But as the essays here demonstrate, as the war has unfolded, it has become increasingly clear that the war has begun to redefine the world as a whole [5].

The most obvious place to start in making sense of what has happened is with Russia itself, though even this might be viewed as controversial, given that a number of critics have laid most of the responsibility for the war on the United States and NATO for previously having failed to take account of Russian security needs [6]. Still, at the end of the day, it was the decisions made

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in the Kremlin by Putin that occasioned the conflict; so, understanding what his reasoning was in launching the war would hardly seem unreasonable.¹

Three connected essays attempt to deal with this issue. The first, by Tomila Lankina, seeks to explain what may seem difficult to explain to outside observers: why the majority of Russians continue to support Putin and have proved vulnerable to his official propaganda. To understand this, we have to move beyond the upper layers of Russian society and look at the broader swathes of Russian society from the rural communities and small towns. As she points out, people in Russia have remained remarkably susceptible to his message, even as he ‘wages’ what Lankina terms his ‘brutal and genocidal war against Ukraine’.

In the next essay, Alexander Dueben focuses on Putin’s own strongly held belief that far from constituting a sovereign country with its own history and culture, Ukraine in effect does not exist (and never has) as a nation separate from Russia. Dueben admits that Putin’s ‘calculus for launching the invasion combined a variety of different motives, including geopolitical concerns about systemic threats to Russia’s national security and domestic considerations of shielding his own authoritarian regime against potential pro-democratic “spill-over” from across the border’. But as he goes on to argue, ‘there is much to suggest that Putin’s personal readings of Ukrainian and Russian history, combined with deeply held ethno-nationalist and irredentist beliefs, have been one of the core factors motivating his decision to unleash a full-scale military assault against Kyiv’.

Eleanor Knott further examines Putin’s ideas, making the important point that while ‘the stakes of Russia’s war against and invasion of Ukraine are ethnic, imperial, and civilisational’, they are also ‘existential’. This suggests that the decision to invade and continue with the war is as much, if not more, about Russian identity as it is about power. Knott also goes on to argue that there will be no easy exit from this conflict, not only because Ukraine as a ‘victim’ must be allowed to set the terms on which the war ends, but also because the war has come to define Russia as a nation while legitimizing the repressive character of Putin’s rule at home.

The next section moves on to Ukraine itself with an opening essay by Serhy Yekelchuk, who deals with the period since the collapse of the USSR. He takes the narrative from Ukraine’s independence in 1991 – that ‘unfinished revolution’ as he calls it – right through to the invasion in 2022, which in his view has completed the transformational process consolidating ‘a modern Ukrainian identity as separate from Russia both politically and culturally’. A number of other observers have insisted that the war was avoidable. Yekelchuk, though, believes it was more or less inevitable. Indeed, having continued to assert itself politically after breaking from Russia (in stages), a final clash between aspiring Ukraine and the former imperial power was something close to a foregone conclusion.

In her contribution, Tamara Krawchenko then examines the significance of the year 2014 in the evolution of Ukraine. While 1991 was clearly a landmark moment, it is only with the Maidan ‘revolution of dignity’ 13 years later that the country began to embark on a set of reforms – which she feels Ukraine must continue with if the country wishes to become fully democratic within an ‘integrated Europe’. However, as Tanya Lokot points out, there is at least one obstacle standing in the way of democratic renewal: the Kremlin’s interventions into the information spaces and telecommunications infrastructure in temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories. This not only increases Russia’s control of the territory it has conquered, but it also reduces Ukraine’s potential for resistance and resilience.

We then go on to look at some of the costs and consequences of the war, beginning with the refugee crisis. As Myria Georgiou and Marek Troszyński point out, millions of Ukrainian refugees have been forced to seek a temporary home in Europe – almost a fifth of the country’s population. Though they have generally been given a warm welcome often denied to other refugees, their rights to protection remain ‘precariously dependent’ and will stay that way until the Western countries commit themselves fully to ‘the recognition of the universal right to refugee protection’. And, if they do not do so, there is a risk that the very real welcome given to Ukrainian refugees might one day turn into ‘suspicion’.

¹ There is now a burgeoning literature on why Putin launched the war against Ukraine. For a sample of the most recent studies, see citations [7–13].

Robert Falkner looks at another costly and significant consequence of the war: the biggest energy shock to Europe since the 1970 oil crises. In his view, this has laid bare what he believes was the ‘strategic blunder’ of becoming overly dependent on ‘Russian energy supplies’. Fortunately, it has not, as yet, led to European leaders reducing their commitment to the net zero goal or pulling back from their decarbonisation efforts.

In the last essay in this section, a number of authors jointly look at the impact the war may have had (or is already having) on organised crime. As we know from previous wars, such as the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, organised crime can often be a beneficiary of conflict. It is essential therefore, that trends in organised crime remain a priority area of focus for ‘policymakers, researchers, civil society and other key stakeholders’.

But how has the West responded to the war, and how in turn has the war shaped Europe and the United States? Peter Harris, Iren Marinova and Gabriella Gricius first look at the US, pointing out that ‘Biden’s policies of support for Ukraine have engendered a rare instance of cross-party unity in Washington’. But how long, they ask, ‘will US support for Ukraine endure’ in an America where there are still ongoing discussions around what is really at stake in Ukraine – an America where there is at least a chance of a more sceptical Republican party returning to the White House in 2024?

Turning to Europe, Nathalie Tocci is in little doubt of the transformational impact the war has already had on the continent. There is, however, some ‘bad news’ for those who were hoping that Europe in the future would play a stronger role on the global stage. Strategic autonomy might remain an aspiration for some. But if the war in Ukraine has shown anything, it is the degree to which Europe still relies on the United States for its security. It is perhaps in Germany though, where things may have altered most. Many may doubt how far Germany has really changed. However, as Kristina Spohr suggests, the shift away from ‘Merkelism’ has been real. Even so, if Germany truly wants to lead in Europe, Chancellor Scholz must ensure that its *Zeitenwende* is implemented and endures for the longer term.

The two essays that follow shift attention away from the ‘West’ towards the ‘Rest’, including perhaps most importantly, China, whose political support for Russia in the war has been serious and significant according to Michael Cox. Chris Alden then looks at the Global South and its response to the conflict. The war in Ukraine has illuminated much about the modern world, especially about the gap that now exists between perceptions of the conflict in the ‘North’ and many of the developing countries. Countries like Brazil and South Africa may not openly approve of what Moscow has done in Ukraine. On the other hand, they have been remarkably reluctant to condemn Russia. But as Alden notes, even if many in the West have shown a marked impatience with those who refuse to see the war in the same ways they do, it is still important to explain what is ‘behind the seeming indifference and even hostility in the Global South to the Western position on Russia’.

The last section addresses two big economic issues. One of immediate concern is the impact the war has already had on what was already a distressed world economy. As Jagjit Chadha points out, the ‘invasion of Ukraine came at a precarious moment for a global economic order still trying to recover from the impact of the Covid pandemic’. Inevitably, the war has made the situation all the more precarious by leading to a ‘sharp increase in energy and food costs’. These, he notes, not only threaten ‘price stability but has also asked severe questions of the monetary and fiscal frameworks which coped so well with stabilising the global economy over the previous quarter of a century’.

But what about the economic challenges facing Ukraine itself, if (or when) the war finally comes to an end? Erik Berglof and Vladyslav Rashkovan are under no illusion of the uphill task confronting a war-shattered country. But as they also remind us, even if all the ‘difficult choices involved in reconstruction and reform, including the use of donor resources’ may be shaped by outside actors, ultimately, the ‘key decisions’ must be made by Ukrainians themselves. A war Ukraine did not seek, and for which its people have paid a high price, has been fought by Ukrainians. It follows that, when peace comes and the task of rebuilding a shattered nation begins, it must be ‘owned by them’ too.

However, this lies in the future. Meantime, the war shows little sign of concluding any time soon. China and a large number of countries in the Global South might talk about the urgent need for peace. Ukrainians, however, have made it clear that there cannot be peace at any

price, especially if the price involves the loss of any of its territory. Nor does Putin seem likely to bring the war to an end. Victory may not be in his grasp, but he cannot afford to lose either. Furthermore, with the Russian army dug in behind well-protected fortifications from the south to the east of Ukraine, he has every incentive to fight on and even escalate the war. Destroying Ukraine's infrastructure and preventing the export of its grain to the rest of the world may look like desperate gestures from a leader with his back to the wall. And continuing the war further may well turn out to be futile. But that is not how it looks to Putin. Rather than accepting what appears obvious to some in the West (and perhaps even in Beijing) – that Russia cannot win – he has instead continued to make Ukraine (and thus its Western backers) pay the heaviest price possible for their continued resistance. A famous writer on strategy once opined that all wars end, and no doubt this war will end one day too. Still, nearly two years into a conflict that some believed would be over in a matter of weeks, we are no nearer to knowing when the conflict might end, on whose terms and with what long-term consequences for the world at large. The tragedy in Ukraine looks set to continue for some time to come.

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Annexes.** Annex A and B. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lsepr.96.s1>

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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