



The Eurasia Center's Slavic Program

March 23, 2023

War in Ukraine What Does the Future Hold?



*Ukrainian troops practice exercises to protect its northern boundaries facing Belarus
Photo Credit: Reuters*

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War in Ukraine – What Does the Future Hold?



Putin beholden to President Xi – As Russia desperately seeks Chinese Aid

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine is one that has captured the attention of every actor on the global stage as well as all of its accompanying international and national organizations as the world scrambles to react. Whether it be in retaliation with joint economic sanctions against Moscow or in terms of aid sent to the active warzones, the involvement of both European allies and tentative Russian supporters is a facet of the conflict that is adapting day by day. The evolution of the conflict undeniably impacts global governance and cooperation at every level, including both the status of regional partnerships and the dictation of national legislation as countries rush to compile budget packages and aid proposals that balance both the needs of their own country with attempting to remedy the devastating losses suffer by Ukraine at the hands of the Russian state. The current Russo-Ukrainian War has been described as the only 21st century armed conflict in Europe, which is

especially pertinent given the prevalence of democracy in the region and is referenced repeatedly by scholars and world leaders alike when emphasizing the severity of the war and its implications for the rest of the continent and beyond.

To those unfamiliar with Russian foreign policy, the motives behind Vladimir Putin's decisions as the sitting leader of the Kremlin state may seem completely unfounded in reality and even self-sabotaging as the war drives Russia farther and farther from the sphere of the West and deeper into its own isolation. But this outcome is exactly what a nation like Russia aims to achieve – a dynamic that can be spun by the political leaders in Moscow to paint the Russian state as the victim of violent Western ideology that oppresses any opposition and drives divergent nations out of Europe and away from regional organizations that are rallied together around a core of democratic ideals. The tragedies occurring in Ukraine today are unfortunately a result of an attempted display of power by the Russian state and a refusal to conform to the democratic norms of Europe and the greater West due to its inferiority to larger, more established and powerful democracies (the US being the greatest threat in this context). When the question of “why” Russia is pursuing a seemingly meaningless war with a state that is self-declared as sovereign and separate from the “Russian Empire”, the answer lies in analyzing power dynamics and the “means to an end” mentality that plagues governments crippled by its own shortcomings and persistent fear of succumbing to the progressive doctrines of freedom propagated by the West and its democratic ideals.

The Russo-Ukrainian War as we know it currently has ultimately stemmed from decades and decades of ethnic animosity in the region, which first came to a climax in 2014 with the Russian annexation of Crimea. Historically, there has always been some form of contention over what constitutes a Russian identity versus a Ukrainian one – Russians claiming that all people of surrounding regions were at one point inherently Russian, and any national identity assumed on top of that must be fraudulent to some degree. This is contrasted with the Ukrainian sentiment that nationality, for them, goes hand-in-hand with an ethnic identity, meaning that Ukrainians are both a government-defined state identity as well as their own sovereign people. This difference in perspective is what causes a lot of the friction between Russian and Ukrainian citizens, especially along the border between the two states, and facilitates the indoctrination process through government messaging and propaganda promoting one point of view over another (although this tactic is far more prevalent on the Russian side of this issue of contention). It is important not to

neglect identity and cultural issues when assessing the conflict holistically as the roots of the violence stem from an inability for both sides to reconcile what it means to be either Russian or Ukrainian, and this struggle is translated to disputes over territory and state legitimacy.

As previously mentioned, the issue of identity is further complicated along the borders, where many Ukrainian nationals speak only or primarily Russian, and view themselves as more Russian than Ukrainian. This is not the comprehensive sentiment, however – there are many Russian-speaking Ukrainians who are nevertheless proud of their national heritage and prefer to prioritize this aspect of their identity over any affiliation with the Russian state. The factor of language combined with the history outlined above is another complicating element that further blurs the lines of identity and in turn, the separation of Russians and Ukrainians in a regional sense (regarding national borders). It would be naïve to suggest that every single Ukrainian supports its own government in electing for state sovereignty – there are certainly people residing within the borders of Ukraine who are in favor of “joining the Russian Empire” as they already speak the Russian language and associate themselves with Russia more than anything else. But an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians are proud of their heritage and wish to be internationally recognized as one with their country, not as an extension of their larger neighbor.

War in Ukraine ultimately manifests as a humanitarian crisis for Ukrainians themselves. With cities and communities being destroyed by targeted Russian airstrikes, Ukrainians have no choice but to flee their country and hope for being granted asylum in neighboring nations. Europe specifically has been struggling with the influx of refugees that are overwhelming immigration systems and many countries (as well as the EU) are reassessing migrant protocols in an attempt to continue supporting the fleeing people of Ukraine while simultaneously working to offset the mass amounts of people overwhelming individual states as intake continues to increase. As expected, this is only a single aspect of international policy that has been completely revisited and revised since the initiation of the conflict in February 2022, but it is undoubtedly one of the most significant due to the large humanitarian crisis that Putin’s aggression has caused.

Another obvious repercussion of regional and organizational sanctions being imposed on Russia is the economic one – thousands of companies based in Western states have had to pull out of Russia or have otherwise had to find alternative sources of raw materials or labor that were previously being obtained from Russia. The implications of broken economic treaties and legal agreements will

surely persist years after the conclusion of the war, and the long-term consequences of a global economic restructuring cannot be understated. It is also imperative to highlight that since economic sanctions are the primary method utilized by international organizations specifically to protest the actions of the Russian government, Russian membership status of these organized bodies is being called into question as well. This contention is reaffirmed by many of the predominantly involved states (primarily from the democratic West) which have been firm about having zero tolerance for the sustained aggression enacted by Moscow in the 13 months since the initiation of the conflict.



Ukrainian soldiers fire a Soviet artillery system at Russian positions near Bakhmut, Ukraine.
Photo Credit: LIBKOS/AP Photo

Managing the interests of the nation of Ukraine as well as the welfare of actual Ukrainians themselves has become somewhat of a balancing act for leaders around the world. On one hand, it is important to assert that modern democracies are not a simple thing to squander, and that blatant imperialism has no place in modern day diplomatic relations. Many governments have also emphasized that democracy is the closest form of government the world has to providing the best semblance of both liberty and freedom for the people residing within a nations boundary. Dismissing or denouncing Ukrainians this choice is essentially denying its people their civil rights

as global citizens. Much of the animosity that comes in reaction to the conflict in Ukraine can also be attributed to the governing style within Russia itself, which provides an oppressive and restrictive environment for Russians themselves. The Putin regime continues to push propaganda and false narratives on its citizenry regarding both the war and Russia's role and relevance on the global stage. Putin continues to preach that Russia is the protector of the safety and quality of life for people within the Donbass and Luhansk regions should come before distinguishing the international formalities of sovereign distinctions between states. While sovereignty often does go in concert with societal welfare, in the case of the Russo-Ukrainian War the lines are not so clear, and these ambiguities only inflict further harm upon both populations of the Russian and Ukrainian people. One must remember that the majority of people living in these regions were Ukrainian, however, Russian propaganda after Maidan and saboteurs fomented division and civil strife in the regions, enabling Russian troops to carve enclaves out of Ukraine in these areas and Crimea.

As stated before, the international impacts of the Russian war on Ukraine are extensive, with the most critical repercussions being the influx of migrant refugees from the warzones to neighboring countries. In addition to the changes in international economic policy that have been implemented in retaliation to Russian aggression in the East of the continent. The violent decisions made by Russia seems to suggest that the world will continue to witness a division of states based on democratic ideals – those supporting democracy and those supporting authoritarianism. The prevalence of opposing ideologies and differing styles of governance can become a primary source of agitation between competing states, especially when the opposition to democracy is based on authoritarianism and limited freedoms for the citizens who reside under it. The Russian violence enacted towards Ukraine is a prime example of how a regional conflict can have global implications and drive areas of the world farther apart instead of closer together, specifically when a disagreement of this magnitude is at stake.

Policymakers around the world have expressed concerns that allowing Russia to annex or dominate Ukraine in any capacity would send the wrong sort of message to other global powers in similar situations concerning territory. If Putin's aggression in Ukraine is successful, it may encourage Xi's regime to invade Taiwan. The state of Taiwan is recognized as sovereign in many contexts, but not by the Chinese government itself, which considers the Taiwan to be an extension of the mainland. But these types of disputes are exactly the kind of thing the West aims to avoid when it comes to the spread of Communism and other oppressive forms of government, especially when Taiwan is

struggling to retain its democratic independence. In short, the Russian invasion on Ukraine in some ways communicates to other global actors the message that imperialistic land claims are possible in the 21st century, and unless Russia faces profound consequences for its actions, this precedent will continue, unless it is stopped.

So, what does the future hold for Ukraine? Is there an estimated time limit for the end of the war, and is Russia the sole state likely to be held responsible? What is to be said about the future of global democracy? The answers are again unclear. What we do know is that the West has been standing firm in its support of Ukraine's democratic efforts and perseverance throughout Russia's brutal assault of its sovereignty. The bravery and determination of the Ukrainian people does not seem to be wavering anytime soon. And while the threat of Russian and Chinese collusion is certainly a possibility to look out for, the ICC's arrest warrant for Putin suggests that the end of the extremism may come sooner than anticipated. Putin's regime has shown signs of cracking from the inside, as hundreds of thousands of casualties mount on the Russian side, not to mention the large loss of war material, bleeding out the nation and its peoples down Putin's road of ruin, while blindly following the cult of his personality. His Potemkin façade of Russian triumphalism may only last for so long. Will China and Russia become the new hegemon of Eurasia or are these regimes destined to falter and fall?

