



# The Russian invasion of Ukraine

## An analysis of Russia's reasons, motivations, and intent behind the 2022 invasion of Ukraine

This article was reviewed by Johannes Hollunder and Lisa-Maria Stilper



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Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the future of the Russian Federation has been uncertain. The consequences of the failure of communism and the resulting economic decline left the former empire in disarray, and the ascension of Vladimir Putin as an authoritarian leader further compounds the issues of Russia's internal political situation (WGI-Interactive Data Access). In addition, the eastward expansion of both NATO and the European Union further threatens the power and existence of a future Russia. Considering this background, the invasion of Ukrainian territory by the Russian Federation on February 24th, 2022, is unsurprising, even if the specific reasons remain elusive. Due to this uncertainty, several hypotheses are being discussed, both in academic environments and in casual conversations (Popova & Shevel, 2022; Lieven, 2022). This paper will explore two prominent alternatives by constructing the appropriate theoretical framework for the specific hypothesis and then applying them to the information that is currently available.

The first of the hypotheses that will be discussed concerns itself with the realist notion that the security of the state is paramount. Therefore, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is the effect of NATO's eastward expansion (Sullivan, 2022) and the election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy in favour of Petro Poroshenko as president of the Ukrainian government and the resulting degradation of this bilateral relationship (Torbakov, 2017 p.73). The analytical framework here will explore differences in realist theory, both in and between International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis concluding with offensive realism as the best-suited option to assess the actions of the Russian state. Following this assessment, this framework will be applied to current events as well as the historical development of this crisis

that might have led to the invasion of Ukraine to create an insight into the causes of this war from a realist perspective.

The second hypothesis discussed in this paper views the current events not as a result of political frameworks and structural influences but rather as a consequence of decisions made by individuals in power, namely Vladimir Putin, his close advisors, as well as the general discourse within the country of Russia. This approach will rely on research into Foreign Policy Decision making and psychological insights to construct a framework including rational choice theory (Smith, 2000) and a cognitive approach by Brecher, Steinberg, and Stein (1969) which dissects the decision-making process into its basic elements and therefore creates insights into the process that might have led to the current conflict.

After exploring the validity of all hypotheses, this paper will compare the results to find similarities and differences in the two approaches and how they interplay and conform into a singular cohesive construct that delivers reasons for Russia's invasion of Ukraine on different levels of analysis, therefore, creating a clearer view of the reasons for this invasion and the possible long-term implications that follow. It will then conclude with a look into generalizable insights from this specific case that might prove valuable to preventing the development of future conflicts hoping to contribute to a more peaceful future as well as the consequences for future interactions with Russia.

### Realism and War:

The invasion of Ukrainian sovereign soil by the Russian Federation on the 24th of February 2022 marks a breach of norms and values that have been the foundation of the inter-

national system since the Second World War (Crisis Group, 2022). Unsurprisingly, this major moment in history has created speculation about the “real” reason for the invasion. One widely accepted hypothesis is that Russia decided in favour of this course of action because its security was threatened by NATO expansion and the regime change in Ukraine that resulted in the election of a pro-European government (Center for Strategic Studies, 2019). This view on the invasion nestles nicely into the realist perspective of International Relations. Realists concern themselves with the security of the state and therefore focus on systemic relationships rather than the decision-making of individuals. Even though these assumptions are shared by all schools of realism, they differ in the conclusions and additional assumptions they make (Monten, 2006).

The first of three schools of realism that requires consideration is neoclassical realism. This branch of the neorealist school concerns itself with both internal and external factors and argues that states act based on their level of material power compared to other state actors in the international arena. What differentiates this school from more traditional schools of realism is however that it is not the actual level of strength that is the base for decisions but rather the perceived level of strength that is used by its leaders to develop its foreign policies. Furthermore, neoclassical realists argue that leaders are not only constrained by the material power at their disposal but also by the structure of the selected state as well as its society. This has the consequence that decisions made might not be ideal if viewed from a purely material perspective, while they are, in fact, the ideal choice for the specific government in the specific case (Rose, 1998 pp. 146-147).

Moving to the opposed set of schools that are defensive and offensive realism, the shift towards a system-focused perspective is clear. Defensive realism, like offensive realism, is based on the notion of an anarchical system in which there is no higher authority than nation-states. This leads to an environment in which states are in a constant fight for survival (Bull, 2012) and therefore they constantly seek to improve their security. This fact becomes problematic when the other side of this argument is considered. The increase in the security of one state brings with it the decrease in the security of other states prompting a counter-reaction. This is part of the phenomenon called the security dilemma and creates the risk of an arms race and war since cooperation cannot be guaranteed (Jervis, 1978). Therefore, defensive realists argue that moderate policy decisions should be followed and that strong states should show restraint in their decisions (Taliaferro, 2001 p. 129).

On the other hand, offensive realists come to different conclusions about the implications of the anarchical system. John Mearsheimer argues in his book “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics” (2001), the seminal work of offensive realism, that states do not have definitive knowledge of the intention of others. He couples this with the argument that states always have some military options and therefore comes to the conclusion that the chances of survival of a state depend on the power that it can wield compared to others (Mearsheimer, 2001 p. 3). Viewing this in conjunction with the desire for power in the theoretical environment of defensive realism the major difference becomes clear. States under the assumptions of offensive realism ultimately strive for global hegemony while defensive realism asserts that states are content in a

setting where a balance of power is in effect (Mearsheimer, 2001 p. 21).

With this foundational theoretical overview established, it is necessary to explore the case at hand to gain an understanding of the situation and therefore the best possible means of explanation. This involves an understanding of the actors that realist theory considers of impact. One major assumption of realism is that of groupism which asserts that humans mostly interact with each other in groups (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2008). The consequence of this is that the nation-state has remained as the unit of interaction ever since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and, therefore, realist analysis regards nation-states as the only major actors in the international arena and therefore the only units of relevance. Following this assumption, this paper will view the actions of different nation-states before the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on February 24th, 2022, to find an explanation for Russia’s actions.

The end of the Cold War in 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union marked a significant reduction in power and territory for Russia. This threatening situation was further compounded by the loss of control of many of the former Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe and their subsequent integration into NATO. While the first wave of this expansion was met with harsh criticism by the Russian government, the second wave in the early 2000s was not met with the same reaction, but instead a rather mellowed response (Franeckova, 2002). Continuing from this phase of NATO expansion this trend of measured and restrained responses does not hold. In the summer of 2008, Russia invaded several regions of strategic importance in the Republic of Georgia which served to

secure Russian interests in the region and expanded its sphere of influence (Allison, 2008 pp.1145-1146). This is congruent with the *modus operandi* that would emerge in the following years. Only six years later, in 2014, the Russian Federation invaded and subsequently annexed the region of Crimea and aided pro-Russian movements in the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk that have the goal of secession. This destabilized Ukraine while simultaneously strengthening Russia’s position in Eastern Europe (Bebler, 2015 pp. 189-208). These events then lead to the topic of this assignment, the reasons for the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022.

Looking at these past events the trend for aggression is clear. Comparing this to the different approaches discussed above, the similarities to the environment offensive realists present are striking. The foundational assumptions of an anarchical system, a striving toward global or regional hegemony, and a lack of complete information (Mearsheimer, 2001) are all present in Russia’s actions surrounding the recent invasion of Ukraine. In his televised speech on the 21st of February, Vladimir Putin (2022a) reasoned that Ukraine was a creation by Bolshevik Russia and that a functioning government never materialized in Kyiv. Furthermore, Putin states that the pro-west rhetoric combined with the efforts to include Ukraine in the NATO alliance are indicators of corrupt elites and their systemic effort to destroy the country. In an additional speech on the 24th of February, Putin (2022b) again strongly criticized NATO expansion policy and accused the United States of acting without consideration of international institutions and principles, and then announced a special operation which was, in fact, a declaration of war in all but name against Ukraine.

From the perspective of an offensive realist, these actions are not born out of sympathy and compassion but rather a milestone in expansionist actions that have taken place since the early 2000s. Looking at this conflict from a geographical perspective, the necessity of it for security and to form the basis for further expansions becomes clear. The western part of Russia is situated at the end of the North European plain. This very flat terrain creates a straight path from France over Moscow to the Ural Mountains. Furthermore, the plain is shaped like a funnel making it difficult to defend for Russian troops and therefore poses an immense security risk. Consequently, Russian interest has always tried to increase the amount of territory between Moscow and its Europe-

an enemies (Marshall, 2016 pp. 14-16). To accomplish this Russia has always aspired to enlarge its territory in Eastern Europe, and especially to control Belarus and Ukraine (Marshall, 2016 pp. 23-24). This enlargement would benefit Russia twofold. On one hand, it would create a larger buffer of land that could be used in case of conflict, and on the other hand, it would reduce the length of a potential frontline making a defence by Russian troops easier.

This geographical issue is compounded by several political ones. First, Russia, as Vladimir Putin stated, views Ukraine as a part of the Russian empire, resulting in a constant effort to retain a grasp on Ukrainian policy and its decisions. This long-standing hold faltered with the election of President Zel-



Source: (European Environment Agency, 2004)

ensky in 2019 (Torbakov, 2017 p.73) which could be viewed as a trigger for the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Furthermore, the considerable loss of power and influence after the fall of the Soviet Union resulted in the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe and therefore a loss of power over the former vassal states. This favours the reasoning that the Russian national interest displays a tendency of longing after its former greatness and in turn, contains actions that will set Russia on a course towards more influence and power.

In conclusion, viewing the Russian invasion of Ukraine from a realist perspective reveals several key insights. This invasion is not the first act of aggression by Russia and therefore it is likely not the last one. While an argument regarding the defensive nature of the invasion of Ukraine

can be made due to NATO expansion and changes in the Ukrainian government this would neglect Russian actions in Georgia and frequent assassinations across Europe (Tenzer, 2021). This constant aggression and disruption of peace initiated and maintained by the Russian Federation point toward a sinister future. To stem the longing for its former glory Russia might decide that territorial gains in Ukraine might not be satisfactory and further expansionist actions should not be ruled out.

### Decision-making and Rationality:

The second hypothesis that this paper will explore surrounds the decision-makers themselves. Many regard this invasion as illogical and erratic and therefore assume the same of Russia's leader Vladimir Putin (Paas-Lang, 2022). This section will explore the decision-making process through different understandings of rationality and the impact and influence of actors that surround the central decision-maker as well as limitations to rationality followed by an endeavour into cognitive approaches. This assessment of approaches

will be followed by an analysis of the events that led to the invasion of Ukraine through consideration of actors inside and outside of the Russian government as well as the influence history and foreign actors hold over these unfolding events ultimately answering whether the decisions by the Russian government

are based in reason, ideology, or insanity.

Rational decision-making as a concept has its roots in Adam Smith's book "The Wealth of Nations" (2000) where he assumes that humans make their decisions based on a rational process. The core here is that humans rank their preferences in order and can therefore discern the relationship between different choices and their impact. Moving from the realm of economics towards rationality in International Relations their intertwined relationship is made clear. Both realism and

*"This constant aggression and disruption of peace initiated and maintained by the Russian Federation point toward a sinister future."*

liberalism, two foundational schools of international relations, view the actions of international actors through a lens of rational decisions (Novelli, 2018). While these theories focus on nation-states and organizations as the main actors in world politics this grounding in rationality is providing a foundation for theories with humans as their primary actors. While this rational approach to decisions and actions provides a clear logic with predictable consequences the reality often looks different.

Rational choice theory assumes that humans value gains and losses equally while it has been proven that humans are more sensitive to losses and therefore view risks regarding possible gains differently than they would assess losses (Levy, 1997). This necessitates other approaches to decision-making that go beyond purely rational theory. Margaret and Harold Sprout (1957) divide the aspects of decision-making into two different parts. The first is the psychological environment which represents the decision-maker and his considerations on an issue followed by the operational environment which is the reality in which the decisions from the psychological environment are enacted. This decoupling of the individual mind from reality creates a space for misinformation and imperfect decisions based on the available information and their psychological state of mind. This basic divide can then be used as a foundation for more complex models of decision-making. The model used for this analysis was developed by Brecher, Steinberg, and Stein (1969) and uses the foundational division by the Sprouts to create a model that considers internal and external factors in the operational and psychological environments as well as the impact that processes like communication, the formulation of policy, and the implementation of decisions have in the overarching process of

decision-making (See figure 1). In the following section, this paper will apply this model to the events and actions that led to the Russian invasion of Ukraine while expanding on the individual components of this model.

To commence the analysis this model requires the analysis of the different factors that make up the operational environment. The fundamental assumption here is that this environment influences the decision-maker through their subjective understanding while directly impacting the realization of decisions. Furthermore, the operational environment is divided into two separate categories, external and internal factors. External factors are the decisions made by entities outside of the nation in question while internal factors are domestic influences on the foreign policy of a nation (Brecher, Steinberg & Stein 1969 p. 82). Applying these considerations to Russia's decision to invade Ukraine the following major categories of analysis in the operational environment emerge: first, the actions by other nations, and second, factors inside of Russia that created the possibility for this decision.

Assessing the external factors to this decision begins with the shape of the global system and its interactions. Considering Russia's position in this system it is clear that it has diminished in importance since the Cold War and the rise of China as a new global power while simultaneously becoming more and more isolated due to the autocratic rule of Vladimir Putin and the spread of democratic ideas in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, on a bilateral level, a change in the relations between Russia and Ukraine has occurred in recent years, specifically the rise of a pro-West sentiment in Ukraine and the worsening of Russia-Ukraine relations with the election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy as President of Ukraine while the territory of Ukraine is seen

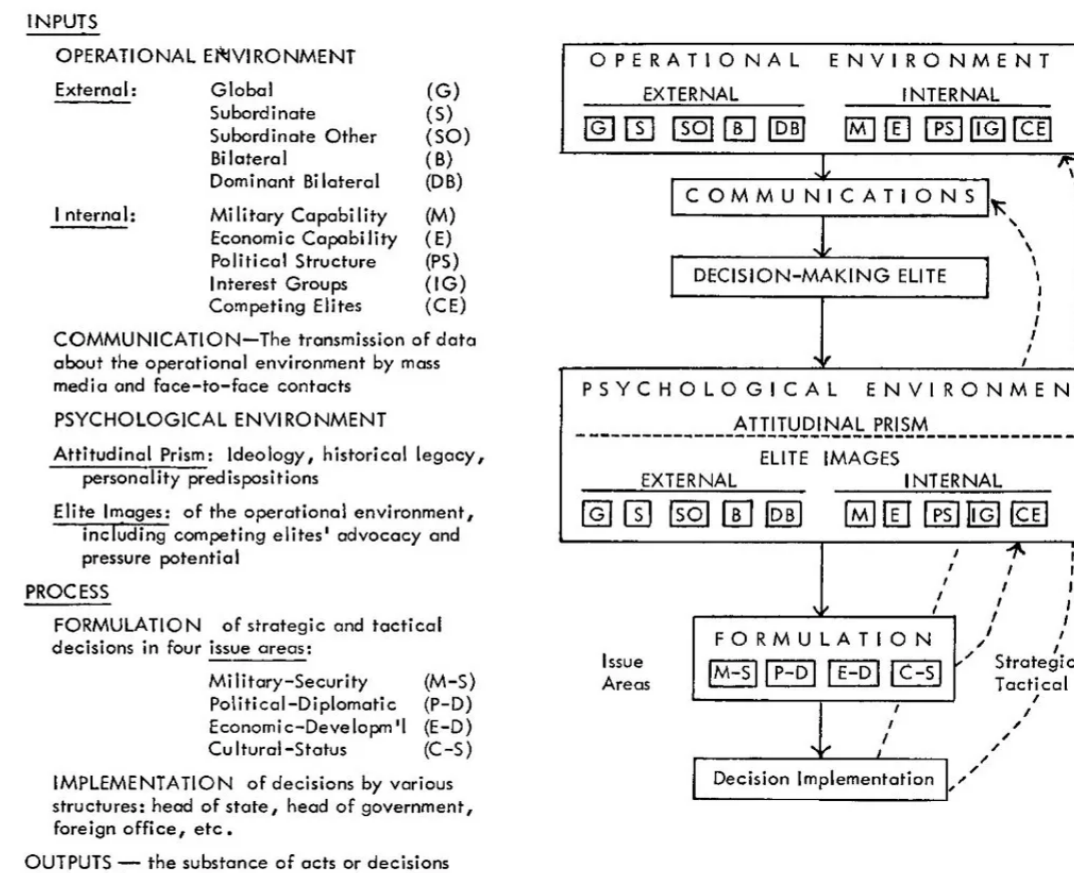


Figure 1: Brecher, Steinberg, and Stein Model (1969 p. 80)

by many Russians as the birthplace of the Russian Empire (Lavrov, 2016). Moving toward the internal factors of the operational environment the first two major variables to consider in this model are the military and economic capabilities of Russia. While the armed forces of Russia are considerably smaller than they were before the fall of the Soviet Union, they have undergone a modernization process that has strengthened them in comparison to their capabilities in the early 2000s (Cancian & Saxton, 2021). In contrast, Russia's economy is steadily moving towards a recession with an annual GDP growth rate of -3% in 2020 (The World Bank, 2021) due to the Covid-19 pandemic delivering the latest figure in this downward trend.

Furthermore, this model requires the assessment of the political structures in the state, including its form of government, the role of interest groups, and political elites. Commencing

with the form of government, Vladimir Putin is pursuing an authoritarian style of rule, including the suppression of the free press and opposition parties. At the same time, Russia's vast economic inequality has led to an oligarchic society creating an elite of extremely wealthy individuals that form the strongest domestic interest group involved in Russian foreign policy. The next category to consider moves away from the operational environment and assesses the communication network. Here factors like the amount of the total information conveyed and its accuracy are at the forefront of the analysis. Here Russia is severely limited by a heavily censored press sector that is almost exclusively part of the government itself. This makes it likely that a substantial amount of information reaching the upper echelons of the Russian government is not accurate or complete. The next point to consider in this model is the decision-making elite. Putin's government

here is characterized by a very small number of individuals that provide information and aid in decisions. This leads to an environment where decisions lack broad consideration and knowledge for specific issues are excluded due to missing experts on a topic.

The next step of analysis in this model is the psychological environment which concerns itself with the same sub-categories as the operational environment but not from an objective perspective. Instead, it focuses on the internal perception of these factors which then leads to the formation of policy. Therefore, this paper will consider these factors under the policy formation step of the analysis to clearly understand the process. Commencing with the perception of the operational environment, European, and especially US foreign policy prioritized China as the major threat to the West resulting in more perceived freedom to act. Furthermore, the pro-Russian separatist movements in Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014 helped to create the view that Ukrainians were not pro-European which was reinforced by the successful annexation of Crimea shortly after. Combining this with Putin's suppression of opposition and dissent creates an environment in which Putin is successful in his military endeavours while facing little criticism and negative information about his actions domestically. This confidence in his military and the probable success of an invasion was then strengthened by the fact that the vast majority of analysts depicted Ukraine's chances in a conflict as minimal producing a viable path of expansion towards Vladimir Putin's dream of returning Russia to its former greatness. This led to the formation of an aggressive foreign policy to expand Russian territory further into Ukraine without the expectation of a reaction beyond economic sanctions and military aid

by NATO leading to a decisive victory and the first step towards Russia's return as a world power.

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, while both hypotheses independently offer compelling reasons for Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in 2022, they do so on different levels. The realist approach offers reasoning based on a system-level approach while the second hypothesis provides answers regarding individual decision-makers and their considerations. Therefore, combining these different levels of analysis results in a clearer picture that grounds the decision by Vladimir Putin and Russia to invade Ukraine in a core theory of international relations as well as a decision-making process that considered a variety of factors and provided the outlook of a successful military campaign with relatively little risk. On the system level, the policy decision by Russia follows the considerations and assumptions of offensive realism which prompts the question of whether Russia would be content with the annexation of Ukrainian territory or whether this is an indicator of future aggression. This issue can also be considered with the choices of Vladimir Putin in mind. Here statements issued point toward a yearning after the former glory of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union which makes further aggression a likely possibility. This analysis shows that the decision by Russia to invade Ukraine is complex and cannot be answered by simple absolute statements and rather is based on both, a systemic development of world politics and the decisions by one individual and his close advisers and their perception of the future of a nation and its roots. Whether this specific decision will indeed be the start of the return to power of Russia or an overreach and its downfall remains to be seen.

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