



Russia's Gambit to Redefine the Current World Order

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Abstract: Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has made iterative changes to its National Security Strategy (NSS) to bolster its position in the world. The initial intent of the NSS was to provide aspirational foreign policy goals and ambitions the Kremlin could work towards. In 2021, President Putin viewed Russia to be in a position to change the Kremlin's status in the world and decided to take action. In addition to publishing the 2021 NSS, President Putin also penned a personal history essay about Russia and Ukraine. President Putin's article provides the Kremlin with a narrative to garner popular domestic support and superficial justification for Russia's actions against Ukraine. The ultimate goal of the NSS is to reestablish the Cold War world order. President Putin is using Ukraine as a means to reassert Russia's position in the world while at the same time attempting to discredit the Euro-Atlantic rules-based order.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, world order, great power, President Putin, Donbas, Crimea, NATO, National Security Strategy, special military operation, historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians.

Introduction

Ukraine's freedom has not perished, nor her glory gone. Once again all Ukraine's fate will smile upon. Enemies will perish like dew in the sun. We shall possess all my people a free land of our own. We will lay down soul and body and show that we are one. We will stand together for our freedom, none shall

rule our home. Ukraine's freedom has not perished nor her glory gone. We will stand together for our freedom none shall rule our home.

--Singer Patricia Lee Smith's English rendition of the Ukrainian national anthem¹

Pavlo Chubynsky, a 19th-Century ethnographer, wrote the poem that would later become the Ukrainian national anthem. The same year he published his poem, 1862, the Russian government arrested and accused Chubynsky of participating in a Ukrainian national movement.² The Ukrainian national identity has been a matter of debate for centuries. In the 1920s, the Bolsheviks introduced an indigenization policy to promote local culture, education, and language amongst the republics of the USSR. In Ukraine, the policy of indigenization was called "Ukrainization."³ Over time, Joseph Stalin feared that Ukrainization could lead to a national identity that would cause Ukraine to seek independence from the Soviet Union. Stalin wrote on August 11, 1932, "At this point the most important thing is Ukraine. The situation in Ukraine is very bad. If we don't take steps now to improve the situation, we may lose Ukraine."⁴ Stalin took a two-prong approach to end Ukrainization – agricultural collectivization and the destruction of autonomous Ukrainian institutions (i.e., the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Communist Party of Ukraine).⁵ The resulting devastation of Stalin's efforts to end Ukrainization is now known as Holodomor.

Ukraine has once again become "the most important thing" to the Russian Federation, and the Kremlin may lose Ukraine from its sphere of influence. In July 2021, The Russian Federation published two critical documents that outline President Putin's views and the strategy Russia is implementing to retain influence over Ukraine and challenge the West's rules-based system. The first document published on July 2, 2021, was the National Security Strategy (NSS) of the Russian Federation.⁶ The second document, which provides an understanding of Ukraine's role in the Russian strategy, is an article President Putin published on

¹ Patricia L. Smith, "Patti Smith's English Translation of the Ukrainian National Anthem," *Vogue UA*, March 6, 2022, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://vogue.ua/article/culture/muzyka/patti-smit-perekhlala-gimn-ukrajini-angliyskoyu.html>.

² Ivan Katchanovski, Zenon E. Kohut, Bohdan Y. Nebesio, and Myroslav Yurkevich, *Historical Dictionary of Ukraine*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013), https://shron2.chtyvo.org.ua/Zbirnyk_statei/Historical_Dictionary_of_Ukraine_anhl.pdf.

³ Serhy Yekelchuk, *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, September 2015).

⁴ Kateryna Bondar, "The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-1933: Legal Case for Genocide," *Ukrainian Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2019): 13-19.

⁵ Katchanovski, Kohut, Nebesio, and Yurkevich, *Historical Dictionary of Ukraine*.

⁶ President of Russia, "О Стратегии Национальной Безопасности Российской Федерации [On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation]," Decree #400 of July 2, 2021, accessed August 5, 2021, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47046/page/1>.

July 12, 2021, titled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”⁷ Understanding the iterative changes in the language of the NSS over time and how President Putin’s view of Russian and Ukrainian history nests within that strategy is crucial to deciphering the current objectives of Russia’s actions in Ukraine.

To an extent, President Putin announced his intentions during his opening remarks at the October 2021 annual Valdai conference. He began by outlining the idea of now being a time of change – a time to redefine the world order that the West established after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁸ He stated, “The attempt to create [the current world order] after the end of the Cold War based on Western domination failed, as we see. The current state of international affairs is a product of that very failure, and we must learn from this.”⁹ To challenge the current world order, President Putin is using Ukraine to make his stand. In the words of a scholar, Lilia Shevtsova, “Ukraine has thus become a battleground on which the Kremlin can wage its struggle against Western civilization.”¹⁰ Russia’s war in Ukraine is an attempt to gain great power status in the current world order while discrediting the Euro-Atlantic rules-based system. Four critical factors explain Russia’s efforts to achieve its objective as a global competitor. First, the NSS drives the Kremlin’s national priorities and reveals Russia’s political and military will to protect its national interests. Second, Russia’s success in gaining and maintaining great power status is contingent on the survival of the Putin regime. Third, President Putin is using a historical narrative to counter the Western influence and justify the Kremlin’s actions in “historical Russian lands.” Fourth, Russia’s timing to redefine the current world order is based on President Putin’s perception of reality.

Background

Current tensions between the West and Russia are at an all-time high. With a force of more than 190,000 Russian troops, President Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine to seize key cities and depose the Ukrainian government. The threat of severe Western sanctions and diplomatic talks between Russia and the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in mid-January 2022 failed to deter the Russian attack. Despite sanctions failing to prevent Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, recent Western diplomatic efforts are not the reason behind Russia’s actions in Ukraine. It is essential to look back through the Russian perspective of

⁷ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” *President of Russia States News Service*, July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁸ “Valdai Discussion Club Meeting October 2021,” *President of Russia*, October 21, 2021, accessed November 5, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66975>.

⁹ “Valdai Discussion Club Meeting October 2021.”

¹⁰ Lilia Shevtsova, “Russia’s Ukraine Obsession,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (January 2020): 138-147, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0011>.

world events following the dissolution of the Soviet Union to understand the Kremlin's motives, timing, and end state.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West viewed the end of the Cold War as a victory for liberal democratic values. Russia, for its part, viewed the end of the Cold War as an opportunity to work with the West as equals in establishing a new world order.^{11,12} As the Russian Ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Antonov, phrased it: "Romantic illusions were dispelled [, and the...] United States immediately began to create a new world order with Russia placed at the outskirts."¹³ Since the Cold War ended, many former Soviet states have adopted the Western liberal order taking the necessary steps to become members of the European Union and join NATO. In the minds of Russian leaders, the country was left with a sense of encroachment on an ever-diminishing sphere of influence, geographically and politically, on the world stage. Ambassador Antonov further expounded: "We have come to the point when we have no room to retreat. Military exploration of Ukraine by NATO member states is an existential threat for Russia."¹⁴ The appeal of Western liberal democracy and Russia's inability to stop former Soviet states from aligning with the West caused Russia to take active measures to prevent further Western expansion. Russia began first with Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

In Ukraine, the ongoing Russian military operation produced unexpected results. Up until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainian military forces had been battling Russian-backed separatists along the border of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics since 2014. Eight years of military confrontation produced few demonstrable gains, and violations of cease-fire agreements occurred daily.¹⁵ As for the Crimean peninsula, which Russia annexed in 2014, President Putin made it abundantly clear there would be no concessions. What makes the conflict in Ukraine different from Russian adventurism in other protracted conflicts like Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moldova's Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh is the Ukrainian response. The fighting in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea galvanized the Ukrainian population further from the Kremlin and closer to the West.

Russia's invasion proved the Ukrainian resolve to maintain their sovereignty as the world watched the determination of the Ukrainian people to defend their homeland. President Putin viewed Ukraine's shift from East to West as a per-

¹¹ Roger E. Kanet, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019).

¹² Anatoly Antonov, "An Existential Threat to Europe's Security Architecture?" *Foreign Policy*, December 30, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/30/russia-ukraine-nato-threat-security/>.

¹³ Antonov, "An Existential Threat to Europe's Security Architecture?"

¹⁴ Antonov, "An Existential Threat to Europe's Security Architecture?"

¹⁵ "Ukraine Watchlist," *BBC Monitoring*, February 28, 2022, accessed February 28, 2022.

sonal affront that contradicts what he views as a fraternal unity between Ukrainians and Russians.¹⁶ Ukraine's move further from the Kremlin's influence was not overnight and has been years in the making. The Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Euromaidan in 2014 were two key events that signaled to the Kremlin Ukraine's move away from Russia's influence towards a more Western-based liberal democratic system of governance. Viewing these changes over the years in Ukraine, in other former Soviet states, and domestically, President Putin guided the evolution of the Russian security strategy to confront the changing operational environment.

The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation

Coming out of the Cold War, the Russian Federation developed a security strategy that evolved with each leader based on political will and military capacity. The current National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation is a planning tool used to define national interests and priorities. It includes the long-term goals and objectives of the Russian Federation to ensure national security and future development.¹⁷ Its purpose is similar to that of a vision statement – to identify an ideal state or status that Russia could work towards achieving. In addition, it defines Russia's overall security policy when grouped with other federal documents like the Military Doctrine, Concept of Foreign Policy, and Information Security Doctrine.¹⁸

The Kremlin has maintained some form of a national security strategy since the establishment of the Russian Federation in the early 1990s. President Medvedev signed into law the first NSS in 2009. Prior to the 2009 NSS, the guiding document was the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation. By transitioning from a "security concept" to a "security strategy," the Kremlin captured measurable goals that it could accomplish within a specific timeframe.¹⁹ Dr. Katri Pynnöniemi, a professor at the University of Helsinki, conducted a comparative analysis of varying concepts between the Russian security strategies from the 1990s until 2015. Dr. Pynnöniemi states, "In 1997, Russia clearly did not have the political, economic, and military resources to realize its foreign policy ambitions. Whereas today [December 2015], Russia has both the resources and the political will to protect its national security with the means of military force."²⁰ The adaptation of a "security strategy" in 2009 brought about a whole

¹⁶ Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians."

¹⁷ President of Russia, "On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation."

¹⁸ Sophia Dimitrakopoulou and Andrew Liaropoulos, "Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020: A Great Power in the Making?" *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 35-42, <http://cria-online.org/russias-national-security-strategy-to-2020-a-great-power-in-the-making/>.

¹⁹ Dimitrakopoulou and Liaropoulos, "Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020."

²⁰ Katri Pynnöniemi, "Russia's National Security Strategy: Analysis of Conceptual Evolution," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31 no. 2 (2018): 240-256, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2018.1451091>.

of government approach using both hard and soft power, which included, in addition to national security, improving the quality of life of citizens, economic growth, science, new technology, education, healthcare, culture, and climate change. Updates to the NSS were commensurate with events at the time of publishing each one, i.e., Georgia, Crimea, Donbas, and NATO expansion.

In addition to world events, the decade between 2008 to 2018 marked a change in Russian strategic capabilities and self-perception. When reporters at the 2008 NATO summit asked President Putin about Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO, he responded that if Ukraine was "...admitted to NATO, [Ukraine] will simply cease to exist."²¹ The 2009 NSS correspondingly did not reflect President Putin's sentiments, and at the time, the Kremlin lacked the political will and military means to put President Putin's words into action. Between the 2009 and 2015 strategies, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ensuing conflict in the Donbas region caused a significant change in the geopolitical landscape. It simultaneously signaled to the world the political and military will of the Russian Federation.

By 2018, Russia further demonstrated its political and military capabilities by deploying military forces beyond its historical sphere of influence. Tatiana Stanovaya, a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center, wrote about the change in Russia's self-image that began in 2018: "Intoxicated by Russia's military success in Syria, its unique role in Central Asia, increased presence in Africa, and, above all, its newly developed 'wonder weapons,' Putin switched from feeling like an oppressed player to someone who could go on the offensive."²² The 2009 and 2015 security strategies specified the time horizon of 2020 to work towards accomplishing the objectives the presidential decrees envisaged. The goal of those security objectives was defined as being "...an institutionally and economically strong centralized state with the statuses of a sovereign, and great, power."²³ Having met the timeline from the 2009 and 2015 strategies and a perceived accomplishment of establishing a "strong centralized state," the Kremlin shifted the focus of the 2021 NSS. The end state of the 2021 NSS is to restore Russia's "competitiveness and international prestige."²⁴ Russia's political will and capacity to protect its national security through military means have grown and permeated much of the 2021 NSS. The key to the Kremlin's approach to restoring its prestige lies in its ability to maintain its influence over its population and former Soviet states that have yet to join the European Union or NATO.

²¹ Olga Allenova, Elena Geda, and Vladimir Novikov, "Блок НАТО Разошелся на Блок-пакеты [NATO bloc has broken up into block packages]," *Kommersant*, April 7, 2008, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/877224>.

²² Tatiana Stanovaya, "3 Things the World should Know about Putin: The Nature of Putin's Russia Has Changed Drastically in the Last Few Years," *Foreign Policy*, January 27, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/27/putin-russia-ukraine-crisis-invasion>.

²³ Kanet, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*.

²⁴ President of Russia, "On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation."

The changing tone of the NSS over time conveys the secondary and tertiary aims of strategic messaging to both domestic and international audiences of the Kremlin's attempt to redefine the world order.²⁵ The 2009 NSS promoted "...cooperation with the United States in terms of an equal strategic partnership in fields of common interests."²⁶ In 2015, the Russian NSS openly referenced the United States, the European Union, and NATO multiple times as competitors. The 2021 NSS mentions the United States twice, NATO once, and does not mention the EU. In the place of the United States, EU, and NATO, the 2021 NSS uses the catch-all term "Western," along with "unfriendly countries" and "unfriendly actions from foreign states."²⁷ Additionally, instead of a more cooperative tone when discussing the United States and its Allies, the 2021 NSS uses more adversarial language when referring to the West. Julian Cooper from the Center for Russian, Eurasian and European Studies stated, "The terminology is now more strident and [...] the USA and its allies are explicitly identified as the source of attacks on Russian values, together with transnational corporations, NGOs, religious, terrorist and extremist organizations."²⁸ The change is most likely due to the Kremlin's view of itself and its self-perceived standing in the world. By omitting individual, adversarial countries and grouping the US, EU, and NATO as ambiguous "unfriendly countries," the vocabulary reinforces Russia's portrayal of being encircled by one common threat that the Kremlin must rival to gain global prestige.

The difference in connotation between the 2015 and 2021 strategies about the West is one demonstrative indicator of the change in Russia's thinking and the timing of its current actions in Ukraine. Article II of the NSS, "Russia in the Modern World: Trends and Opportunities," advances the idea that now is the Kremlin's window of opportunity to change the "structure of the world order."²⁹ For the past 30 years, Russia has viewed itself as acting from a position of weakness. Given the events leading up to the invasion of Ukraine, particularly with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the internal strife within the West (US domestic issues, BREXIT, new German leadership), Russia saw itself acting from a position of at least parity with the US.³⁰ Unlike the previous security strategies, the 2021 NSS asserts that "countries," an inference to the West, and in particular the United States, are losing their undisputed leadership and are trying to dictate their "...rules to other members of the international community..." through the use of "unfair competition," unilateral restrictive measures such as sanctions,

²⁵ Pynnöniemi, "Russia's National Security Strategy."

²⁶ Dimitrakopoulou and Liapopoulos, "Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020."

²⁷ President of Russia, "On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation."

²⁸ Julian Cooper, "Russia's Updated National Security Strategy," Russian Studies Series 2/21, NATO Defense College, last updated July 19, 2021, accessed October 14, 2021, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=704#>.

²⁹ President of Russia, "On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation."

³⁰ "Round-up: Russian Press Focuses on Moscow's New Signal to West," *BBC Monitoring*, December 21, 2021.

“and openly interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign states.”³¹ The NSS further reinforces Russia’s claim of its standing in the world. It emphasizes that Russia retains the capacity to protect its national security, whether internationally or domestically, first diplomatically and then, if necessary, through “symmetrical and asymmetric measures.”³² Russia’s perceived status as a global competitor is as much a declaration to the world as to the Russian people. Ukraine thereby becomes the platform where Russia can openly challenge the West, its Alliance, and the West’s resolve in maintaining the current rules-based order.

Three sections within the 2021 NSS highlight the role of Ukraine in the Kremlin’s strategy to increase its global competitiveness. The sections that outline the pivotal role Ukraine plays in achieving Russia’s end state include, in summary, how Russia sees itself in the modern world and Russia’s national interests and priorities. Russia’s interests and priorities feed into how Russia intends to ensure its national security. The specific subsections of the NSS include: “Information Security,” “Protection of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values, Culture, and History,” and “Strategic Stability and Mutually Beneficial International Cooperation.”³³ Inherent in the bodies of all three sections is the idea described in the 2016 Russian military doctrine as the “actions of individual persons’ as one of the internal dangers to Russia’s sovereignty, state, and territorial integrity.”³⁴ Regardless of the end state of the NSS, the Russian people are the guarantors of its success.

In the subtext of the NSS lies the greatest obstacle to Russia’s challenge to the world order: internal strife. President Putin’s fear of Russia having its own Maidan-type event is a common theme throughout the 2021 NSS. It follows a similar vein found in the 2015 NSS of preserving the Putin regime from a popular uprising. Analyzing the 2015 NSS, Russian scholars Vladimir Gel’man and Pavel Shchelin argued that the 2015 NSS focused on a foreign policy based solely on regime survival. “Whereas the 2009 strategy stressed global competitive conditions, the new version [2015 NSS] is myopic and acutely fearful of color revolutions in continuation of Putin’s statements about the Maidan Revolution.”³⁵ Like the 2015 NSS, the 2021 NSS only states “color revolution” once; however, the sentiment of domestic unrest is a prevailing theme throughout the sections of the 2021 NSS. Specifically, the 2021 NSS states: “Unfriendly countries are trying to use the existing socioeconomic problems in the Russian Federation to destroy its internal unity, inspire and radicalize the protest movement, support marginal groups and split Russian society.”³⁶ The restructuring and additions to the national priorities foment the reiterative fear of a domestic uprising: “Almost every

³¹ President of Russia, “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation.”

³² President of Russia, “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation.”

³³ President of Russia, “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation.”

³⁴ Pynnöniemi, “Russia’s National Security Strategy.”

³⁵ Kanet, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*.

³⁶ President of Russia, “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation.”

priority area in the 2021 [NSS] contains criticism of Western actions that purportedly undermine Russian national interests.”³⁷ The 2021 NSS outlined one way to combat Western influence in Russia and mitigate potential domestic uprisings by adding “Information Security” as a national priority.

Russian Information Security: Protect the Regime

At first glance, information security, as outlined in the 2021 NSS as a national priority, is not geared toward information warfare, nor does it seem to cover any offensive information operations that the West routinely accuses Russia of conducting. The general connotation of the information security priority carries the continued theme of Russia being besieged on all sides. The 2021 NSS states that foreign countries are using information to “...destabilize the socio-political situation in the Russian Federation,” with the target being Russia’s youth.³⁸ The new national priority on information security provides a well-defined method for controlling the narrative of information outside the Kremlin to the greater Russian population. As described in the NSS, the Kremlin labels any news or media contradicting Putin as disinformation.

To discourage the spread of potentially damaging information, the Russian government produces its own false narratives along five main themes: Russia is the victim, historical revisionism, the “collapse of Western Civilization,” popular movements are US-sponsored “color revolutions,” and finally, the reality is whatever the Kremlin wants it to be.³⁹ The juxtaposition of information and disinformation between the United States and Russia plays a significant role in gaining popular support amongst constituents and justifying further diplomatic or military actions. The internal politics in Ukraine, Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine, and Russia’s official statements and documents all fall within Russia’s modus operandi as defined in its military doctrine on information security.

It is crucial to understand how both the US and Russia view information security and how each country operates within the information domain. The US definition of the information instrument of national power “...is limited to the US government’s efforts to disseminate information to, and collect information on foreign audiences.”⁴⁰ On the other hand, Russian military doctrine on information operations falls into two categories: cyber operations, such as hacking, and influence operations. The former deals with the technical aspect and in-

³⁷ Nivedita Kapoor, “Russia’s New National Security Strategy,” *Observer Research Foundation*, July 7, 2021, accessed January 27, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/russias-new-national-security-strategy/>.

³⁸ President of Russia, “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation.”

³⁹ U.S. State Department, “Russia’s Top Five Persistent Disinformation Narratives,” Fact Sheet, *Office of the Spokesperson*, January 20, 2022, accessed January 28, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/russias-top-five-persistent-disinformation-narratives/>.

⁴⁰ D. Robert Worley, *Orchestrating the Instruments of Power: A Critical Examination of the U.S. National Security System* (Raleigh, NC: Lulu Press, 2012).

cludes “shutting down pipelines, stealing data, and surveilling personal devices.”⁴¹ The second component of Russian information security “...targets the cognitive processes of the adversary’s leaders and population. It focuses on psychological manipulation.”⁴² Russian military strategists Chekinov and Bogdanov argued, “In the ongoing revolution in information technologies, information and psychological warfare will largely lay the groundwork for victory.” The chief of staff of the Russian armed forces, Valery Gerasimov, further elaborated by saying he values nonmilitary to military measures 4 to 1.⁴³ The NSS states that information security is not only reserved for “adversary’s leaders and population” but also Russia’s own people. The nonmilitary and military success will largely depend on who controls the narrative.

President Putin’s Revisionist History Lesson

President Putin’s article is a powerful narrative for domestic and international consumption that captures elements of the NSS. Under “Protection of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values, Culture, and History” in the NSS, it states: “Information-psychological sabotage and the ‘Westernization’ of culture increasingly threaten the Russian Federation from losing its cultural sovereignty. Attempts to falsify Russian and world history, distort historical truth and destroy historical memory, inciting interethnic and interfaith conflicts, and weaken the state-forming people have become more frequent.”⁴⁴ To correct the “false” and “distorted” historical truths, President Putin personally wrote his version of the history of Russia and Ukraine. President Putin succinctly put into words the thoughts and ideas he had shared in fragments throughout his years in power when he published his article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.” President Putin states, “to better understand the present, and look into the future; we need to turn to the past.”⁴⁵ While scholars and academics have identified many historical inaccuracies in President Putin’s account, these are the “facts” President Putin is using to “look into the future” of Ukraine as a partner with Russia and is the narrative under which the Kremlin is operating.

President Putin opens his essay with the claim “...that Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole.”⁴⁶ By presenting Ukrainians and Russians as “one people,” the traditional Russian spiritual and moral values addressed in the NSS apply equally to all Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians because of their “fraternal ties.” Citizenship then becomes trivial when compared to the

⁴¹ David Shedd and Ivana Stradner, “The Curious Omission in Russia’s New Security Strategy,” *Defense One*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/08/curious-omission-russias-new-security-strategy/184854/>.

⁴² Shedd and Stradner, “The Curious Omission in Russia’s New Security Strategy.”

⁴³ Shedd and Stradner, “The Curious Omission in Russia’s New Security Strategy.”

⁴⁴ President of Russia, “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation.”

⁴⁵ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

⁴⁶ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

Russian identity. This Russian identity and “cultural sovereignty” are defined in the NSS by culture, spiritual and moral values, language, and a shared history.⁴⁷ The NSS goes on to define those inherent Russian values as “life, dignity, human rights and freedoms, patriotism, citizenship, service to the Fatherland and responsibility for its destiny, high moral ideals, a strong family, creative work, the priority of the spiritual over the material, humanism, mercy, justice, collectivism, mutual assistance and mutual respect, historical memory and continuity of generations, the unity of the peoples of Russia.”⁴⁸ President Putin stresses that Ukrainians are undergoing a “forced change of identity,” and the West is coercing them to “deny their roots.”⁴⁹ He continues, “It would not be an exaggeration to say that the path of forced assimilation, the formation of an ethnically pure Ukrainian state, aggressive towards Russia, is comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us.”⁵⁰ President Putin’s article, like the NSS he signed in July 2021, asserts that the West and other “unfriendly countries” are culpable for meddling in Ukrainian affairs and for being complicit in the alienation of ethnic Russians.

President Putin’s view on history provides additional insights into the origins of the “Ukrainization” of Ukraine. President Putin defines Ukrainization as the rise of the “Ukrainian culture, language, and identity” separate from the larger Russian nation.⁵¹ He places the blame primarily on the Bolsheviks and their social experiments. Yet, President Putin also states that Ukrainization began much earlier than the Bolsheviks when Polish elites and Austro-Hungarians perpetuated “...the idea of Ukrainian people as a nation separate from Russians...”⁵² Advancing the hypothesis that external forces concocted the notion of Ukrainian people and culture provides President Putin with additional credence to the idea that the West is interfering in Ukrainian internal affairs. President Putin refuses to accept the notion that the Ukrainian people, through their own volition, have aspirational goals of establishing a liberal democratic government similar to other former Soviet states that are now part of the EU. Such an idea validates the color revolutions and goes contrary to the concept of Ukrainization. It also nullifies any justification the Kremlin could use to intercede on behalf of devout Russians who are being “...threatened with ethnic cleansing and the use of military force.”⁵³

In addition to the Western liberal model, President Putin blames the current Ukrainian leadership for purportedly forcing ethnic Russians to assimilate into a new Ukrainian state. A phrase used in another context but applying equally to

⁴⁷ President of Russia, “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation.”

⁴⁸ President of Russia, “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation.”

⁴⁹ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

⁵⁰ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

⁵¹ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

⁵² Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

⁵³ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

how the Kremlin views the leaders in Ukraine is that they are simply the “minority masquerading as the majority.”⁵⁴ At the 2021 Valdai Conference, President Putin stated “...that silent majority voted for them [current Ukrainian leadership] in the hope that they would fulfill their campaign promises, but the loud and aggressive nationalist minority suppressed all freedom in decision-making that the Ukrainian people expected.”⁵⁵ Taking a zero-sum approach to policies Ukraine enacts that potentially go against ethnic Russians provides the Kremlin with a rationalization to execute its foreign policy goals. The NSS states that to achieve the foreign policy goals of the Russian Federation, the Kremlin can provide “... support to compatriots living abroad in exercising their rights, including the right to preserve the all-Russian cultural identity, and ensuring the protection of their interest.”⁵⁶ President Putin’s ethno-nationalist approach to Ukraine is a foundational pretext to justify the Kremlin’s actions against Ukraine.

The overall premise of President Putin’s article is that the descendants of ancient Rus: Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, or commonly phrased in his article, Velikorussia (Big Russia – geographically what is now Russia), Belarus, Malorussia (Little Russia – Current geographic state of Ukraine), and Novorossiia (New Russia – the land in South/Southeastern Ukraine that borders the Black Sea, Azov Sea, and Russia), were “ethnically and religiously diverse” but symbiotically worked together to form the entire Russian nation.⁵⁷ President Putin lays the blame primarily on the Bolsheviks for fracturing this inherent Russian identity and cooperative relationship. He states that “...modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era,” and the Bolsheviks were “...generous in drawing borders and bestowing territorial gifts.” President Putin surmises that “Russia was robbed” because of the Bolsheviks.⁵⁸

In 1991, the three founding states (the Russian Federation, Belarus, and Ukraine) of the Soviet Union signed the Belavezha Accord, or Agreement on Establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States, which included an article to “...recognize and respect each other’s territorial integrity [as existing in 1991] and the inviolability of existing borders within the Commonwealth.”⁵⁹ However, President Putin argues that the Belavezha Accord does not have legal merit because the Bolsheviks detached historical territories from Russia. The only legal

⁵⁴ Elder L. Tom Perry, “Why Marriage and Family Matter – Everywhere in the World,” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, April 2015, accessed December 8, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2015/04/why-marriage-and-family-matter-everywhere-in-the-world>.

⁵⁵ “Valdai Discussion Club Meeting October 2021.”

⁵⁶ President of Russia, “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation.”

⁵⁷ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

⁵⁸ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

⁵⁹ Russian Federation, Ukraine and Belarus, “Соглашение о Создании Содружества Независимых Государств [Agreement on Establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States],” *Internet Portal CIS Integration Space*, December 8, 1991, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://e-cis.info/page/3373/79405/>.

recourse would be for the founding states of the USSR to “...return to the boundaries they had before joining the Soviet Union” in 1922.⁶⁰ In other words, Nikita Khrushchev’s ceding of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 was “...in gross violation of legal norms,” and Russia was therefore justified in annexing the peninsula in 2014.⁶¹ A significant omission from President Putin’s argument is the Alma-Ata Declaration. Less than two weeks after the three largest former Soviet states signed the Belavezha Accord, eleven former Soviet states, including Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, signed the Alma-Ata Declaration. This declaration reiterated the same articles of the Belavezha Accords. It declares “...mutual recognition and respect for state sovereignty and sovereign equality; the inalienable right to self-determination; the principles of equality and non-interference in internal affairs; the rejection of the use of force and the threat of force, economic and any other methods of pressure; peaceful settlement of disputes, respect for human rights and freedoms, including the rights of national minorities; conscientious fulfillment of obligations and other generally recognized principles and norms of international law; recognizing and respecting each other’s territorial integrity and the inviolability of existing borders.”⁶² Putin’s legal argument to compromise the validity of past treaties to justify actions in Ukraine could theoretically apply equally to any past treaty with all former Soviet states.

President Putin’s renegeing on agreements made at the collapse of the Soviet Union based on legal grounds is only a part of the Kremlin’s reasoning. An alternate justification for revisiting past agreements aligns with President Putin’s notion of renegotiating the post-Soviet settlement from a position Russia did not have in the early 1990s. The Kremlin views the renegotiating of past treaties as one within its rights as a self-perceived world power. President Putin, speaking about the December 2021 draft treaty with the United States and the draft agreement with NATO at a recent Defense Ministry Board, stated “that even written Western commitments don’t guarantee anything since the West easily withdraws from treaties.”⁶³ The specific commitment President Putin is referring to is the expansion of NATO. In 1990, during the German unification proceeding, US Secretary of State, James Baker, assured Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not expand “not one inch eastward.”⁶⁴ While neither the US nor the Soviet Union signed a formal treaty about NATO expansion, the Kremlin has viewed each enlargement of NATO as a violation of Baker’s verbal agreement with Gorbachev. Therefore, President Putin presumes that if Washington and Brussels can interpret agreements to fit their needs, Moscow, now acting as an equal, can

⁶⁰ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

⁶¹ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

⁶² Commonwealth of Independent States, “Alma-Ata Declaration,” December 21, 1991, Alma Ata, accessed February 5, 2022, <https://cis.minsk.by/page/178/alma-atinskaa-deklaracia-g-alma-ata-21-dekabra-1991-goda>.

⁶³ Stanovaya, “3 Things the World should Know about Putin.”

⁶⁴ Jan Eichler, *NATO’s Expansion After the Cold War: Geopolitics and Impacts for International Security* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021).

also reinterpret agreements made at the end of the Soviet Union. However, reevaluating written treaties threatens the integrity of all treaties to which the Russian Federation is a signatory. Such an approach can spiral out of control, and questions arise about how far back and which agreements are on the line. In his book, *Aggression against Ukraine*, Thomas Grant concludes his argument on territory, responsibility, and international law by saying: “The problem with territorial revision when it is done with reference to history is that more than one State has a history.”⁶⁵ President Putin’s revisionist history paper eludes to several eras in Russian history that President Putin wishes to restore. The open-ended nature of his narrative leaves all treaties from the mid-1800s to the present on the table, with the eventual goal of retaining the Russian cultural identity in “historical Russian lands.”

President Putin’s Operation Code

Ultimately, how far the Kremlin will go to protect the “cultural sovereignty” of ethnic Russians remains with President Putin. The article he penned provides a narrative for Russians, Ukrainians, and the global community. Receiving buy-in from those groups, particularly his constituents and the pro-Russian peoples of Ukraine, is a variable President Putin must consider in his decision-making. Dr. Graeme Herd, a professor at the George C. Marshall Center, wrote the following about President Putin’s operational code. “Putin makes decisions either when the benefits outweigh the costs or when the costs become acceptable [...] Putin’s risk calculus, his perception of costs/benefits, is critical to understanding when and why strategic decisions are made.”⁶⁶ Following the invasion of Ukraine, an unanswered question remains of whether the narrative President Putin broadcasted to the Russian people and the world is sufficient to justify his formal recognition of DPR and LPR and the invasion of a sovereign country.

The critical problem with President Putin’s operational code in deciding to invade Ukraine is that it is based on “his perception.” Similar to his skewed perception of history, a flawed understanding of costs and benefits will result in decisions based on a false premise. Recent decisions to invade Ukraine resulted from President Putin surrounding himself with “trusted” advisors that confirm his biases and create the “perception” that the costs of acting now will significantly outweigh the future costs of waiting. Like Grigori Potemkin’s villages displayed to Catherine the Great, Putin’s advisors have generated Potemkin assessments of realities in Ukraine.

In his declaration to invade Ukraine on February 24, 2022, President Putin stated that his primary goal “is to protect people who have been subjected to abuse, genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years, and for this, we will strive to

⁶⁵ Thomas D. Grant, *Aggression Against Ukraine: Territory, Responsibility, and International Law* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁶⁶ Kanet, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*.

demilitarize and denazify Ukraine.”⁶⁷ The notion of “denazify” echoes what Putin referred to as “Ukrainization” of Ukraine in his essay. President Putin’s fear of Ukrainization and his actions are also reminiscent of Stalin’s two-prong approach against Ukraine’s institutions and national identity in the lead-up to the Holodomor in 1932. No evidence suggests Ukraine has abused or committed genocide of ethnic Russians in Ukraine or the breakaway regions of Donbas. Martin Shaw, a sociologist and academic, defined genocide as “a form of violent social conflict or war between armed power organizations that aim to destroy civilian social groups, and those groups and other actors who resist this destruction.”⁶⁸ The last report before Russia’s invasion from the United Nations Commission on Human Rights asserted that since 2014 there has been a decrease in the number of civilian deaths in the Donbas region and that all deaths have been conflict-related.⁶⁹ In other words, the civilians killed have been collateral deaths due to armed engagements between the warring factions. Ukrainian armed forces have not deliberately targeted a specific “civilian social group” with the aim of destroying them. President Putin’s use of the word genocide is likely derived from his perceived notion that ethnic Russians in Ukraine are undergoing a “forced change of identity” through some of Kyiv’s political and social reforms and realignment toward the West.⁷⁰

There is a mismatch in Putin’s perception and reality, resulting in further polarization of Ukrainian people, regardless of their language or religion, away from Russia. The second stated objective of current operations to demilitarize Ukraine would bring to fruition President Putin’s claim that Ukraine is not a legitimate state.⁷¹ The legitimacy of a state is based on four components – population, territory, government, and sovereignty. The state’s ability to exercise power and control over a defined geographical area is critical to both territory and sovereignty.⁷² Russia’s demilitarization of Ukraine would remove two of the four components of a legitimate state, thereby giving the Kremlin the de facto power of maintaining Ukraine’s territory and sovereignty. However, delegitimizing

⁶⁷ Vladimir Putin, “Обращение Президента Российской Федерации [Address by the President of the Russian Federation],” February 24, accessed April 30, 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

⁶⁸ Amos Fox, “Russo-Ukrainian Patterns of Genocide in the Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 4 (2021): 56-71, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.14.4.1913>.

⁶⁹ United Nations Human Rights, “Conflict-Related Civilian Casualties in Ukraine,” Office of the High Commissioner, October 8, 2021, accessed April 8, 2022, <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/Conflict-related%20civilian%20casualties%20as%20of%2030%20September%202021%20%28rev%208%20Oct%202021%29%20EN.pdf>.

⁷⁰ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

⁷¹ Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation.”

⁷² Sumedha Korishetti, “Challenges to State Control of Territory: Comparative Analysis of Yemen, Afghanistan and Myanmar,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 7, no. 1 (2022): 115-131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911211004775>.

Ukraine as a sovereign state without popular support runs significant risks of insurgencies and popular uprisings.

Immediately following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, President Putin outlined what he hoped to achieve by invading Ukraine.⁷³ An important takeaway from Putin's remarks is that Ukraine is only briefly mentioned once near the end of his comments; instead, the focus was on the West as President Putin laid the blame squarely on the United States. He stated that NATO is merely "a tool of US foreign policy" and that "...the whole so-called Western bloc formed by the United States in its own image and likeness is, in its entirety, the very same 'empire of lies'."⁷⁴ President Putin expounded upon his accusations against the United States by citing Western expeditionary operations in Serbia, Iraq, Libya, and Syria as examples of "gross disregard for international law."⁷⁵ President Putin's language propagates the accusatorial tone from the NSS that the US and the West's rules-based system has failed. Putin offers Russia as the alternative "great power" for other countries to emulate.

Conclusion

The Kremlin's actions against Ukraine, beginning in 2014 through the current "special military operation," was a gamble to challenge the Euro-Atlantic rules-based order. The NSS of the Russian Federation outlines the goals and objectives of how Russia can attain global recognition and become "...one of the influential centers of the modern world."⁷⁶ The most explicit demonstration of the Kremlin operationalizing portions of the NSS, reinforced by the narrative of Putin's history article, is the pretext President Putin used to order the attack on Ukraine – to safeguard Russia's "cultural sovereignty" abroad. The protection of ethnic Russians in Ukraine may have justified in Putin's mind a reason to invade, but pacifying Ukraine is only an intermediate objective. Russia's intended end state is to redefine the world order and gain a more significant role in countering Western liberal democracy.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine changed and will continue to change the Euro-Atlantic security environment. Millions of displaced persons and refugees are fleeing west from Ukraine. The West is pouring millions of dollars of military equipment and aid to the Ukrainian armed forces. A global food crisis is looming based on impending shortages of exports from both Ukraine and Russia. Foreign fighters, fighting on both the Ukrainian and Russian sides, arrive daily. Russia's efforts have unquestionably changed the security situation in Europe. However, the change has gone contrary to President Putin's desired outcome. The Russian

⁷³ Putin, "Обращение Президента Российской Федерации [Address by the President of the Russian Federation]."

⁷⁴ Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation."

⁷⁵ Putin, "Обращение Президента Российской Федерации [Address by the President of the Russian Federation]."

⁷⁶ President of Russia, "On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation."

armed forces failed to accomplish their intended objectives in Ukraine. The Russian military failures have resulted in the Kremlin resorting to energy blackmail, threatening the use of nuclear weapons, and a surge of disinformation. Russia's global prestige is debatable.

Ukraine upset President Putin's plans to achieve its national security priorities. Ukraine's determination to retain its sovereignty and territorial integrity play toward President Putin's greatest fear of a Russian color revolution. On March 16, 2022, in an attempt to shore up domestic support for the mounting pressure from failures in Ukraine, President Putin addressed leaders of the Russian Federation on a new socioeconomic plan. The undertones of the speech suggested that President Putin personally lives by the adage that "Putin is Russia, and Russia is Putin." He stated: "The collective West is trying to divide our society using, to its own advantage, combat losses and the socioeconomic consequences of the sanctions, and to provoke civil unrest in Russia."⁷⁷ President Putin highlighting the "socioeconomic consequences" is a reference from the NSS. He repeats the refrain about the collective West undermining his leadership through economic pressures throughout his speech. His plea to his constituents is that he has a plan to see Russia through these challenging times. The goal being appeasement of the population to prevent a potential division between himself and the Russian people.

President Putin also attempted to flip the narrative of the current economic hardships as part of his objective to accomplish his national security strategy goals. He stated, "...the ongoing developments are drawing a line under the global dominance of Western countries...[, and] they [ongoing developments] call into question the economic model that has been imposed on developing countries and the entire world..."⁷⁸ President Putin's narrative and stated objectives will evolve as his situation becomes more dire. However, the crux of President Putin's ability to remain in power is Ukraine. President Putin's actions in Ukraine solidified the Euro-Atlantic security apparatus and galvanized Ukraine's resolve to remain a free country. In the end, the Russian people will need to decide if Russia is Putin or Russia is something greater.

On the other hand, the North Atlantic Alliance strengthened its position in the current world order. The West has a shared common threat and is determined to oppose that threat through unprecedented sanctions, increased national defense spending, and military deterrence options. Ukraine has become the literal battleground on which the Kremlin is waging its struggle against Western civilization.⁷⁹ Through blood and grit, the Ukrainian people are ensuring the creditability of the Euro-Atlantic rules-based order.

⁷⁷ President of Russia, "Meeting on Socioeconomic Support for Regions," March 16, 2022, accessed April 29, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67996>.

⁷⁸ President of Russia, "Meeting on Socioeconomic Support for Regions."

⁷⁹ Shevtsova, "Russia's Ukraine Obsession," 138-147.

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