

EXPLORING THE RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE: DEMOGRAPHY'S POWER AND UKRAINE'S UNIQUENESS

Western officials and media have portrayed Russia as a rogue state that seeks to undermine the fundamental foundations of the Western lifestyle, which are based on democratic and liberal principles, especially more since the invasion of the remaining Ukrainian territories began on 24 February 2022. According to this perspective, Russia allegedly launched its strike to prevent Ukraine from joining the club of liberal nations. This move would have been a clear message to any other post-Soviet countries, further strengthening Russian control over them. It would be unfair to completely dismiss this argument, yet, justifying the simplification of the procedure and the continuation of conflict on these reasons goes much beyond presenting the facts. A thorough examination of the many issues involved is necessary to comprehend the Russian motivations for the ongoing war. This calls for an in-depth analysis of the Crimean Question, focusing on how Russia uses demographics in its foreign strategy. In addition, within the broader context of The Russian World (Russkiy Mir) Vision, it is crucial to understand the relevance of Russia's unique perspective on Ukraine. The objective of this study is to provide an analytical framework concentrating on these apparently most visible factors for Russia's willingness to raise tensions in Eastern Europe further and invade the remaining territory under the sovereignty of Ukraine.

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Many people saw Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began in 2014 with the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and escalated into violent conflicts beginning on 24 February 2022, as a daring and risky attempt by the so-called "Non-Western" world to challenge the U.S.-led liberal international order, which had enjoyed a unipolar nature since the end of Cold War. Different aspects of this invasion and what it meant for the changing international order have been discussed by various authors, some of whom also contributed their valuable comments and perspectives to this special issue of TPQ. In distinction, my goal in writing this article is to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the possible reasons behind the unfortunate aggressive move Russia opted to take.

Since the invasion of the remaining Ukrainian territories began on 24 February 2022, three days after Russian President Vladimir Putin's critical address on 21 February 2022, Western officials and prominent members of its media have painted Russia as a rogue state that seeks to undermine the fundamental foundations of Western lifestyle established on democratic and liberal principles. According to them, Russia attacked for one simple reason: to send a clear message to any other post-Soviet countries by stopping Ukraine from joining the liberal forces. While it would be wrong to reject this claim entirely, simplifying the process and continuing conflict on these grounds goes far beyond portraying the facts. Understanding the Russian motivations for the ongoing war requires a comprehensive analysis of the numerous factors that are involved. This necessitates a thorough assessment of the Crimean Issue, emphasizing the use of demography as an instrument of Russian foreign policy. Moreover, it is essential to grasp the significance of Russia's distinctive perception of Ukraine within the expansive scope of The Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) Vision. The purpose of this paper is to give an analytical framework focusing on these arguably most apparent causes for Russia's determination to increase tensions in Eastern Europe further and invade the remaining territory under the control of the Ukrainian government. Before I begin, I want to stress that Ukraine, like any other sovereign nation, has the right to choose its own path, and that Russia's visible aggression since 2014 is completely unacceptable. Yet, without taking the simple route of entirely labeling Russia as a rogue state, this article seeks to analyze the potential foundations of the aggressive foreign policy Moscow has been pursuing.

Bringing Demography to the Battleground: "Crimean Question"

Understanding the role Crimea has played in this process is crucial since, as is well known, the current conflict has its foundations in Russia's internationally unapproved annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. After the ouster of former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich on 22 February 2014, pro-Russian rallies

began the following day in Kyiv, directed at the new Ukrainian administration. Also, about this time, Russian President Vladimir Putin told the heads of Russia's security services, "We must start working on restoring Crimea to Russia," regarding the instability that emerged in the region concerning changing dynamics in Ukraine.¹ Putin and many others at the top of Russia's policymaking establishment (Kremlin, to simplify) have long held the position that the peninsula of Crimea should be considered an inalienable part of the Russian Federation, and they never considered the peninsula's transfer to be anything other than an undeserved gift. This viewpoint originates with historical accounts asserting Russia's links to the peninsula go back to the time of Catherine the Great, who is often credited with annexing modern-day Crimea and the southern part of Ukraine from the Ottoman Empire. In 1954, Crimea was given to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, and a half-Ukrainian himself.² Constructing a historical narrative to justify Kremlin's actions further, Putin declared his stance on the Crimean Question as following:

"... both before and after the Great Patriotic War, Stalin incorporated in the USSR and transferred to Ukraine some lands that previously belonged to Poland, Romania, and Hungary. In the process, he gave Poland part of what was traditionally German land as compensation, and in 1954, Khrushchev took Crimea away from Russia for some reason and also gave it to Ukraine. In effect, this is how the territory of modern Ukraine was formed".³

“It is important to remember that the Crimean Question was never brought to the table between 1954 and 1991 since the Ukrainian SSR and Russian SFSR were both inseparable components of the Soviet Union.”

It is important to remember that the Crimean Question was never brought to the table between 1954 and 1991 since the Ukrainian SSR and Russian SFSR were both inseparable components of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the inhabitants of Crimea had to bear the brunt of the misery brought on by Soviet policies directed

¹ Agence France-Presse, "Vladimir Putin Describes Secret Meeting When Russia Decided to Seize Crimea," *The Guardian*, 9 March 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/09/vladimir-putin-describes-secret-meeting-when-russia-decided-to-seize-crimea>

² BBC, "Ukraine Crisis: Does Russia Have a Case?" 5 March 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26415508>

³ Kremlin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," 21 February 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>

at the territory, with the plight of the indigenous Crimean Tatars reaching its apex after their mass and forced expulsion from the peninsula to various parts of the vast regions of the Soviet dominion on the claims that they had collaborated with invading Nazi Germany forces during World War II. Between 18 and 20 May of 1944, tens of thousands of Crimean Tatars were expelled from their ancestral lands in livestock trains.⁴ Estimates for this number range widely, from 30,000 to 120,000.⁵

The dynamics of Crimea and Soviet politics as a whole were profoundly affected by this obvious act of ethnic cleansing. A total of over 8,000 Crimean Tatars lost their lives during the deportation itself, and many more died in the years that followed because of the severe conditions they endured in exile.⁶ Displaced Crimean Tatars left behind 80,000 homes and 360,000 acres of land. The surviving Crimean Tatar population was thereafter subjected to a brutal “de-tatarization” operation. Although new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1956 strongly criticized Stalin’s actions, particularly the deportation of numerous ethnic groups, he did not reverse the edict prohibiting the return of the Crimean Tatars.⁷

These difficult periods are nothing new in the history of mankind; we may either resist them or go on to learn from them and improve our understanding of the world as it now stands. For academic purposes, I will strive to adopt a perspective that concentrates on the latter alternative, even though I fully acknowledge the agony and suffering of the Crimean Tatar community. Significant changes in the peninsula’s demographics between “the two Russian annexations” of the territory in 1783 and 2014 have profound ramifications for our ability to comprehend Russian and Ukrainian approaches to the Crimean Issue and the continuing war. The crucial shifts are laid out in detail in the following table:

⁴ Brian Glyn Williams, “The Crimean Tatar Exile in Central Asia: A Case Study in Group Destruction and Survival,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1998): p. 285-317. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634939808401038>

⁵ J. Otto Pohl, “The Deportation of Crimean Tatars,” Paper Presented at 5th Annual World Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities: “Identity and the State: Nationalism and Sovereignty in a Changing World,” 13-15 April 2000, Columbia University, New York.

⁶ Human Rights Watch, “‘Punished Peoples’ of the Soviet Union: The Continuing Legacy of Stalin’s Deportations,” New York City, (1991). <https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/u/ussr/ussr.919/ussr919full.pdf>, p. 34.

⁷ Brian Glyn Williams, (1998).

Table 1. Demographic Distribution of the Crimean Peninsula Over Years (in Percentage)⁸

Group	Census Data											
	1785	1795	1816	1850	1897	1926	1939	1959	1979	1989	2001	2014
Russians	2.2%	4.3%	4.8%	6.6%	33.1%	42.2%	49.6%	71.4%	66.9%	67.0%	60.4%	67.9%
Ukrainians ⁹	N/A	1.3%	3.6%	7%	11.84%	10.6%	13.7%	22.3%	25.1%	25.8%	24%	15.7%
Crimean Tatars	84.1%	87.6%	85.9%	77.8%	35.55%	25.1%	19.4%	N/A	0.2%	1.6%	10.8%	12.6%
Belarussians	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.38%	0.5%	0.6%	1.8%	2.1%	2.1%	1.5%	1%
Armenians	N/A	0.6%	1.3%	1%	1.52%	1.5%	1.1%	N/A	N/A	0.1%	0.4%	0.5%
Jews	N/A	2.3%	2.3%	2.2%	4.42%	6.4%	5.8%	2.2%	N/A	0.7%	0.2%	0.1%
Others	13.7%	3.9%	2.1%	5.4%	13.19%	13.7%	9.8%	2.3%	5.7%	2.7%	2.7%	2.2%

Several significant inferences can be drawn from this data, albeit it is crucial to note that the 2014 Census was done under Russian control after the illegitimate invasion of Crimea; therefore, its accuracy is highly questionable. Yet, the large number of Ethnic Russians is evident, especially following the tragic forced deportation of

⁸ For the data estimates on 1785, 1795, 1816 and 1850 Censuses, see Kelly Ann O’Neill, *Claiming Crimea: A History of Catherine the Great’s Southern Empire* (New Haven, 2017): p. 30; 1897 Data excludes figures for Berdyansky, Dneprovsky and Melitopolsky *Uezds* (regions as I prefer to translate), see Demoscope.Ru, “The First General Census of the Russian Empire in 1897 – Taurida Governorate,” http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_lan_97_uezd_eng.php?reg=1420, Original Source: Первая Всеобщая перепись населения Российской Империи 1897 г. Таблица XIII. Распределение населения по родному языку. Т.Т.1-50. С.-Петербург: 1903–1905 (The First General Census of the Russian Empire of 1897. Table XIII. Breakdown of population by mother tongue. Volumes 1-50. Saint-Petersburg: 1903-1905), Same Source for 1926, 1959, 1979, and 1989 Censuses; For 2001, see Regions of Ukraine / Autonomous Republic of Crimea” 2001 Ukrainian Census, http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/regions/reg_crym/; 2014 Census Data is Debatable for Accuracy as the event took place in illegally occupied peninsula under Russian supervision, *Итоги переписи населения в крымском федеральном округе* [Results of the population census in the Crimean Federal District] (PDF). Moscow: Federal State Statistics Service of Russia. (2015): p. 108.

⁹ It was common for figures to describe Ukrainians as “Little Russians” (*malorosiivto*) until 1917. For the use of this concept and the significance it has with respect to Ukrainian identity-building see Zenon Eugene Kohut, “The Development of a Little Russian Identity and Ukrainian Nation Building,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. ¾ (1986): p. 559-576.

Crimean Tatars under Joseph Stalin's iron grip. Certainly, the Soviet leadership recognized the importance of demography as a science and did not hesitate to use it as a tool for policymaking.¹⁰

It is vital to remember that a person's native language was one of the most decisive factors in determining his or her ethnicity or group membership in the eyes of the Soviet administration. Evidently, the Kremlin is not afraid to adopt a similar posture in the manner that it forms a more "intervening approach" for the regions with a higher Russian population residing there. In fact, the constitutional recognition of multiple nationalities, the application of ethnic federalism, and the use of passports to prove a person's ethnicity are all arguably central features of the multiethnic federalism-based ethnicity regime that the Soviet Union bequeathed to the Russian Federation.¹¹ This has only increased the significance of *Russkiy Mir*, or "Russian World Vision," which is perhaps one of the most remarkable weapons of Russian foreign policy, and which we need to grasp even more if we hope to understand better the Russian motivations for the current conflict and how to prevent similar circumstances develop in the future.

Why Ukraine Matters for the So-Called "Russian World (Russkiy Mir)" Vision?

To some extent, Russian officials share a so-called "traumatic imperial nostalgia" that is common among governments with an imperial past.¹² The Soviet Union was enormous, yet even under Bolshevik leadership, the former imperial territories such as Finland and Poland were no longer subject to Moscow's authority. The Bolsheviks understood that securing firm control over the production of raw resources, including Uzbek cotton and Azerbaijani oil was crucial to Russia's continuing existence and prosperity. Even Lenin, while he was explaining how the Soviet policies targeting the periphery regions under their control would differ from their Tsarist predecessor, admitted this reality, and emphasized, "We cannot do without the petroleum of Azerbaijan or cotton of Turkestan. We take these necessary products for us not as the former exploiters but rather as older brothers bearing the torch of civilization".¹³

In 1991, when the last-ditch efforts to prevent the dissolution of the USSR failed,

¹⁰ I highly recommend for those who are interested in the power of demography on the establishment of Soviet power to take a closer look at Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of Soviet Union* (Cornell University Press, 2005). Moreover, for a more critical analysis on the Russia's Ethnicity and Nationhood policies, see Şener Aktürk, *Regimes of Ethnicity and Nationhood in Germany, Russia, and Turkey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹¹ Sven Gunnar Simonsen, "Inheriting the Soviet Policy Toolbox: Russia's Dilemma Over Ascriptive Nationality," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 6 (1999): p. 1069-1087.

¹² Thomas Sherlock, "Russian Politics and the Soviet Past," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (March 2016): p. 45-59. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2016.01.001>

¹³ Merle Fainsod, *How Russia is Ruled* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953): p. 304.

things grew even worse for the Russian leadership. The new country was left with just Russia under their full control out of the originally fifteen union republics that had been under their control throughout the socialist era. It's no surprise that the new Russian Federation had a hard time surviving economically and politically due to the terrible effects of controlling just what was left following the breakup of the USSR. This made things much more difficult for Russia's political elite, who sought new strategies to exert control over its former peripheries when they gained independence. No one should be surprised that Russia, realizing the importance of demographics once again, has opted to use the remaining Russian population in these newly independent polities as a potent foreign policy instrument to impose its influence over them. Indeed, many have speculated that the Russian elite's formulation of the idea of *Russkiy Mir* (the Russian World) and its subsequent political execution were responses to the severe crises that befell the Russian Federation and other post-Soviet republics following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.¹⁴

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According to Wilfried Jilge, the Ukraine specialist at the DGAP, Putin's heavy invocation of the concept of *Russkiy Mir* in 2014 was not a passing expression during the Russia-Ukrainian conflict. The idea was conceived by Kremlin-friendly academics and journalists between 1995 and 2000, and Putin first used it in public political discourse in 2001. Pro-Kremlin policymakers have used the idea to legitimate their domestic and international agendas since it was first introduced. Ideological, political, identity-based, and geographical aspects were only some of the areas they used it in. After a so-called “*Russkiy Mir* Foundation” was set up, the word became widely used throughout Russia.¹⁵

¹⁴ Kirill Shevchenko and Petr Lozoviuk, “*Russkij Mir*” – Nadnacionální Integrovní Projekt či Projev Postsovětského Imperialismu?” (“*Russkij Mir*” – Transnational Integration Project or Manifestation of post-Soviet Imperialism?), *Historická Sociologie*, Vol. 2 (2022): p. 121-139. Doi: [10.14712/23363525.2022.20](https://doi.org/10.14712/23363525.2022.20)

¹⁵ Wilfried Jilge, “*Russkiy Mir*: ‘Russian World’,” DGAP – German Council on Foreign Relations, 3 May 2016. <https://dgap.org/en/events/russkiy-mir-russian-world>

So, it would be extremely limited, if not entirely inaccurate, to attempt to explain this concept based on its cultural discourse. While the number of Russian speakers and individuals of Russian ancestry has been on the decline since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation and its “*Russkiy Mir*” ideology has continued to find a sizable audience in the Baltic state of Latvia¹⁶ and the Central Asian state of Kazakhstan.¹⁷ In fact, it appears that Russia aimed to influence these countries by employing the Russian diaspora residing within the boundaries of these post-Soviet countries with great strategic importance from such an economic and political perspective.

Yet, we should distinguish between these other former Soviet Union peripheral regions and the examples of Ukraine and Belarus. There is widespread knowledge that these two nations have traditionally had a higher status in the Kremlin’s assessment. From the beginning, Russia has recognized these two republics as the countries of fellow Russians, by claiming to have just a few minor differences with them. Ukrainians and Belarusians were historically thought of as “Little Russians” (*malorosiistvo*) and “White Russians” (Belaya Rus), respectively, in contrast to the Russian population in the center of the Russian Empire, who were referred to as “Great Russians” (*Velikorossy*).

As a result of these similarities, Russian policymakers have considered Ukraine to be within their “natural sphere of influence.” They have made it abundantly clear that they will not tolerate any further attempts by Western institutions like the European Union and NATO to exert influence over this country, which they view as their “brothers at the door.”¹⁸ Russia was unable to prevent the accession of several former Warsaw Pact members, both those directly under her control, like the three Baltic nations and those it was influencing, like Poland and Hungary, due to the country’s current political instability. Yet, Ukraine and Belarus were never the same, and today Russia is back in the game, albeit in a weaker position than in her Soviet

¹⁶ The most recent figures claim that more than a quarter of Latvian population, around 25.6 percent, belongs to the Russian minority. Back in 1989 Census, the estimated number of Ethnic Russians living within the borders of Latvian SSR was constituting 34 percent of the population. For a more detailed analysis of the current situation, see Minority Rights Group International, “World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – Latvia, Russians,” <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/russians-4/>; for an in-depth analysis of data concerning 1989 Census, see Aadne Aasland, “The Russian Population in Latvia: An Integrated Minority?” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1994): p. 233-260, with a specific attention to p. 234.

¹⁷ According to 2021 data, the Russian diaspora in Kazakhstan constitutes 15.54 percent of the population, in contrast to 36.4 percent of the population according to the figures concerning early 1993. For a more detailed analysis of these figures concerning 1993, see Neil Melvin, “Russia and the Ethno-Politics of Kazakhstan,” *The World Today*, Vol. 49, No. 11 (November 1993): p. 208-210. For 2021 data, see “Итоги Национальной переписи населения 2021 года в Республике Казахстан” [Results of the 2021 National Population Census in the Republic of Kazakhstan] (in Kazakh). Committee on Statistics of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan. <https://stat.gov.kz/api/getFile/?docId=ESTAT464825>

¹⁸ Holly Ellyatt, “Russia is Risking All-Out War to Prevent Ukraine from Joining NATO,” CNBC, 12 January 2022. <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/01/12/russia-is-risking-all-out-war-to-prevent-ukraine-from-joining-nato.html>

prime. Still, she will not allow these countries to be influenced by the United States or any other Western nation that aims to restrain the Russian power in them.

Some scholars, including Mearsheimer, have drawn on this contrast and argued that, from a realist stance focusing on the political explanation of the ongoing conflict, the foundations of Russian aggression lie in Western miscalculations that expanding influence to Ukraine and Belarus would not prompt such an aggressive response from the Russian Federation.¹⁹ This miscalculation is partly occurred due to the considerations that Russia did not take a similar stance when the western institutions, including the European Union and NATO, expanded to a number of former Warsaw Pact member states in Central and Eastern European following the end of the Cold War in the 1990s and early 2000s. There is a consistent line of thought in the statements made by Russian diplomats, such as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's comparison of Russia's invasion of Ukraine to the memorable 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, when the Soviet Union and the United States came dangerously near to nuclear war.²⁰

Moreover, Mearsheimer contended that the miscalculations of American foreign policy were primarily responsible for the damage Putin and his war machine unleashed upon Ukraine. Most crucially, he claims to know with complete confidence that the United States and its allies are not interested in reaching a settlement or pursuing both parties to return to the negotiating table. According to him, the United States and its allies share equal blame for setting Ukraine on the road to this needless war.²¹

Before concluding, it is essential to once more noting that the strategic uniqueness of Ukraine in the eyes of the Russian Federation has apparent roots in the sociohistorical relations Russia has had with Ukraine over the ages. Moreover, this is even more evident from a cultural viewpoint, as seen in the indoctrination of Russian foreign policy via the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) worldview. This viewpoint, which was reinforced by Russia's politically strategic interests, prompted an unexpected reaction from Russia. Western decision-makers, knowingly or unknowingly, miscalculated this response and allowed the conflict to escalate further.

Concluding Statements and a Hopeful Appeal to the International Community

It's crucial to stress that none of these explanations can excuse the suffering endured

¹⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (September/October 2014): p. 77-84, 85-99.

²⁰ Al-Jazeera, "Lavrov Draws Parallels Between Ukraine War, Cuban Missile Crisis," 30 October 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/30/lavrov-draws-parallels-between-ukraine-war-cuban-missile-crisis>

²¹ John J. Mearsheimer, "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, No. 22 (Summer 2022): p. 12-27.

by the Ukrainian people, who are seeing “the return of history” to the European stage or an assault that threatens the present international order. Therefore, it’s important not to paint international relations as a binary (black/white) issue. On the other hand, demonizing Russia will neither aid Ukraine’s survival nor the development of a more stable and peaceful Eastern European order. Rather than this easy but not-functional move, scholars and policymakers should instead promote a more constructive and compromising model that can strengthen the efficiency of international organizations like the United Nations. This can prevent such situations and an unwanted return to the disastrous conflicts we should have left behind.

Unfortunately, many lives have been lost in the conflict; nevertheless, in the case of the United Nations, it is not too late to establish a clear and efficient institutional framework. A more peaceful resolution to the current dispute and preventing future conflicts elsewhere may benefit from this. The era immediately after WWII is long gone, and we have moved on to a new era. The conclusion of the Cold War presented several great opportunities, and unfortunately, no effort was made to embrace them. Now, we should all be even more concerned and strive to succeed where our predecessors failed.