

A Geopolitical Flashpoint: Why Ukraine Is at the Center of World Issues

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As the Kremlin and Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the world turned to watch. This conflict seemingly had global attention and interest; it had the international community convinced that this imminent war would have far-reaching effects that would ripple throughout the world. But why? How has a border conflict between two nations become the main concern for global affairs, and what is the significance behind the war in Ukraine?

Putin's War in Ukraine is an extension of a conflict that started almost a decade ago. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, the first time a European nation seized territory from another since WWII (**Masters, 2022**). Then, Ukraine turned into a geopolitical flashpoint as Russia supplied and aided Ukrainian separatists in Donbas, a southeast region of Ukraine closer to Russia (**Masters, 2022**). Since then, the death toll from the continued conflict has reached fourteen thousand (**Masters, 2022**). Many experts saw increasing aggression by the Russians as a challenge to the unilateral dominance of the United States since the end of the Cold War (**Masters, 2022**). Particularly in the last decade, Putin's agenda for Russia has seen the resurfacing of a desire to upend the United States' unilateral global dominance. Part of this campaign has included disinformation campaigns to create mistrust towards Western democratic institutions, as seen in the meddling of the 2016 Presidential Election and the refusal to allow an organization in NATO which is heavily influenced by the US, to continue east towards Russia.

Despite being a former primary state in the Soviet Union, Ukrainian contemporary alignment with more Western organizations brewed conflict in 2014 and now (**Masters, 2022**). Putin sees NATO's expansion into nations that were once a part of the defunct Warsaw Pact as an encroachment of Russian power as he seeks to re-establish Russia to its Cold War glory (**Masters, 2022**). Russia's interest in destroying a Western-aligned Ukraine brought about this unprovoked invasion, and now the world is watching. Moreover, with the assumed ascension of Finland and Sweden to NATO, doubling the size of NATO's border with Russia, the urgency on behalf of Putin to put his foot on the ground even as the war continues only increases.

Upon announcing a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin and Russia disrupted the region's thin peace and set forth severe economic turmoil with global reverberations. With the conflict being such an international crisis with multiple involved parties, the Ukraine Crisis, with all the sanctions and export shortages, has become a genuine concern around the globe. The rise of globalization has only amplified the effects of the shortages. Due to high sanctions on Russian oil, gas, and energy, the world already feels the effects of the shortages with strenuous hikes in prices worldwide. In addition, projected food shortages from a lack of Russian and Ukrainian fertilizers and an inability to export Ukrainian wheat pose a considerable threat. With so many potential economic and political ramifications, it is crucial to understand what is at stake—not only for the people of Ukraine but also for countries worldwide. This paper explores geopolitical and economic factors that explain how a border dispute evolved into an international crisis, affecting countries a whole hemisphere away from the fighting.

Ukraine as a Major Region of Interest

A primary reason so much of the world holds much interest in the war in Ukraine is its significant place in upholding global security. Furthermore, its geographical location between Russia and the West symbolizes its middle ground position between major powers and is currently the world's most important geopolitical flashpoint (**Masters, 2022**). Because of this geopolitical importance coupled with a promising economy and vast amounts of resources, Ukraine is one of a promising economic country, and an alignment by Ukraine to either side will be incredibly influential in either hindering or furthering Russia's renewal to global power (**Masters, 2022**).

Russian Interest in Ukraine

In order to understand Ukraine's importance to Russia, the ties between the two and Russia's claim to the country are essential to explore.

During the glory days of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was one of its most influential member states to its success economically and politically. Its population was the second highest in the USSR, and it was extremely vital as the breadbasket and top producer of military equipment to the Union (**Masters, 2022**). When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Ukraine officially became an independent state with a referendum in December of that year (**Masters, 2022**).

Many of Russia's claims to the region are related to Putin's assertion that Ukraine and Russia share one national identity. Beyond the claims that this "special military operation" was a defensive measure on behalf of Russia in response to NATO's increasing expansion upon its borders, Putin talked heavily about an independent Ukrainian identity and sovereignty itself, or rather the illegitimacy of such concepts (**Mankhoff, 2022**). Putin repeated his long-standing belief in cultural unity between Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians (**Mankhoff, 2022**). Because of such unity, Putin claims that the three groups should share the same paths and fates (**Mankhoff, 2022**). Kremlin leadership believes that creating false Ukrainian and Belarusian identities is a part of the West's "anti-Russia" agenda. The unity undeniably tying Ukraine and Russia together is a concept that Putin strongly asserts, giving insight into why the Kremlin has run the risk of retaliation from the West. It suggests that Russia not only aims to prevent Ukraine from aligning itself with Western organizations like the European Union and NATO, but its ultimate aim is to keep Ukraine under political, economic, and military control (**Mankhoff, 2022**).

Russia's faith in said cultural unity was evident in its military strategy both back in 2014 and currently. Ukraine's eastern and southern regions are home to many ethnic Russians and pro-Russian separatists. As of 2001, 8 million ethnic Russians reside in those regions of Ukraine in what has been considered a Russian diaspora (**Masters, 2022**). Despite still being a minority, this concentration of ethnic Russians is the largest in Ukraine. While citizens of the western and northern regions are more likely to identify as Ukrainian and speak Ukrainian, the eastern and southeastern regions are more likely to speak Russian (**Masters, 2022**). The Kremlin relied on this linguistic and cultural connection of the east and southeast to Russia in hopes of having some pro-Russia backing within Ukraine. Moscow hoped that these separatist regions would accept Ukrainian integration into Russia. Putin cited "protection" for these ethnic Russians as justification for annexing Crimea and the invasion of the Donbas in 2014 (**Masters, 2022**).

However, whatever pro-Russian sentiments exist in the eastern regions, most Ukrainians in the western regions do not want a part of Russia (**Mankhoff, 2022**). In the 30 years since Ukraine became a sovereign nation, Ukrainians have created an undisputed unique Ukrainian culture and identity - although the Ukrainian language dates back to the 16th century. The 2014 Euromaidan protests (which began in late 2013) embodies this idea as millions of Ukrainians took to Kiev's Independence Square to protest then-President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to back out of an agreement that would lend Ukraine 610 million euros to achieve European Union standards for potential ascension into the organization (**BBC, 2013**). As the demonstrations descended into violence as the Yanukovich led government passed repressive legislation against the protestors and over 100 civilians were killed in clashes with police, the massive protests in favor of the agreement showed that Ukrainians were seeking to distance themselves further from Russia and Russian identity (**Open Society Foundations, 2019**). Putin's war in 2022 has brought the majority of Ukrainians together more than ever before and has further cemented a unique anti-Russia Ukrainian identity that believes in its sovereignty. In the long term, many experts believe this war has made it even more difficult for Russia to justify any cultural ties to the Ukrainian people (**Mankhoff, 2022**).

However, Russian interest in regaining a spot at the top of the world order is too significant to ignore. Integrating and annexing Ukraine, even through invasion, would work as double acting means to help achieve this goal.

In the invasion effort, Russia is sending a clear message and challenge to the dominance of the United States. Challenging the United States has long been on the agenda of Moscow and, more specifically, Putin to restore the power and glory of the USSR to Russia (**Masters, 2022**). After the embarrassment of dissolving the USSR, the world viewed Russia as less a country and more of a land of abandoned missile silos of what was once great power. However, Putin has long wanted to rewrite this narrative and reaffirm Russia as a superpower. Rejecting and challenging the United States and the West and its forms is a clear motivation for maintaining political control over Ukraine and keeping within its sphere of influence (**Masters, 2022**).

Beyond this idea, though arguably less significant, lie economic interests in Russia's aggression. Many suspect that part of this is due to Russia's desire to become a more significant economic player as it currently only accounts for 2% of the world's GDP as opposed to the US, with nearly 16%. Historically, Russia has been Ukraine's undisputed trading partner and has been upended by China in recent years, as China now accounts for 12.1% of exports as opposed to Russia's current 5.1% (**Workman, 2022**). As we will investigate, Ukraine's incredible promise for economic prosperity could be a decisive step for Russia in assuming more economic prowess to challenge the dominance of the United States eventually. The Kremlin seeks to regain that title as strong economic ties leave Ukraine dependent (**Shehadi, 2022**). By strengthening its economic ties with Ukraine, Russia can actively grow its own and make a dent in the United State's heavy economic lead.

Foreign investment has been solid in Ukraine. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, up to \$50 bn dollars of foreign investment in Ukraine accumulated foreign investment even in 2020 (**Shehadi, 2022**). Wide ranges of foreign companies and industries have taken an interest in

Ukraine recently, and Ukraine is now essential to the European Union supply chain for automobiles (**Shehadi, 2022**). Moreover, its relatively untapped consumer market and sizable natural resource pool make it a perfect center for economic interest and investment (**Shehadi, 2022**). Perhaps no other indicator of how valuable the Ukrainian economy has become was when the invasion started on February 24, 2022, and Wall Street crashed on a day in which the invasion was holding headlines hostage. The Dow Jones Industrial Index fell 800 points following the breaking news (**Shehadi, 2022**).

Ukraine's significant natural resource pool makes it even more appealing to Russia. In statistics reported by Statista, Ukraine holds first in Europe in recoverable reserves of uranium ores, second in titanium ore and mercury, and shale gas reserves. In the world, Ukraine holds second place in available manganese, second in iron ore reserves and eighth in coal reserves (**Shehadi, 2022**). However, not only do these natural resource reserves make Ukraine incredibly appetizing for potential Russian control in their goal to renew their superpower status, Ukraine holds global significance in agriculture and an increasing role in the industry. Ukraine holds the top ten spots in the world in exports of sunflowers and sunflower oil (1st), black soil (3rd), potato production (3rd), barley production and exports (4th), rye production (4th), exporter of corn (4th), honey production (5th), and wheat exports (5th) (**Shehadi, 2022**). With such agricultural importance, it makes Russian advancement for economic incentives even more evident as Russian control of such a globally present industry will reap massive rewards for Moscow (**Shehadi, 2022**). Furthermore, Russian control of Ukraine and, thus, its agricultural production would mean that Russia would have free reign to control food distribution across Europe and the world. Dominance over such an important industry will give Russia the doorway to the significant influence Putin so desires.

In addition, Russian gas, one of its major exports, has to flow through Ukraine before it can reach European markets further west. Its reliance on Ukraine for its gas exports costs Moscow billions of dollars yearly, one of Kiev's most significant sources of income (**Masters, 2022**). Control of Ukraine would save Russia from these costs and give it further energy dominance in Europe.

Finally, control over Ukraine would provide Russia with further access to ports along the Black Sea. The Black Sea is vital to Russia's economic interests as it is its only warm water port as the only adjacent body of water in which Russia can ship goods year-round, making it a cornerstone of the Russian economy (**Kroenig, 2022**). Giving itself more space to work with control over Ukrainian ports would be an incredible boost to Russian exports (**Kroenig, 2022**).

Such significant economic incentives also help to explain why Russia is willing to take such huge risks in the invasion. Even with sanctions, the long-term economic benefit seemingly outweighs the current cost in the minds of the Russian leadership.

Western Interests in Ukraine

The biggest reason for Ukraine's significance as a global flashpoint is its highly contested position between the West and post-Soviet era Russia.

In the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States, the EU, and other NATO members have relied heavily on establishing independent Ukrainian and Belarusian states to create a buffer between Russia and central Europe. Keeping these nations free from Russian control and influence has proven to be vitally important (**Kagan, 2021**). Should Putin gain control of Ukraine, he will have a door towards Poland, Romania, and other former members of the Warsaw Pact (**Kagan, 2021**). Such interests in the region explain the West's profound reaction of condemning the invasion of Ukraine beyond the moral obligation to maintain Ukraine's sovereignty from Russian control.

The United States, specifically, has further informal obligations to protect Ukraine. Ukraine has historically been an important and loyal international partner to the United States in foreign policy (**Pifer, 2017**). (After the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine agreed to surrender its nuclear weapons in exchange for US protection from nuclear weapons. Ukraine not only gave up 176 ICBMS, 44 Blackjack and Bear H bombers, and 1900 nuclear warheads but also aligned its non-proliferation policy with the United States (**Pifer, 2017**). Ukraine's historical cooperation with Washington should warrant the US obligation to protect and aid Ukraine (**Pifer, 2017**).

Furthermore, in 1994, the United States, Ukraine, Russia, and Britain signed the Budapest Memorandum that committed those countries to acknowledge Ukraine's sovereignty, freedom, and borders and promised no economic coercion (**Pifer, 2017**). In the signing of the memorandum, US officials guaranteed Ukraine a vital US interest in further activities in Ukraine. As such, further obligations to Ukraine on behalf of the US are clear and present (**Pifer, 2017**).

The EU also has a significant commitment to Ukraine, especially after Ukraine verbalized its commitment to the EU in recent years. In 2019, Ukraine committed to gaining membership in the EU in its constitution (**Masters, 2022**). President Zelensky pushed this as a national goal and formally began Ukraine's official application to the EU during the beginning of Russia's renewed invasion (**Masters, 2022**). Since then, Ukrainian leadership has urged the EU numerous times to create a fast track for Ukrainian ascension to the organization (**Masters, 2022**). However, the path to a quick ascension has proved to be difficult, as there was an underwhelming response by EU officials at the EU summit in March.

A relative lack of EU action regarding Ukrainian ascension can be considered appeasement which could empower Putin to use further aggression in Europe's eastern front. Provoking Putin is of obvious concern, mainly due to European reliance on Russian gas. As the invasion has gone on, European access to such an essential energy source has declined, with higher costs because of the low supply. The test for Europe will come during the winter when the harsh European winters will challenge Europeans' ability to survive without Russian gas (Kroenig, 2022). However, a lack of response from the EU could be equally provocative as appeasement of Russian aggression.

Energy and Food

The growing concern about a global food shortage is one of the biggest headlines from the invasion. Ukraine and Russia are considered "among the world's breadbaskets," producing 30% of global wheat and barley, 20% of global maize, and over half of global sunflower (**United Nations, 3, 2022**). Belarus and Russia also produce 20% of the world's fertilizers (**United**

Nations, 3, 2022). Fertilizers are vital supplies to maintain and keep up with the increasing annual global food demand; with Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus essentially economically cut off from the world due to the invasion, these numbers paint a grim image of a potential food shortage crisis. Moreover, food is 34% more expensive than last year, and fertilizer prices have more than doubled since the start of the invasion, another bad omen for future food costs and availability (**United Nations, 3, 2022**). According to projections, such drawbacks will affect the world's poorest countries the most, as these nations are most sensitive to the adverse effects of price increases (**United Nations, 3, 2022**).

The energy shortage crisis has continued to be a top concern since the start of the invasion. In America and worldwide, high gas prices have severely affected transportation shipping costs, transportation, and economies. As Russia is the world's largest natural gas exporter and second-largest oil exporter, sanctions and the isolation Russia has experienced due to its commitment to the invasion have raised crude oil prices by 60% (**United Nations, 2022**). As much of the world, especially Europe, relies on Russian petroleum and natural gas for energy production and consumption, the energy crisis presents a major challenge as a significant effect of Russia's actions (**United Nations, 2022**).

With these two shortages and high prices in both critically important sectors, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict draws even more attention.

Food Shortage

Before the invasion, the world was already experiencing a steady increase in food prices. The war has exacerbated this crisis, stopping approximately 85% of the normal amount of wheat being exported to critical regions in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa (**Strubenhoff, 2022**). Unfortunately, the hope of pursuing other routes besides sea transport due to the blockade in the Black Sea has not yet yielded much success, making the situation more bleak.

The backdoor routes using trains, trucks, and river transport to Europe makes the valuable Ukrainian grain even more costly, however necessary (**Strubenhoff, 2022**). Due to the blockade in the Black Sea, the grain has to take a long and expensive route through Europe, travel south on the Atlantic, and back towards the Mediterranean countries (**Strubenhoff, 2022**).

However, there is also the problem of a lack of Russian exports in agriculture and, potentially, more importantly, fertilizer. Alongside Ukraine, Russia has one of the largest export agricultural economies and is one of the world's largest fertilizer producers (**Selyukh, 2022**). As such, it is impossible to overstate its importance to the global food supply.

Since the war began in February, the price of fertilizer has more than doubled (**United Nations, 2022**). The price hike has raised significant issues, especially for the agrarian, less developed national economies that rely on fertilizer for their agriculture industry. Such countries, mainly in Africa, rely significantly on their domestic agriculture to provide their people with food instead of importing it. Therefore, they are most vulnerable to the effects of decreased access to fertilizer globally (**United Nations, p. 3, 2022**). As climate change's adverse effects continue to plague the African continent, a lack of the necessary fertilizer for the agriculture industry would worsen further the already decreasing crop yields of these countries. Countries such as Ghana, Côte

d'Ivoire, and Cameroon are among the most vulnerable to increases in fertilizer prices, as they are some of the most reliant on Russian supplies (**United Nations, 2022**). Outside of Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Bangladesh, and many other countries rely on Russian fertilizer to fuel their staple agricultural sectors to feed their people and a large portion of their economies (**United Nations, 2022**). The war has urged countries with food instability and fertilizer shortage to find other suppliers and manage better fertilizer efficiency (**United Nations, 2022**).

The fertilizer and food shortages could put more pressure on other agriculture industries of other countries, for example, the United States, to supply the food lost from the conflict (**Strubenhoff, 2022**). Furthermore, it will be up to G-7 and G-20 countries to help alleviate some of the stresses of the agricultural and food markets (**Strubenhoff, 2022**). Potentially lifting or not creating export restrictions or a joint effort in restructuring international aid for agriculture are some of the most viable options moving forward (**Strubenhoff, 2022**).

The combination of the food and fertilizer shortages places seemingly ticking time bombs due to the Ukraine crisis beyond the apparent humanitarian and refugee crisis. It places enormous pressure on the competing nations of the conflict to find some form of resolve quickly to resume regular agricultural export and imports around the globe. However, whether these countries will place their political interests above the food needs of more desperate nations is an entirely different story. Moreover, as discussed previously, the winter months will test the ability of the EU to hold out long-term without Russian gas to prevent the need for a concession to Russia.

Conclusion

As the world enters unprecedented levels of globalization, the effects of such a conflict are bound to have widespread ramifications. Globalization has connected Western, more specifically the US, interest to a country halfway across the world. Likewise, globalization has allowed Russia to justify its expansion into a sovereign nation beyond its borders. This common theme of countries in a more connected world having political and economic motivations abroad results in an international crisis where opposing interests come to a conflicting head. Moreover, this same globalization amplifies any adverse effects of such an event on a global scale. In this case, the imminent food, energy, and fertilizer shortage will test the resilience of countries as the world moves into the winter months. The conflict in Ukraine will undoubtedly also examine if a world of clashing interests can find a compromise amid current and incoming humanitarian calamities.



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