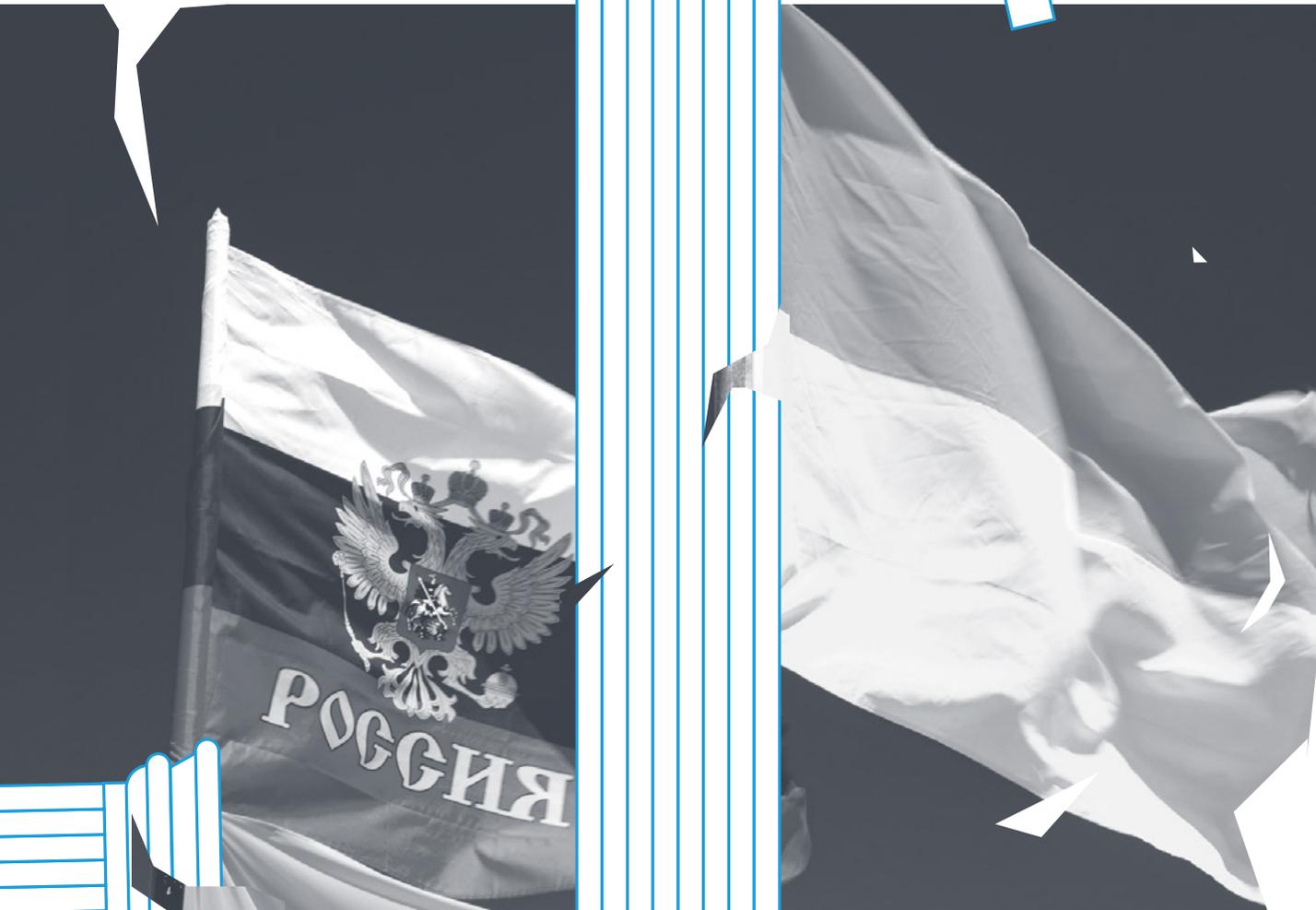
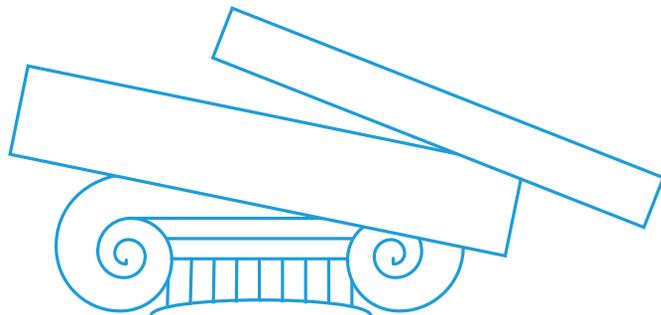




# AN EPISODE OF EXISTENTIAL UNCERTAINTY: THE ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY ORIGINS OF THE WAR IN DONBAS

Brendan  
Chrzanowski



Despite the fact that the war in eastern Ukraine has been ongoing for over seven years, there remains no satisfactory answer as to what prompted Moscow to invade Donbas in the first place. Explanations range from materialist to ideational — however, none get to the heart of the matter. In addressing this problem, this paper uses the concept of ontological security to explain the motivations behind the 2014 invasion. Compared with the available explanations for the invasion, ontological security goes further in accounting for Moscow's seemingly irrational actions than do previous analyses. Further, it would appear as though the continuation of the conflict is fueled by identity-based routines associated with ontological security. In examining these topics, this paper provides a background on relevant events, outlines the alternate explanations, defines and makes the case for ontological security, and indicates the necessity of a novel conflict-resolution approach in Donbas.

**A**s the war in eastern Ukraine advances beyond its seventh year and the death toll climbs above 13,000, the exact motivations that led Moscow to invade its neighbor to the west remain a topic for debate.<sup>1</sup> Why did the Kremlin, facing the prospect of significant material and reputational consequences, decide not only to provide considerable support for local militants, but to contribute active Russian servicemembers to the fight as well? Moreover, why has Russian involvement continued apace for so many years? Answers to the first question run the gamut from materialist to ideological explanations, and often seek at the same time to explain Russia's annexation of Crimea, which took place in March 2014, a month prior to the invasion of Donbas.<sup>2</sup>

The annexation is more easily explained, par-

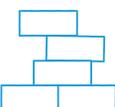
ticularly along strategic lines, which may be why this particular event has received the lion's share of analysis. Given that the bulk of speculation revolves around the annexation or treats the two problems as one and the same, this paper focuses solely on discerning what drove Russia to embark upon what has become a protracted and costly war in eastern Ukraine. In doing so, it invokes the concept of ontological security — the stable sense of self that a state maintains via routine relations with another — in an effort to provide a more robust interpretation of Moscow's motives for invading Donbas.<sup>3</sup> The paper is guided by a challenge: Does ontological security better explain the invasion of and ongoing conflict in Donbas than a range of alternate explanations?

After evaluating alternative explanations, considering ontological security as presented by Jennifer

1 "Death Toll Up to 13,000 in Ukraine Conflict, Says UN Rights Office," *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, Feb. 26, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/death-toll-up-to-13-000-in-ukraine-conflict-says-un-rights-office/29791647.html>.

2 Shaun Walker and Ian Traynor, "Putin Confirms Crimea Annexation as Ukraine Soldier Becomes First Casualty," *The Guardian*, March 19, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/18/putin-confirms-annexation-crimea-ukrainian-soldier-casualty>.

3 Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2014), 3.





Mitzen and Brent J. Steele, and applying it to the case in question, this paper finds that, indeed, ontological security does provide greater understanding of what happened in Donbas. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Russia's purported goals according to alternate explanations could have been accomplished in a tidier manner, were themselves symptoms of ontological insecurity, lack plausibility, or explain Crimea, not Donbas. Importantly, these explanations are not necessarily inaccurate but, more precisely, are incomplete.

The significance of this topic lies, primarily, in the centrality of Russia within contemporary geopolitics. The 2017 *National Security Strategy* and the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* released by the Trump administration have both pointed to Russia as a principal threat alongside a rising China.<sup>4</sup> As a primary menace in international affairs, Russia has captured the imagination of the entire Western world. Thus, it is crucial to establish a nuanced understanding of this actor's impulses, particularly as so many commentators (credentialed and otherwise) have taken up the cause of Russia-focused prognostication.<sup>5</sup> Answering the above research question could help to determine the likelihood of broadened Russian aggression against nearby countries such as Belarus, the Baltics, Georgia, or even Sweden's Gotland Island.<sup>6</sup> Predictions of military adventurism on the part of Russia, comparable to that in Ukraine, became an increasingly common occurrence following the events of 2014.<sup>7</sup> Although such prospects cannot be ruled out entirely, two factors mitigate them taking place. For one, both the annexation of

Crimea and invasion of Donbas occurred under particular conditions that are unlikely to be reproduced elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, and more germane to the topic at hand, Ukraine plays a singular role in relation to Russia's self-identity.<sup>9</sup> Recognizing and interpreting Ukraine's unique position from an ontological security angle can lead to more sound analyses regarding future conflict, which could preclude the tendency identified by Dmitry Chernobrov to merge the war in Donbas with all other outward forms of Russian aggression.<sup>10</sup>

Discerning whether ontological security better accounts for Moscow's behavior could yield applications for similar cases outside of the Russo-sphere, in which the self-identity of one state is existentially connected to its relations with another state. Examples include India and Kashmir, China and Taiwan/Hong Kong, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Palestine. These cases all represent pressing disputes in global affairs and thus may benefit from alternate approaches. Gaining a more contextual comprehension of long-running relational disputes has the potential to influence policy decisions. If policymakers are better informed as to the situations they are tasked with resolving, they will likely end up crafting more successful policy. Regarding Russia's activity in Ukraine, America's policy in particular has been deeply flawed. A more refined approach would certainly be an improvement on the status quo.<sup>11</sup>

Further, and perhaps of more immediate importance, recognizing the war in Ukraine as rooted in ontological security may create conflict-resolution opportunities. In response to the second question

4 "A New National Security Strategy for a New Era," The White House, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; and "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy," Department of Defense, January 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

5 Taras Kuzio, "Euromaidan Revolution, Crimea and Russia-Ukraine War: Why It Is Time for a Review of Ukrainian-Russian Studies," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 59, no. 3-4 (February 2019): 529-53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.1571428>; and Edward Luce, "Liberal America's Unhealthy Fixation on Russia," *Financial Times*, Dec. 6, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/f8601f8-d9e3-11e7-a039-c64b1c09b482>.

6 Olena Lennon and Aemin Becker, "Belarus at the United Nations: An Analysis of Belarus's Global Policy Alignment Following the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 27, no. 3, (Summer 2019): 319-47, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/729526>; Viljar Veebel, "NATO Options and Dilemmas for Deterring Russia in the Baltic States," *Defence Studies* 18, no. 2 (March 2018): 229-51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2018.1463518>; Maia Otarashvili, "Russia's Quiet Annexation of South Ossetia Continues," Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 11, 2017, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/04/russias-quiet-annexation-south-ossetia-continues/>; Johan Wiktorin, "Försvara Gotland - Varför Och Hur?" *Kungl Krigsvetenskapsakademien*, March 10, 2014, <https://kkrva.se/forsvara-gotland-varfor-och-hur/>; and Teva Meyer, "The Fear of Russia and the New Cold War Discourse in the Swedish Debate Over Energy Policies: Continuity and Changes," Association for the Study of Nationalities World Congress, Presented in New York, United States, 2017, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01520159>.

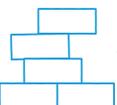
7 Adam Balcer, "In the Shadow of a Neo-Imperialist Russia," *New Eastern Europe*, no. 3-4(22) (2016): 29-35, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=459421>; and Paul Goble, "Having Lost 'Soft' Power in Post-Soviet Space, Moscow Increasingly Using 'Hard,'" The Jamestown Foundation, June 13, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/lost-soft-power-post-soviet-space-moscow-increasingly-using-hard/>.

8 Michael Kofman, et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, RAND Corporation, May 9, 2017, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1498.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1498.html).

9 Kimberly Marten, "Putin's Choices: Explaining Russian Foreign Policy and Intervention in Ukraine," *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (March 2015): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660x.2015.1064717>.

10 Dmitry Chernobrov, "Ontological Security and Public (Mis)Recognition of International Crises: Uncertainty, Political Imagining, and the Self," *Political Psychology* 37, no. 5 (October 2016): 581-96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12334>.

11 Rajan Menon and William Ruger, "The Trouble with Arming Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 11, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2017-10-11/trouble-arming-ukraine>.



posed earlier regarding the extended nature of the war, a perusal of local media reporting from both sides of the contact line would suggest that neither side in the conflict is necessarily *trying* to win — a phenomenon that is itself likely best explained using an ontological security lens. This suggests that the war, which was brought on by ontological insecurity, has, over time, provided the opposing sides with a new sense of ontological security via the routinization engendered by years of sustained conflict. Thus, one can conclude that the conflict will likely require a unique approach that offers both sides a new routine to replace the conflict. Without an ontological security-oriented resolution method, the war is liable to go on taking lives and wreaking humanitarian havoc in much the same way as it has over the previous seven years.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: First, it provides a brief background on the situation in Donbas, including the events that led up to the current war. Next, the paper outlines the various explanations for Russia's intervention in eastern Ukraine. Then, ontological security is defined and two international relations-based approaches are discussed. The central thesis of the paper is then revisited and the case for an ontological security explanation is made. Finally, the paper concludes with a summation, an overview of implications, and a recommendation for how to end the war.

## **Background**

### **The Maidan Revolution**

On Nov. 21, 2013, Ukraine's then-President Viktor Yanukovich made the unilateral decision to halt negotiations on the symbolically meaningful European Union Association Agreement that was set to further Ukraine's integration with the West.<sup>12</sup>

Dissatisfied with this blatantly pro-Russian move — Russia had long opposed closer ties between Ukraine and the West — Ukrainians took to the streets.<sup>13</sup> Within days, nearly 100,000 protestors filled the area around Kyiv's *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* (Independence Square) to peacefully demonstrate. However, riot police, known as the Berkut, who had been dispatched to quell the gathering soon resorted to violence, injuring dozens on Nov. 30.<sup>14</sup> Over the early days of December, the size of the protests increased by a factor of eight. In an attempt to assist his floundering Ukrainian counterpart, Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized a hefty economic aid package to Ukraine by the middle of the month.<sup>15</sup> Undeterred by the violent Berkut forces, even as they were later bolstered by state-hired thugs referred to as *titushki*, protestors continued to turn out in increasingly larger numbers. Draconian anti-protest legislation, which criminalized all aspects of political resistance with harsh penalties, was passed by the parliament in mid-January 2014. These laws only served to further fan the flames of the unrest and have been likened to those implemented in response to the Bolotnaya protests in Russia two years earlier.<sup>16</sup>

Within two weeks, however, the Ukrainian parliament terminated the controversial legislation. This development, coupled with the resignation of the prime minister and offers of amnesty to jailed activists, was meant to mollify the protestors.<sup>17</sup> By mid-February, the situation had calmed some, following the release of imprisoned protestors. However, on Feb. 18, skirmishes between activists and police arose, resulting in the deaths of over two dozen people on both sides.<sup>18</sup> The nadir of the Maidan Revolution arrived two days later, when more than 50 protestors and three members of the state security forces were killed in a massive clash — the exact details of which are still

12 David Stern, "Ukraine Suspends Preparations for EU Trade Agreement," *BBC News*, Nov. 21, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25032275>. Oksana Grytsenko and Shaun Walker, "Ukraine Faces Critical East-West Tug of War Over EU Association Agreement," *The Guardian*, Nov. 20, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/20/ukraine-eu-association-agreement-europe-russia>.

13 Yuriy Shveda and Joung Ho Park, "Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity: The Dynamics of Euromaidan," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no. 1 (January 2016): 85–91, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2015.10.007>; and Gergana Noutcheva, "Whose Legitimacy? The EU and Russia in Contest for the Eastern Neighbourhood," *Democratization* 25, no. 2 (2018): 312–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1363186>.

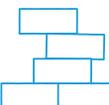
14 "Ukraine's Berkut Police: What Makes Them Special?" *BBC News*, Feb. 26, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25895716>; and Lucie Steinzova and Kateryna Oliynyk, "The Sparks Of Change: Ukraine's Euromaidan Protests," *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, Nov. 21, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-politics-euromaidan-protests/29608541.html>.

15 "Ukraine Crisis: Timeline," *BBC News*, Nov. 13, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26248275>.

16 Borislav Bilash II, "How It All Happened," *Euromaidan Press*, Feb. 20, 2016, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2016/02/20/the-story-of-ukraine-starting-from-euromaidan/2/>.

17 Steve Rosenberg, "Ukraine Crisis: Parliament Abolishes Anti-Protest Law," *BBC News*, Jan. 28, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25923199>.

18 "Ukraine Anti-Government Protests – Timeline," *The Guardian*, Feb. 19, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/19/ukraine-protests-timeline>.





disputed — that would set the stage for the momentous geopolitical events that followed.<sup>19</sup>

## The Annexation

So went the events of Maidan, or the Revolution of Dignity, as it later came to be known.<sup>20</sup> Within a day of the killings, Yanukovich inked a deal with the opposition, only to flee to Russia overnight. A series of political changes in Ukraine — including a new interim president and the disbanding of the Berkut — followed in short order. One such development was the banning of Russian as a second language. Although quickly reversed, this parliamentary decree greatly disturbed the sizable Russian-speaking populations of Ukraine's eastern provinces and likely the Kremlin as well, based on outrage in the Russian media.<sup>21</sup>

Unsettled by its former client state's anti-Russian backlash and expedited pivot to the West, Russia first reacted by mobilizing 150,000 troops for "war games" to be held along the border with Ukraine, prompting the United States to issue a warning to Russia and a declaration of support for Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, pro-Russian demonstrations broke out in Crimea, and Moscow expressed concern over the well-being of its citizens living in Ukraine, claiming that there were 1.5 million living on the Crimean Peninsula alone.<sup>23</sup> Notably, a military analyst

based out of Moscow at the time remarked to *Reuters*, "Any rational analysis says that Russia would get nothing out of military intervention — it would become an international outcast."<sup>24</sup>

By March 1, 2014, Moscow's "little green men" had seized installations throughout Crimea,<sup>25</sup> and Putin had secured parliamentary approval to dispatch troops to Ukraine under the pretext of safeguarding Russian citizens, ethnic Russians, and "compatriots" residing in the country.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, protests opposed to those taking place in Kyiv — known as the anti-Maidan movement — gained momentum in Ukraine's southern and eastern regions.<sup>27</sup> Between March 6 and March 16, 2014, the local Crimean legislature declared independence from Ukraine, announced and held a referendum on rejoining Russia, and asserted as valid the results of that referendum in which a supposed 96 percent of people voted in favor of reunification.<sup>28</sup> Russia formally annexed the Crimean peninsula on March 21, 2014, citing the aforementioned declaration of independence and referendum in its legislation.<sup>29</sup> As has been noted elsewhere, the Kremlin has taken great pains to defend its decision to annex Ukrainian territory, invoking cultural, historical, and legal claims to justify reacquiring what constitutes a significant part of Russia's self-identity.<sup>30</sup> Although similar rhetoric was employed regarding the Donbas region, leading observers to

19 Mattathias Schwartz, "Who Killed the Kiev Protesters? A 3-D Model Holds the Clues," *New York Times Magazine*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/30/magazine/ukraine-protest-video.html>; and Gabriel Gatehouse, "The Untold Story of the Maidan Massacre," *BBC News*, Feb. 12, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190326132752/https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31359021>.

20 Yuliya Talmazan, "Maidan Massacre Anniversary: Ukraine Remembers Bloody Day of Protests," *NBCNews.com*, Feb. 20, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/maidan-massacre-anniversary-ukraine-remembers-bloody-day-protests-n973156>.

21 BBC News, "Ukraine Crisis: Timeline"; Thomas De Waal, "New Fighting in Ukraine's Language War," *Carnegie Europe*, May 29, 2017, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/70098>; and "Canceled Language Law in Ukraine Sparks Concern Among Russian and EU Diplomats," *RT International*, Feb. 27, 2014, <https://www.rt.com/news/minority-language-law-ukraine-035/>.

22 Hannah Strange, "Ukraine Revolution: 150,000 Russian Troops on Alert as US Warns Putin," *The Telegraph*, Feb. 26, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/10662187/Ukraine-revolution-Protesters-in-stand-off-in-pro-Russian-Crimea.html>.

23 Mikhail Pogrebinskiy, "Russians in Ukraine: Before and After Euromaidan," *E-International Relations*, March 26, 2015, <https://www.e-ir.info/2015/03/26/russians-in-ukraine-before-and-after-euromaidan/>; and "Transcript: Putin Says Russia Will Protect the Rights of Russians Abroad," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-putin-says-russia-will-protect-the-rights-of-russians-abroad/2014/03/18/432a1e60-ae99-11e3-a49e-76adc9210f19\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-putin-says-russia-will-protect-the-rights-of-russians-abroad/2014/03/18/432a1e60-ae99-11e3-a49e-76adc9210f19_story.html).

24 Alessandra Prentice and Richard Balmforth, "New Ukraine Ministers Proposed, Russian Troops on Alert," *Reuters*, Feb. 26, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-idUSBREA1GOOU20140226>.

25 As the Russian soldiers sent to capture Crimea initially bore no identifying insignia, they were referred to in Ukraine as "little green men" in reference to the color of their uniforms. These soldiers were alternatively deemed "polite men" by the Russian media after a Crimean blogger referred to them as such.

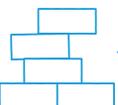
26 Vitaly Shevchenko, "Little Green Men' or 'Russian Invaders?'" *BBC News*, March 11, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26532154>; Gogo Lidz, "'Polite People' of Russia: Not Who You Might Expect," *Newsweek*, April 11, 2015, <https://www.newsweek.com/polite-people-russia-321759>; and Shaun Walker and Harriet Salem, "Russian Parliament Approves Troop Deployment in Ukraine," *The Guardian*, March 1, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/02/russia-parliament-approves-military-ukraine-vladimir-putin>.

27 Jonathan Marcus, "Russian Parliament Approves Troop Deployment in Ukraine," *BBC News*, BBC, March 1, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26400035>.

28 Thomas D. Grant, "Annexation of Crimea," *The American Journal of International Law* 109, no. 1 (January 2015): 68–95, <https://doi.org/10.5305/amerjintlaw.109.1.0068>.

29 "Laws on Admitting Crimea and Sevastopol to the Russian Federation," President of Russia, March 21, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/20625>.

30 Thomas Ambrosio, "The Rhetoric of Irredentism: The Russian Federation's Perception Management Campaign and the Annexation of Crimea," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 3 (April 2016): 467–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1151653>.



surmise that a comparable fate was in store, the situation in Ukraine's east has played out in a very different manner.

## The War in Donbas

The conflict in Donbas had its roots in the anti-Maidan protests that swept the predominantly Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine. However, the conflict began in earnest in mid-April 2014 after Kyiv ordered troops to confront pro-Russian rebels in the country's east who had, in the previous days, taken control of government buildings throughout the Donbas territory.<sup>31</sup> With Ukraine labeling the maneuver an "anti-terrorist operation," Putin responded with a warning that Ukraine was on the "brink of civil war," a loaded term that remains controversial to this day.<sup>32</sup> In the weeks that followed the official start of the likewise provocatively termed anti-terrorist operation, dozens of rebels were burned alive in Odesa, the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces — the two constituent parts of the Donbas region — were declared "People's Republics" by pro-Russian separatists who were largely in control of them, and widely contested independence referendums were held in both provinces.<sup>33</sup> Over the course of the following year, the Donbas region experienced its most intense fighting, resulting in over 9,000 deaths and 20,000 injuries. Initially outmatched by the superiorly armed Russian-backed separatists, Kyiv found itself floundering well into the summer of 2014. The Ukrainian military began picking up momentum in the

fight following the horrific July 17 downing of flight MH17 by a Russian-made Buk missile over eastern Ukraine, which killed nearly 300 civilian passengers. Fearing the loss of the upper hand, Moscow began sending not just materiel, but Russian military personnel to assist the separatists.<sup>34</sup>

Since then, the conflict has generated two, at best partially effective, ceasefire agreements, respectively known as Minsk I and Minsk II.<sup>35</sup> Despite these frameworks for peace, hostilities continue more or less unabated, with hundreds of ceasefire violations recorded by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Special Monitoring Mission on a weekly basis.<sup>36</sup> The war has claimed over 13,000 lives, and although casualties have dramatically decreased following the implementation of a supplemental ceasefire, there remains no clear end in sight.<sup>37</sup> In addition to the direct danger posed by kinetic military operations, the Donbas region faces both humanitarian and environmental crises as a result of the ongoing conflict, thus intensifying the need for resolution.<sup>38</sup>

## Russian Involvement

Moscow has made futile attempts at discretion in Donbas, leading some to question the extent of Russia's involvement early on, but there is no longer any doubt about the country's significant role in the conflict. According to the separatists themselves, the Kremlin has been responsible for their ability to wage war from the very beginning.<sup>39</sup> Western governments and independent

31 Andrew E. Kramer and Andrew Higgins, "Ukraine Forces Storm a Town, Defying Russia," *New York Times*, April 13, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/14/world/europe/ukraine-forces-and-pro-russian-militants-battle-over-local-police-station.html>.

32 Jonathan Marcus, "Ukraine Says Donetsk 'Anti-Terror Operation' under Way," *BBC News*, April 16, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27035196>; and Ivan Gomza, "Quenching Fire with Gasoline: Why Flawed Terminology Will Not Help to Resolve the Ukraine Crisis," *Vox Ukraine*, March 12, 2019, <https://voxukraine.org/en/quenching-fire-with-gasoline-why-flawed-terminology-will-not-help-to-resolve-the-ukraine-crisis/>.

33 Christopher Miller, "Kyiv Rebrands Its War In The East" *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, Jan. 19, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-russia-fighting-donbas-rebranding-ato-/28985423.html>; and Sabine Fischer, "The Donbas Conflict: Opposing Interests and Narratives, Difficult Peace Process," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, April 2019, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019RP05/>.

34 Fischer, "The Donbas Conflict."

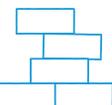
35 Cindy Wittke, "The Minsk Agreements – More than 'Scraps of Paper'?" *East European Politics* 35, no. 3 (June 2019): 264–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2019.1635885>.

36 "Daily and Spot Reports from the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine," Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/reports>; and Amy Mackinnon, "Counting the Dead in Europe's Forgotten War," *Foreign Policy*, Oct. 25, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/25/counting-the-dead-in-europes-forgotten-war-ukraine-conflict-donbas-osce/>.

37 "OSCE SMM Chief Monitor Briefs the Permanent Council," Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Feb. 4, 2021, <https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/477562>.

38 "Nobody Wants Us: The Alienated Civilians of Eastern Ukraine," International Crisis Group, Oct. 12, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/252-nobody-wants-us-alienated-civilians-eastern-ukraine>; Yevhenii Yakovliev and Sergiy Chumachenko, "Ecological Threats in Donbas, Ukraine: Assessment of Ecological Hazards in Donbas Impacted by the Armed Conflict in Eastern Ukraine," Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, October 2017, <https://deis.menr.gov.ua/lib/files/Ecological-Threats-in-Donbas.pdf>; and "Ukraine's Donbas Bears the Brunt of Toxic Armed Conflict," United Nations Environment Programme, July 25, 2018, <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/ukraines-donbas-bears-brunt-toxic-armed-conflict>.

39 "Eastern Ukraine: A Dangerous Winter," International Crisis Group, Dec. 18, 2014, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/eastern-ukraine-dangerous-winter>; and "Separatist Website Unintentionally Posts Proof of Russian Weapon Presence in Donbas," *Unian, UNIAN.net*, May 29, 2015, <https://www.unian.info/war/1083320-separatist-website-unintentionally-posts-proof-of-russia-weapon-presence-in-donbas.html>.





researchers alike have, by now, extensively documented the provision of Russian materiel to Ukrainian separatists.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the open-source intelligence outfit Bellingcat has identified the identities of many of the individuals responsible for targeting flight MH17 as well as their connections to Russia.<sup>41</sup>

However, providing material support is not that unusual. The United States provides lethal weapons to many foreign fighting forces, including those of Ukraine.<sup>42</sup> What is of note is that Russia was willing to contribute much more than the typical lethal aid packages supplied by the United States — including active-duty Russian troops — despite the knowledge that it would face significant repercussions.<sup>43</sup> From NATO confirmation to eyewitness testimony to independent corroboration, the presence of Russian military members fighting on the side of the separatists has been documented at length and in detail.<sup>44</sup> The question that remains is what, exactly, drove the Kremlin to go to such lengths.<sup>45</sup>

## Previous Explanations

In the seven years since the initial invasion of Donbas, a litany of explanations for Moscow's actions vis-à-vis Ukraine have been put forth. From early accounts that highlight the distinctiveness of the Ukraine crisis as opposed to the earlier conflict in Georgia, to later, more in-depth insights emphasizing the role that strategy played in the decision-making process, these interpretations provide reasonable arguments that draw from all manner of international relations theory.<sup>46</sup> Although analyses abound,<sup>47</sup> in the interest of concision the summary that follows divides them into two main groups: Ukraine-specific explanations and explanations based on general Russian aggression.

## Ukraine-Specific Explanations

In a 2015 paper, Kimberly Marten conveniently outlined several of the most prominent attempts to explain the Ukraine crisis.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the most prevalent of the Ukraine-specific explanations involves NATO expansion and the threat that a change in

40 Thomas Grove and Warren Strobel, "Special Report: Where Ukraine's Separatists Get Their Weapons," *Reuters*, July 29, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-arms-specialreport/special-report-where-ukraines-separatists-get-their-weapons-idUSKBN0FY0UA20140729>; Aric Toler, "British Intelligence Report Confirms Russian Military Origin of MH17 Murder Weapon," *Bellingcat*, Dec. 20, 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/12/20/british-intelligence-report-confirms-russian-military-origin-mh17-murder-weapon/>; and Bellingcat Investigation Team, "MH17 - The Open Source Investigation, Three Years Later," *Bellingcat*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/07/17/mh17-open-source-investigation-three-years-later/>.

41 Bellingcat Investigation Team, "Identifying the Separatists Linked to the Downing of MH17," *Bellingcat*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/06/19/identifying-the-separatists-linked-to-the-downing-of-mh17/>.

42 Brendan Chrzanowski, "Arming Ukraine: Practicalities and Implications," *The Strategy Bridge*, September 5, 2018, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2018/9/5/arming-ukraine-practicalities-and-implications>.

43 Indeed, Russia was met swiftly with, and continues to endure, Western sanctions and an international loss of prestige: Jim Acosta, "U.S., Other Powers Kick Russia out of G8," *CNN*, March 24, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/03/24/politics/obama-europe-trip/index.html>; and "U.S. Sanctions on Russia: An Overview," Congressional Research Service, March 23, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10779.pdf>.

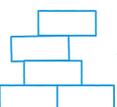
44 "Ukraine Crisis: Russian Troops Crossed Border, Nato Says," *BBC News*, Nov. 12, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30025138>; Pavel Mirzlikin, "I'd Be Willing to Work Against This Government with Satan Himself We Talked to a Suburban Russian Policeman Who Spied for the CIA, Fought in Eastern Ukraine, and Got Sentenced to 13 Years for Treason," *Meduza*, July 31, 2019, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/07/31/i-d-be-willing-to-work-against-this-government-with-satan-himself>; Aleksey Vinogradov, "What We Know About Russian Troops in Eastern Ukraine," *Euromaidan Press*, May 21, 2018, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2018/05/22/what-we-know-about-russian-troops-in-eastern-ukraine/>; Simon Ostrovsky, "Russia Denies that Its Soldiers Are in Ukraine, But We Tracked One There Using His Selfies," *Vice*, June 16, 2015, [https://news.vice.com/en\\_us/article/ev9dbz/russia-denies-that-its-soldiers-are-in-ukraine-but-we-tracked-one-there-using-his-selfies](https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/ev9dbz/russia-denies-that-its-soldiers-are-in-ukraine-but-we-tracked-one-there-using-his-selfies); and Bellingcat Investigation Team, "Bellingcat Investigation - Russia's Path(s) to War," *Bellingcat*, Sept. 21, 2015, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/09/21/bellingcat-investigation-russias-paths-to-war/>.

45 For a concise, yet thorough and illuminating, outline of the nature of Russian involvement see Donald N. Jensen, "Moscow in the Donbas: Command, Control, Crime and the Minsk Peace Process," NATO Defense College, ETH Zurich Center for Security Studies, March 2017, [https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/NDC-RR\\_01\\_17-01.pdf](https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/NDC-RR_01_17-01.pdf).

46 Samuel Charap and Keith Darden, "Russia and Ukraine," *Survival* 56, no. 2 (2014): 7–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.901726>; Keith B. Payne and John S. Foster, "Russian Strategy *Expansion, Crisis and Conflict*," *Comparative Strategy* 36, no. 1 (2017): 1–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2017.1277121>; and Mette Skak, "Russian Strategic Culture: The Role of Today's *Chekisty*," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (July 1, 2016): 324–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201317>.

47 To highlight but a few: Valerie Bunce and Aida Hozic, "Diffusion-Proofing and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 24, no. 4 (2016): 435–455. [muse.jhu.edu/article/634318](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/634318); Michael Kofman, et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*; John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>; Tor Bukkvoll, "Why Putin Went to War: Ideology, Interests and Decision-Making in the Russian Use of Force in Crimea and Donbas," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 267–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201310>; Andrei Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand: The Sources of Russia's Ukraine Policy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 4 (2015): 279–303, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586x.2015.1005903>; and Taras Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri, "The Causes and Consequences of Russia's Actions Towards Ukraine," *E-International Relations*, June 16, 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/06/16/the-causes-and-consequences-of-russias-actions-towards-ukraine/>.

48 Again, many of these explanations treat Crimea and Donbas jointly, hence the use of "Ukraine crisis" rather than "invasion of Donbas."



Kyiv's leadership posed to Russia's Crimean naval installations. This position was led by John Mearsheimer's controversial 2014 *Foreign Affairs* article, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault."<sup>49</sup> A related view posits that the Kremlin initiated the war in Donbas with the aim of stoking another "frozen conflict" — along the lines of those in Georgia, Moldova, and Nagorno-Karabakh — in an effort to dissuade NATO from considering Ukraine for accession. Yet another potential explanation is the idea that Moscow was motivated by the goal of creating a Russia-Crimea land bridge over Donbas as a means of reinvigorating the troubled Crimean economy following annexation. These three rationales can be thought of as *strategic explanations* for the conflict.

Another grouping of explanations revolves around the historically and geopolitically important role that Ukraine has held in Russia's conception of itself. These are *ideational explanations*. In this line of thinking, Russia considers a certain level of control over Ukraine as vital to its identity as a great power. These explanations highlight the Russian identity as essential to Russia's understanding of security, yet, as will be shown below, they focus more on Moscow's depiction of itself in relation to the West, rather than to Ukraine.

Finally, and in response to the idea that Moscow must have known the severe consequences that it would face for its aggression, *error-based explanations* suggest the possibility that the Kremlin miscalculated the cost of invading Donbas. Taking into account a number of factors, ranging from lax penalties for the 2008 Georgian war to discord throughout the Western world, Moscow may have simply underestimated the ramifications of its actions.<sup>50</sup>

### General Russian Aggression

Taking a different approach, Elias Götz organized the conflicting explanations for general Russian aggression into four categories. Importantly, Götz is concerned with explaining Russia's "assertive" foreign policy in general, not just the Ukraine-related aggression that began in 2014. Nevertheless, given the geopolitical impact and excessive costs associated

with the actions in Ukraine, this particular expression of assertiveness can arguably be considered the culmination of such a foreign policy — serving as the impetus for Götz's undertaking — and is accordingly referenced throughout his paper. Moreover, the categories assembled by Götz suitably resemble the explanations for Moscow's actions in post-Maidan Ukraine, specifically. Thus, despite not being concerned with Donbas alone, the examination of these explanations is nonetheless instructive.

With that said, Götz's first category, what he calls "Decision-Maker Explanations," contains explanations that are rooted in Putin's personality. Drawing on the outpouring of Putin-centric books and scholarship published in recent years,<sup>51</sup> these explanations call upon everything from the Russian president's mental health to his nostalgia for the Soviet Union, during which time he served as an operative in the KGB. Guided by the idea that Putin's notion of Russia's place in the world drives foreign policy, this category puts tremendous weight on Putin's personal proclivities and ability to pull strings.

The second category, "Domestic Political Explanations," is comprised of two subsets: diversionary and fear-based explanations. The diversionary subset argues that Moscow's belligerence is merely a means to distract the Russian people from domestic woes such as economic stagnation and pension reform.<sup>52</sup> The fear subset has to do with the Kremlin's anxiety over the spread of democracy spurred by popular protest movements such as Maidan. These explanations are rooted in "regime security theory" — the protection of the administration as the regulative force behind a country's foreign policy. According to the fear subset, the Kremlin decided to attack Ukraine as a way of "diffusion-proofing" — ensuring a phenomenon stays contained — the country in response to civil unrest taking place in a neighboring state.<sup>53</sup>

The third category, "Ideational Explanations," positions Russian foreign policy as the logical extension of the country's predisposition to self-identify as a great power in world affairs. As the logic goes, Russia perceives itself as a key player on the international stage, and thus must behave like one. In this case,

49 Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault."

50 Kimberly Marten, "Putin's Choices: Explaining Russian Foreign Policy and Intervention in Ukraine," *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 189–204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660x.2015.1064717>.

51 Examples include: Anna Politkovskaya, *Putin's Russia: Life in a Failing Democracy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007); Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Simon & Schuster Ltd, 2016); Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015); Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2013); and Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

52 Lidia Kelly and Maya Nikolaeva, "UPDATE 2-Russia's Stagnation Raises Pressure for New Growth Model," *Reuters*, Dec. 3, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-economy-forecast/update-2-russias-stagnation-raises-pressure-for-new-growth-model-idUSL5N0J11QG20131203>; and Darya Korsunskaya, "New Russian Pension Reform Fuels Nationalization Fears," *Reuters*, Oct. 3, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-pension/new-russian-pension-reform-fuels-nationalization-fears-idUSBRE9920UT20131003>.

53 Bunce and Hozic, "Diffusion-Proofing and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine."

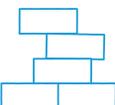




Table 1: Previous Explanations

As Identified by Marten	As Identified by Götz
NATO Expansion/Protection of Sevastopol	Decision-maker Factors
Great-Power Identity	Domestic Political Factors
Effort to Create Frozen Conflict	Ideational Factors
Effort to Erect Russia-Crimea Land Bridge	Geopolitical Factors
Miscalculation	—

great-power comportment apparently involves territorial expansion, imperialism, and international prestige-seeking. The “ideational” explanations — also called constructivist explanations — view Russian foreign policy as shaped by historical and cultural concepts that harken back to a time when the country was in complete control of its “near abroad.”

The final category is what Götz calls the “Geopolitical Explanations.” These realist-oriented accounts are twofold. First, due to a revitalized economy beginning in 2004, Russia was able once again to pursue and maintain a sphere of influence throughout the former Soviet Union. Second, Russia has implemented an aggressive foreign policy in reaction to Western expansion into the country’s immediate neighborhood, whether in the form of NATO, the European Union, or pro-democracy movements. This view discounts any sort of ideational influence upon Russian aggression, and instead, “hold[s] that the combination of rising material capabilities and strategic threats pushed Russia to assert its regional dominance.”<sup>54</sup>

### Inadequacies of Previous Explanations

The primary explanation among the Ukraine-specific group is that Russia acted out of fear of Ukraine joining NATO. At the time of Russia’s

invasion into Donbas, Ukraine was not even being considered for membership in the alliance due to widespread corruption and an unreliable defense sector. Furthermore, as is evident in subsequent NATO statements, the invasion likely only pushed Ukraine closer toward becoming a member.<sup>55</sup> Related is the idea that the invasion was an attempt to create a so-called “frozen conflict” that would preempt NATO membership for Ukraine. However, despite the continued use of the term to describe the war in Donbas,<sup>56</sup> the conflict has never warranted such a characterization, due to Moscow’s perpetual involvement.<sup>57</sup> As for the notion that Russia was trying to create a land bridge, this explanation has been disproven by the construction of the much simpler and less costly *actual* bridge over the Kerch Strait, demonstrating that Russia and Crimea could be connected without embarking upon a years-long war.<sup>58</sup> The argument that the invasion was but a miscalculation seems to be disproven by the fact that it is ongoing seven years later.

Regarding the group of explanations based on a theory of general Russian aggression, there are several problems related to each of Götz’s categories. The chief issue with the “Decision-Maker Explanation” is that Putin is not omnipotent. Although he is often portrayed that way, the now four-term

54 Elias Götz, "Putin, the State, and War: The Causes of Russia's Near Abroad Assertion Revisited," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (June 2016): 228–53, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw009>.

55 Marten, "Putin's Choices," 190; Sergey Sukhankin, "Ukraine's Thorny Path to NATO Membership: Mission (Im)Possible?" International Centre for Defence and Security, April 22, 2019, <https://icds.ee/ukraines-stony-path-to-nato-membership-mission-impossible/>; and "NATO Confirms Ukraine's Aspirations to Membership in Alliance, - Stoltenberg," *112 International*, March 14, 2019, <https://112.international/ukraine-top-news/nato-confirms-ukraines-aspirations-to-membership-in-alliance-stoltenberg-37826.html>.

56 Bill O'Reilly, "Mud, Snipers and a Global Flashpoint: On the Frontlines of Ukraine's Frozen War," *NBCNews*, Feb. 17, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/mud-snipers-global-flashpoint-frontlines-ukraine-s-frozen-war-n972561>; and Sukhankin, "Ukraine's Thorny Path to NATO Membership."

57 Marten, "Putin's Choices," 191; and Thomas D. Grant, "Frozen Conflicts and International Law," *Cornell International Law Journal* 50, no. 3 (2017): 361–413, <https://doi.org/10.31228/osf.io/8jucd>.

58 Andrew Roth, "Putin Opens 12-Mile Bridge Between Crimea and Russian Mainland," *The Guardian*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/15/putin-opens-bridge-between-crimea-and-russian-mainland>.

Russian president is by no means running a one-man show.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, the elite class broadly supports Russian foreign policy decisions, and particularly when it comes to Ukraine, the general populace does as well.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the decision to invade is not likely to have been a mere whim of Putin's, but a calculated consensus among officials. Moreover, anyone else in Putin's position would have acted in the very same manner. Finally, an aggressive foreign policy is in no way a new practice for Russia.<sup>61</sup> Both of these points are in alignment with Eugene Rumer's "Primakov Doctrine" thesis.<sup>62</sup> Taken together, these four problems leave the theory that Putin's personality is responsible for episodes such as the invasion of Donbas wanting,

**Most importantly, the ruling administration in Russia was never in any danger of being overthrown, so the need to divert attention would not have existed. Notably, leading up to the conflict, Putin was enjoying his highest approval ratings to date.**

divert attention would not have existed.<sup>63</sup> Notably, leading up to the conflict, Putin was enjoying his highest approval ratings to date.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the longevity of the Putin regime is dependent on economic factors, which are, as evinced by the ensuing sanctions, negatively affected by military adventurism. A further consideration is the general futility of diversionary war, particularly as it applies to states like Russia.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the ineffectiveness of diversionary war, and the Kremlin's penchant for eschewing it, remains as apparent as ever.<sup>66</sup> Further discounting the diversionary argument is the fact that Russia's aggressive foreign policy began in 2004, when Russia had no need to divert attention from domestic troubles given the country's rebounding economy and the consequent rise in support for the administration.<sup>67</sup>

Turning to "Geopolitical Explanations," there are three overarching problems with the notion that Russian foreign policy is driven by realist considerations, aside from those already addressed above. First, if Russia is motivated by an encroaching outside power, then the country should be equally as concerned with the rise of China as it is with NATO expansion.<sup>68</sup> This, of course, has not been the case.<sup>69</sup> Though Russia and China have not engaged in

any sort of formal alliance, they have become increasingly close in recent years.<sup>70</sup> Second, realist explanations do not address Russia's inconsistent projection of power — it formally annexed Crimea, but not other territories it has invaded.<sup>71</sup> Third, there is the question of why Russia

As for the "Domestic Political Explanations," the theory that Russia's invasion of Donbas was a "diversionary war" is highly unlikely. Most importantly, the ruling administration in Russia was never in any danger of being overthrown, so the need to

59 Götz, "Putin, the State, and War," 231; Mark Galeotti, *We Need to Talk about Putin: Why the West Gets Him Wrong* (London: Ebury Press, 2019); and Tony Wood, *Russia Without Putin: Money, Power and the Myths of the New Cold War* (Verso Books, 2018).

60 Götz, "Putin, the State, and War," 231; Harley Balzer, "Public Opinion Paradoxes? Russians Are Increasingly Dubious About the Costs of Putin's Foreign Policies," *PONARS Eurasia*, May 24, 2019, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/public-opinion-paradoxes-russians-increasingly-dubious-costs-putins-foreign-policies>; and "екитилоП йеншенВ оВ еинаворачозаР," Levada Center, Sept. 4, 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/2018/09/04/razocharovanie-vo-vneshnej-politike/>.

61 Götz, "Putin, the State, and War," 231–32.

62 Eugene Rumer, "The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 5, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254>.

63 Götz, "Putin, the State, and War," 234.

64 Alberto Nardelli, Jennifer Rankin, and George Arnett, "Vladimir Putin's Approval Rating at Record Levels," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/datablog/2015/jul/23/vladimir-putins-approval-rating-at-record-levels>.

65 Götz, "Putin, the State, and War," 235.

66 Polina Beliakova, "How Does the Kremlin Kick When It's Down?" *War on the Rocks*, Aug. 13, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/08/how-does-the-kremlin-kick-when-its-down/>.

67 Götz, "Putin, the State, and War," 235.

68 Götz, "Putin, the State, and War," 240.

69 Vsevolod Samokhvalov, "Russia and Its Shared Neighbourhoods: A Comparative Analysis of Russia-EU and Russia-China Relations in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Central Asia," *Contemporary Politics* 24, no. 1 (2018): 30–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1408171>.

70 Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, "A Russian-Chinese Partnership Is a Threat to U.S. Interests," *Foreign Affairs*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-05-14/russian-chinese-partnership-threat-us-interests>.

71 Götz, "Putin, the State, and War," 240.



only began to confront Western-leaning former Soviet states in 2004, even though it had the relative material capabilities and opportunities to do so in the mid-1990s when Western encroachment was at its most fierce.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, there are four shortcomings to the “Ideational Explanations” category. As regards the Russian perception of itself as a great power, a chief problem is the lack of explanation as to how this particular identity narrative won out over other potential contenders. Similar to one of the problems with the diversionary explanation, ideational approaches also leave one wondering why Russian foreign policy only ramped up in 2004 and not earlier. Furthermore, there is the fact that Russian belligerence has hindered the country’s standing in world politics far more than it has advanced it. The main problem with the ideational approach is that these explanations do not sufficiently take into consideration Russia’s substantial material capabilities.<sup>73</sup> However, these criticisms of the ideational approach — similar to but more so than the other approaches — can be promptly set aside when the explanations are viewed through the lens of ontological security, specifically when it comes to Ukraine.

The invasion of Donbas represented an exceptional development in Russian foreign policy, one not sufficiently accounted for by existing explanations. Both Marten and Götz, comprehensive in their approaches, come to similarly ambiguous conclusions. Given that two leading Russia experts were left unsatisfied after undertaking extensive reviews on the topic, it is clear that a more powerful explanation is in order. Enter ontological security.

## What Is Ontological Security?

Originally developed by famed psychiatrist R. D. Laing as a means of grappling with inherently difficult psychiatric conditions, such as schizophrenia, ontological security was later developed by

renowned sociologist Anthony Giddens to describe the process through which narrative and routine are harnessed by individuals to achieve a perception of social agency.<sup>74</sup> Giddens defines the concept as “a sense of continuity and order in events,” and it is this *consistency* that establishes the “firm core” of ontological security.<sup>75</sup>

Not long after Giddens introduced the sociological application of ontological security, the concept was adopted by a series of international relations scholars.<sup>76</sup> Jennifer Mitzen’s 2006 article “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma” and Brent J. Steele’s 2008 book *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* soon became the foundational works on the topic as it pertains to international relations.<sup>77</sup> It is from these publications that this paper will be principally drawing to make its case.

In her pioneering paper, Mitzen posits that it is not merely physical security that states covet, but *ontological* security as well. Addressing a common critique of the concept upfront, Mitzen notes that, as with physical security, ontological security is “extrapolated from the individual level” to that of the state. Using Laing and Giddens as starting points, Mitzen defines ontological security as, “the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time — as being rather than constantly changing — in order to realize a sense of agency.”<sup>78</sup> However, this continuity is threatened primarily by uncertainty. Thus, seeking ontological security requires the establishment of routines in relation to “significant others,” such as a neighboring state. Echoing Jef Huysmans, Mitzen emphasizes the point that these anxiety-reducing, routinized relationships need not be amicable. The critical factor is that the relationship be consistent and undisturbed. In this way, states may pursue ontological security to the detriment of their physical security. A common example of this phenomenon is when states remain involved in prolonged hostilities because the act of doing so has come to represent an ontologically securing routine. Ending such a

72 Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 240.

73 Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 237–39.

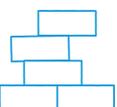
74 R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969); and Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991)

75 Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 243; and Laing, *The Divided Self*, 42.

76 Jef Huysmans, “Security! What Do You Mean?: From Concept to Thick Signifier,” *European Journal of International Relations* 4, no. 2 (June 1998): 226–55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066198004002004>; Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 154–55; and Catarina Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security,” *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (October 2004): 741–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2004.00396.x>.

77 Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (September 2006): 341–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106067346>; and Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*.

78 Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 342.



conflict requires a routine or routines to replace that war in order to negate any ontological insecurity brought about by the armistice. Ontological insecurity, commonly generated by interrupting a routine, can be thought of as akin to an existential crisis in which the sufferer reacts in oftentimes inexplicable or dramatic ways.<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, Steele argues in his 2008 book that, ultimately, “states pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence.”<sup>80</sup> Departing from Mitzen, Steele insists that ontological security is, in fact, *more* important than physical security, as it “affirms ... [a state’s] physical existence.”<sup>81</sup> Again, this sense of security is achieved through routinization, and, when this routine is threatened, states may be prompted to act out in “seemingly irrational” ways.<sup>82</sup> In making his argument, Steele emphasizes that he employs ontological security not to explain the outcomes of specific decisions, but the *motivations* that preceded them. Furthermore, Steele notes that his use of ontological security is not necessarily intended to disprove alternate explanations for a state’s behavior, but to “provide a more *complete* understanding.”<sup>83</sup> It is in this vein that the present analysis employs the concept in relation to the Russian invasion of Donbas.

Anticipating potential methodological critiques that this approach is reductionist,<sup>84</sup> Steele goes on to defend, like Mitzen, the practice of ascribing personhood to states, albeit in a perhaps more parsimonious manner. To begin with, anthropomorphizing states is far from a novel undertaking in international relations.<sup>85</sup> As Steele notes, “All mainstream approaches to IR [international relations] ... assume some type of human emotion operating at the level of states.”<sup>86</sup> Then, expounding upon Mitzen’s work, Steele presents two more defenses: that the ontological security-seeking of

states is done to further the ontological security of its individual members, and that “assumptions about individuals help explain macro-level patterns.”<sup>87</sup> Moreover, Steele’s defense of what he refers to as the “level of analysis problem,” is that since state agents are representative of the state, they, in a sense, “are the state.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, “state agents seek to satisfy the self-identity needs of the states which they lead.”<sup>89</sup> This particular defense is significant, because a typical means for demonstrating an ontological security case involves conducting a discourse analysis of relevant decision-makers — often the state’s elites.<sup>90</sup>

As Ayşe Zarakol points out, Steele and Mitzen come down on two separate sides of the “agent-structure” debate — whether a state’s anxiety stems from within (agent) or without (structure/environment) — with Mitzen emphasizing the role of the “other” while Steele insists upon the primacy of the “self.”<sup>91</sup> This paper recognizes the importance of the self, but places equal importance on the other in relation to the self. Put another way, the internal narrative (“self”) plays a critical role in providing ontological security, though only in the context of relations with a significant other.

In sum, ontological security is the process through which states reinforce their particular self-identity through routinization in relation to others. Traumatic disturbances of these routines can result in ontological insecurity, which, in turn, oftentimes manifests in outwardly inexplicable behavior, including endangering a state’s physical security or economic well-being. Accordingly, states may discover a renewed sense of ontological security through the continued use of force against an “other.” The ontologically securing routine that is actualized by conflict can often prove difficult to disrupt and requires a replacement of commensurate potency.

In the next section, this paper demonstrates how

79 Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 348.

80 Steele, *Ontological Security*, 2.

81 Steele, *Ontological Security*, 2.

82 Steele, *Ontological Security*, 3.

83 Steele, *Ontological Security*, 7–8.

84 Ken Booth and Steve Smith, eds., *International Relations Theory Today* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 198–216.

85 Alexander Wendt, “The State as Person in International Theory,” *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 2 (April 2004): 289, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210504006084>.

86 Steele, *Ontological Security*, 16.

87 Steele, *Ontological Security*, 17.

88 Steele, *Ontological Security*, 15.

89 Steele, *Ontological Security*, 19.

90 Christine Agius, “Drawing the Discourses of Ontological Security: Immigration and Identity in the Danish and Swedish Cartoon Crises,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 52, no. 1 (2017): 109–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836716653157>.

91 Ayşe Zarakol, “Ontological (In)Security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan,” *International Relations* 24, no. 1 (March 2010): 3–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117809359040>.



ontological security both applies to and can explain the war in Donbas. It then goes on to show how ontological security can provide a much more comprehensive and satisfactory answer to the question of why Moscow chose to wage war in Ukraine than the existing explanations discussed above.

## **Donbas as an Ontological Security Dilemma**

### **Ontological Security and Ukraine**

Ontological security has been used as a conceptual framework for analyzing such varied international events as the NATO intervention in Kosovo, Iranian nuclear armament, and the European Union migration crisis, among others.<sup>92</sup> And, to be sure, applying an ontological security lens to Russian foreign-policy decisions is not an innovative approach. However, as the concept pertains to the war in eastern Ukraine, specifically, ontological security has yet to be engaged.

The authors of the Russia case study in Stefano Guzzini's edited volume on the resurgence of European geopolitics credit the Soviet Union's demise as the catalytic event that brought about overwhelming "ontological anxiety" in Russia, resulting in a noteworthy concentration on geopolitics in the official discourse. Politicians and academics alike scrambled to reimagine Russia's place within the international system. Interestingly, the authors also allude to the cyclical nature of national-level Russian identity crises.<sup>93</sup> Earlier in the same volume, Guzzini identifies four distinct avenues through which states deal with "foreign policy identity crises." He argues that "they either deny the existence of any crisis, define it as a misunderstanding and negotiate with the outside about it,

adapt to it, or try to mould international society to fit its own identity discourses."<sup>94</sup> Regarding the Donbas case, his final means of remedying an identity crisis is particularly apt.

In terms of Russia's anti-Western foreign policy in general, Flemming Hansen has similarly pinpointed the fall of the Soviet Union as the traumatic event that triggered ontological insecurity within Russia, engendering an internal narrative that positions the country against the West. Focusing on the West as an enemy creates a routine through which Russia can feel ontologically secure, Hansen argues.<sup>95</sup> Eugene Rumer would disagree, instead positing that it was not until Yevgeny Primakov became Russian foreign minister in 1996 that the country embarked upon its post-Soviet, anti-Western crusade, and even then it was done in an effort to prevent American hegemony.<sup>96</sup> Andrei Tsygankov agrees with the notion of the West as an "other" with which Russia must compete, though he insists that the motivation is honor, not ontological security or establishing multipolarity.<sup>97</sup> What each of these analyses have in common, however, is that they position the West as the "other" in relation to Russia. Yet, doing so seems to neglect the distinct importance of Ukraine.

Keeping ontological security as his conceptual framework, Jonas Gejl Pedersen charts an alternate methodology. With a similar point of departure as the present paper, Pedersen sets out to understand why Russia would annex Crimea despite the unquestionably high costs of such an endeavor.<sup>98</sup> In applying the framework to the problem, Pedersen makes a sound case that ontological security motivated Russia's takeover of the Crimean peninsula. He demonstrates, much like Götz, the inadequacies of material and ideational explanations, and then conducts a thorough discourse analysis to establish a narrative basis for ontological security.<sup>99</sup>

92 Steele, *Ontological Security*, 114–47; Maysam Behraves, "State Revisionism and Ontological (In)Security in International Politics: The Complicated Case of Iran and Its Nuclear Behavior," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 21, no. 4 (2018): 836–57, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-018-0149-x>; Jennifer Mitzen, "Feeling at Home in Europe: Migration, Ontological Security, and the Political Psychology of EU Bordering," *Political Psychology* 39, no. 6 (December 2018): 1373–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12553>; and Noga Glucksam, "I Fear, Therefore I Am: Victimhood and the Struggle for Ontological Security in the Liberia Truth Commission," *Civil Wars* 20, no. 1 (2018): 89–108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2018.1466090>.

93 Alexander Astrov and Natalia Morozova, "Russia: Geopolitics from the Heartland," in *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe? Social Mechanisms and Foreign Policy Identity Crises*, ed. Stefano Guzzini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 192–216.

94 Stefano Guzzini, ed. *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe? Social Mechanisms and Foreign Policy Identity Crises* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 5.

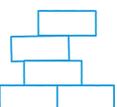
95 Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, "Russia's Relations with the West: Ontological Security through Conflict," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 359–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201314>.

96 Rumer, "The Primakov."

97 Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

98 Jonas Gejl Pedersen, *The Russian Quest for Ontological Security: An Inquiry Into the Reconstruction and Translation of the "Russian Self" in Relation to the Military Intervention in the Kosovo and Ukraine Crises*, PhD Dissertation, Aarhus University, 2019, [https://politica.dk/fileadmin/politica/Dokumenter/ph.d.-afhandlinger/jonas\\_gejl\\_pedersen.pdf](https://politica.dk/fileadmin/politica/Dokumenter/ph.d.-afhandlinger/jonas_gejl_pedersen.pdf), 18.

99 Gejl Pedersen, *The Russian Quest*, 15.



Pedersen's work applies ontological security to the Russo-Ukrainian relationship more thoroughly than those discussed above. Nevertheless, his analysis differs from the present study in several ways.

First, Pedersen employs what he refers to as a "retranslation" of ontological security, wherein the focus is on the inner self-self dialogue taking place within Russia.<sup>100</sup> This strays from Mitzen's ontological security theory wherein the focus is commonly on the routinized self-other relations between states.<sup>101</sup> Though this retranslation is well formed, a self-other conception of ontological security is perhaps better suited to explain Russia's involvement in Donbas, because this particular act of aggression is, first and foremost, predicated on the unique relationship between Russia and Ukraine.

Second, Pedersen is concerned chiefly with the weeks immediately before and after the annexation of Crimea — more specifically, the time period between Feb. 21, 2014, and March 25, 2014.<sup>102</sup> Thus, the preparation for the invasion of Donbas, the invasion itself, and its ensuing implications go relatively uncovered. Though there are some surface-level similarities between Russia's Crimea and Donbas actions, such as both taking place on Ukrainian territory in 2014 and both involving high concentrations of Russian speakers, the two constitute almost entirely different occurrences.<sup>103</sup> The annexation of Crimea was a relatively bloodless, fast-acting, and eventually overt operation, while Donbas has incurred high casualties, been protracted, and involved a continual level of attempted secrecy.<sup>104</sup> Additionally, the Crimean Peninsula was swiftly and officially appropriated by the Russian state, which has not been the case with eastern Ukraine.<sup>105</sup> Hence, Russia's initiation of, and continued participation in, the war in eastern Ukraine warrants a separate, albeit similar, examination.

Third, Pedersen focuses on broader Russo-Western relations (what he calls "encounters"), whereas

this paper takes a more regional approach focused on Russo-Ukrainian interactions. Though it can rightfully be argued that something of a proxy war is playing out between Russia and the West in Donbas, the ontological insecurity felt by Russia as a result of the Maidan Revolution is more intimately connected to the breakdown in routine relations between Russia and Ukraine.<sup>106</sup>

Finally, though Pedersen determines in his epilogue that Russia has become more ontologically secure since the annexation of Crimea, he does not discuss whether the ongoing war in Ukraine has become a reinforcing mechanism for that newfound security, or if the ontological security created by conflict extends to Ukraine.<sup>107</sup>

Pedersen presents a scrupulously convincing case, but given the points noted above, it seems clear that an independent ontological security analysis pertaining specifically to the war in Donbas is required. It stands to reason that, if, as Pedersen maintains, self-identity and ontological security played critical roles in the Kremlin's decision to annex Crimea, then similar forces were at work in the choice to invade Donbas. In fact, given the multiple ontological security treatments of Russia discussed above, it seems plausible that Russia has, in recent years, experienced what Amir Lupovici calls "ontological dissonance" — the phenomenon wherein a state suffers several identity crises at once, the remedies to which happen to contradict one another.<sup>108</sup>

### The Ontological Drive to Invade Donbas

The principal conclusion of a 2012 Chatham House report regarding Russian soft power in Ukraine reads: "For Russia, maintaining influence over Ukraine is more than a foreign policy priority; it is an existential imperative. Many among Russia's

100 Gejl Pedersen, *The Russian Quest*, 57.

101 Mitzen, "Ontological Security," 342.

102 Gejl Pedersen, *The Russian Quest*, 43.

103 Elina Beketova, "Kurt Volker: There Is No Difference Between Crimea and Eastern Ukraine," *112 International*, Sept. 21, 2017, <https://112.international/interview/kurt-volker-there-is-no-difference-between-crimea-and-eastern-ukraine-20932.html>.

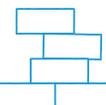
104 Natalya Vasilyeva, "Russia's Conflict with Ukraine: An Explainer," *Military Times*, Nov. 26, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/11/26/russias-conflict-with-ukraine-an-explainer/>.

105 "Vladimir Putin Signs Russia's Annexation of Crimea Into Law," *NBCNews.com*, March 21, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/ukraine-crisis/vladimir-putin-signs-russias-annexation-crimea-law-n58526>.

106 Daniel Byman, "Why States Are Turning to Proxy War," *National Interest*, Aug. 26, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-states-are-turning-proxy-war-29677>; and "On the Frontlines of Ukraine's Proxy War Between the West and Russia," *VICE News*, YouTube, Oct. 5, 2016, <https://youtu.be/e7D4r8OTgTw>.

107 Gejl Pedersen, *The Russian Quest*, 367–71.

108 Amir Lupovici, "Ontological Dissonance, Clashing Identities, and Israel's Unilateral Steps Towards the Palestinians," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 4 (October 2012): 809–33, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210511000222>.





political elite perceive Ukraine as part of their country's own identity."<sup>109</sup> Making what is essentially an ontological security-based argument without actually using the term, the Chatham House report indicates how control over Ukraine represents an essential component of Kremlin-perceived selfhood, the loss of which would, in a sense, constitute an identity crisis. The authors of the report delve into the unique relationship between Russia and Ukraine, noting the distinctiveness that separates it from the relationship between, say, Russia and Georgia. A number of examples are brought forth to demonstrate the way in which the Russian elite conceive of Ukraine as an extension of Russia, such as a 2009 Putin quote in which he refers to his country's western neighbor as "little Russia."

Further evidence submitted by the authors includes references to the rich intellectual history in Russia of treating the Ukrainian national identity as fictional or nonexistent, and the disdain felt by Russian elites toward the concept of Ukrainian sovereignty, as the country is, to them, not its own, but Russia's. The details and conclusions of this report serve to illustrate the particular significance of Ukraine to Russian self-identity, which is the first step in establishing the relational aspect (i.e., the self-other dynamic) of ontological security. Similar arguments corroborating the exclusive nature of Ukraine's position can be found in a recent talk by Igor Torbakov and a paper by Lilia Shevtsova. Both scholars assert that Ukraine inhabits a singular place in the collective mind of Russian officialdom.<sup>110</sup>

A 2019 report from the Royal United Services Institute provides an in-depth analysis of the so-called "Surkov Leaks" — a series of leaked email correspondences between Russian and Russia-aligned elites, namely Vladislav Surkov, former personal adviser to Putin and Kremlin point man for the war in Ukraine.<sup>111</sup> This report not only delivers a glimpse into the insatiable desire within Moscow to wield considerable Russian influence over Ukraine, but also underscores the nature of

the routinized Russo-Ukrainian relationship that had emerged under the Yanukovich regime. Drawing from the contents of nearly 4,000 emails, the report exhibits the immense amount of time, effort, and resources that Russian agents invested into the manipulation of Ukrainian affairs dating back, in some instances, to 2005.<sup>112</sup> The majority of the emails contain what are essentially intelligence reports meant to provide as clear a picture as possible of the goings-on in Ukraine, so as to exploit any potential weaknesses that might result in Russia gaining greater leverage.<sup>113</sup> Much of the information in these emails revolves around Moscow's attempt to encourage separatism in the weeks and months leading up to the outbreak of the war. These emails detail the organization of street protests and the spreading of mis/disinformation, as well as the receipts for the costs of those efforts.<sup>114</sup> Overall, the picture the report paints is one of extreme Kremlin interest in coordinating the future of Ukraine.

After quoting a Surkov confidant who referred to Ukraine as "another Russia," the authors of the report suggest that "[i]ntervention in Ukraine, an integral part of Russia, might therefore be legitimized by the need to protect the welfare of the whole 'organism.'"<sup>115</sup> From an ontological security perspective, the answer to what engendered this "need to protect" in the first place can also be found in the pages of the report, which describes the utter corruptness of the Ukrainian government under Yanukovich and how this made it easier for Moscow to manipulate Ukraine.<sup>116</sup> Having a malleable regime in power for nearly four years, it is safe to assume that the Putin administration had fallen into a relatively predictable routine in which the exertion of control over the dependably crooked government in Kyiv, as well as the regional offices, was virtually assured. Although Yanukovich generally positioned his country westward, it is clear that, in light of the withdrawal from the E.U. Association Agreement that precipitated his eventual removal from office, he was willing to do Moscow's bidding if persuaded.<sup>117</sup>

109 Alexander Bogomolov and Oleksandr Lytvynenko, "A Ghost in the Mirror: Russian Soft Power in Ukraine," Chatham House, January 2012, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263853878\\_A\\_Ghost\\_in\\_the\\_Mirror\\_Russian\\_Soft\\_Power\\_in\\_Ukraine\\_The\\_Aims\\_and\\_Means\\_of\\_Russian\\_Influence\\_Abroad\\_Series\\_A\\_Ghost\\_in\\_the\\_Mirror\\_Russian\\_Soft\\_Power\\_in\\_Ukraine](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263853878_A_Ghost_in_the_Mirror_Russian_Soft_Power_in_Ukraine_The_Aims_and_Means_of_Russian_Influence_Abroad_Series_A_Ghost_in_the_Mirror_Russian_Soft_Power_in_Ukraine).

110 "Igor Torbakov: The Ukraine Factor in Russia-Europe Relations (Livestream)," Ukrainian Research Institute Harvard University, YouTube, Oct. 16, 2017, [https://youtu.be/-w\\_fIFxhWFw](https://youtu.be/-w_fIFxhWFw); and Lilia Shevtsova, "Russia's Ukraine Obsession," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (January 2020): 138–47, <http://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0011>.

111 Alya Shandra and Robert Seely, "The Surkov Leaks: The Inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine," *RUSI*, July 16, 2019, <https://rusi.org/publication/occasional-papers/surkov-leaks-inner-workings-russias-hybrid-war-ukraine>.

112 Shandra and Seely, "The Surkov Leaks," 18.

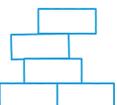
113 Shandra and Seely, "The Surkov Leaks," 23.

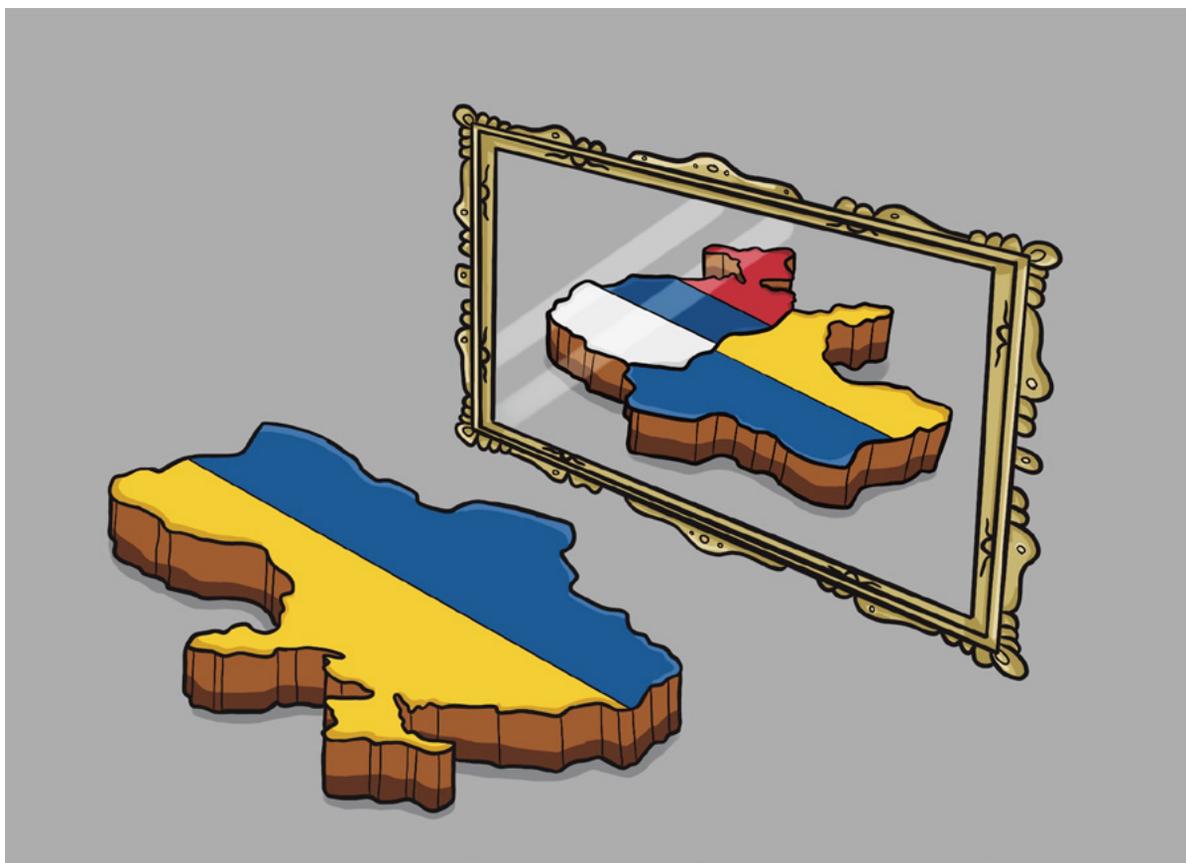
114 Shandra and Seely, "The Surkov Leaks," 21.

115 Shandra and Seely, "The Surkov Leaks," 15.

116 Shandra and Seely, "The Surkov Leaks," 32.

117 "Profile: Ukraine's Ousted President Viktor Yanukovich," *BBC News*, Feb. 28, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25182830>.





Perhaps more detrimental to Russian ontological security than the fall of an impressionable president was the breakup of the Moscow-friendly Party of Regions, which was not only led by Yanukovich, but also enjoyed significant sway over the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, including Donbas. Following the Maidan Revolution, many of the Party of Regions leaders abandoned ship, some fleeing to Russia along with their former president.<sup>118</sup> Though a number of members had regrouped under the politically constrained, much less influential Opposition Bloc party by September 2014, Moscow's exertion of control was no longer assured following the dissolution of the Party of Regions.<sup>119</sup> Thus, whereas prior to the revolution Russia had maintained sufficient command over Ukrainian politics for several years — particularly in the regions geographically and culturally closest to it — the entire apparatus was afterwards sent into a tailspin, threatened by lustration, anti-corruption campaigns, and other

democratic reforms. Although such transformations would prove to be extraordinarily slow-going, there was no way of knowing this at the time.<sup>120</sup> In all, these developments resulted in a level of ontological insecurity necessary to motivate Russia's risky Donbas incursion.

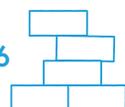
### Discourse Analysis

The importance of Ukraine in Russia's eyes can additionally be gleaned from quotes over the years from Official Russia, specifically, in this case, from Putin. What follows is a brief discourse analysis. As time and space do not permit the sort of analysis carried out by Pedersen, a collection of select quotations will have to suffice. Consequently, the following analysis is confined by a relatively narrow set of parameters, which nevertheless serve to illustrate the point. Namely, the succeeding statements originate almost exclusively from the

118 "Ukraine: Party of Regions, Including Mandate, Leaders, Power Base, Structure, Membership and Membership Cards; Whether the Party Is Still Active or Dissolved Into Other Parties; Whether Authorities Are Able to Identify Party of Regions Members; State Protection Available for Members Targeted by Militias or Other Forces," Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Sept. 11, 2015, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5797736f4.html>.

119 Konstantin Skorin, "Losing the Plot—Ukraine's Opposition Seeks a Strategy," Carnegie Moscow Center, Nov. 20, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77753>.

120 Igor Lyubashenko, *Transitional Justice in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine: Swimming Upstream* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag Der Wissenschaften, 2016).





current Russian head of state and were made between his initial inauguration as president in 2000 and the present day.

Many, like Marten, mark the historical importance of the relationship between Russia and Ukraine as dating back to the time of Catherine the Great and the idea of *Novorossiya* — or “New Russia” — which was an area that included the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine that were incorporated into Russia under Catherine’s rule. Putin has been known to invoke this antiquated term in conversations regarding Ukraine, and there have been various attempts at reigniting support for the concept since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis.<sup>121</sup> Others liken the current Russian elites’ obsession with Ukraine to that of the early Soviet leadership.<sup>122</sup> Still others reach back even further, marking the beginning of Ukraine’s importance to the mid-17th century.<sup>123</sup> Regardless of the date, however, there is no doubt about Russia’s unparalleled and historic regard for its neighbor to the west.<sup>124</sup> This attachment is reflected in the words of Russian officialdom. The sort of language employed regarding Ukraine is simply not adopted when referring to other former Soviet republics.

There are two common narratives concerning Ukraine’s significance to Russia that are frequently espoused by Putin. First is referencing the questionable statistic that 17 million ethnic Russians are living in Ukraine as a way to emphasize

the profound bond between the two countries.<sup>125</sup> Putin has repeated this claim on numerous occasions, often at the same time as he cites estimates of how many Ukrainians speak primarily Russian or stresses the existence of millions of Ukrainians

## The country’s conception of its western neighbor transcends any single desire, instead symbolizing a sweeping attachment that appears to require maintaining in order for Russia to feel whole.

living in Russia.<sup>126</sup> The other most prevalent narrative is that “the Russian and Ukrainian peoples are practically one single people.”<sup>127</sup> As with the “17 million ethnic Russians,” Putin is adamant, at least on the record, about his belief that Russia and Ukraine are essentially one, constantly emphasizing the two nations’ shared culture and history, and even going so far as to express heartache over the deaths of Ukrainian soldiers, as he considers them to be “ours.”<sup>128</sup> More recently, Putin suggested that not only do the two countries constitute “one nation,” but that “some form of integration” between them is “inevitable.”<sup>129</sup> This integration, Putin believes, would result in an unstoppable force

121 John O’Loughlin, Gerard Toal, and Vladimir Kolosov, “The Rise and Fall of ‘Novorossiya’: Examining Support for a Separatist Geopolitical Imaginary in Southeast Ukraine,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2017): 124–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2016.1146452>.

122 Anne Applebaum, “Why Does Putin Want to Control Ukraine? Ask Stalin,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 20, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-does-putin-want-control-ukraine-ask-stalin/2017/10/20/800a7afe-b427-11e7-a908-a3470754bbb9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-does-putin-want-control-ukraine-ask-stalin/2017/10/20/800a7afe-b427-11e7-a908-a3470754bbb9_story.html).

123 Andreas Kappeler, “Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the Imperial Past and Competing Memories,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 5, no. 2 (July 2014): 107–15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2014.05.005>, 112.

124 Krishnadev Calamur, “Why Ukraine Is Such A Big Deal For Russia,” *NPR.org*, NPR, February 21, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/02/21/280684831/why-ukraine-is-such-a-big-deal-for-russia>. For an in-depth look into the historical connection between Russia and Ukraine see Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

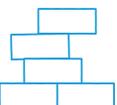
125 Eve Conant, “Ethnic Russians: Pretext for Putin’s Ukraine Invasion?” *National Geographic*, May 2, 2014, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/5/140502-russia-putin-ukraine-geography-crimea-language/>; and “Russia’s Ukrainian Retreat,” *Newsweek*, June 8, 2015, <https://www.newsweek.com/russias-ukrainian-retreat-340214>.

126 “Интервью телеканалу ЦДФ (Германия),” Президент России, July 13, 2006, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23703>; “Стенограмма Прямого Теле- и Радиоэфира («Прямая Линия с Президентом России») • Президент России,” Президент России, Oct. 18, 2007, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24604>; “Интервью журналу «Тайм»,” Президент России, Dec. 19, 2007, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24735>; and “Text of Putin’s Speech at NATO Summit (Bucharest, April 2, 2008),” *Unian*, April 18, 2008, <https://www.unian.info/world/111033-text-of-putin-s-speech-at-nato-summit-bucharest-april-2-2008.html>.

127 “Всероссийский молодёжный форум «Селигер-2014»,” Президент России, Aug. 29, 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46507>.

128 “Концерт, посвящённый воссоединению Крыма и Севастополя с Россией,” Президент России, March 18, 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47878>; “Заседание Международного Дискуссионного Клуба «Валдай»,” Президент России, Oct. 27, 2016, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53151>; “Посещение Лебединского горно-обогатительного комбината,” Президент России, July 14, 2017, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55052>; “Большая пресс-конференция Владимира Путина,” Президент России, Dec. 14, 2017, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56378>; and Дмитрий Смирнов, “Дмитрий Смирнов on Twitter: ‘Путин: На Донбассе Гибнут Военнослужащие Украинской Армии. Когда я Об Этом Думаю, На Меня Это Производит Очень Сильное Впечатление. Потому Что я Считаю, Что Там Все Наши’” <https://t.co/Ghs-59f44zR> / Twitter, *Twitter*, March 7, 2018, <https://twitter.com/dimsmirnov175/status/971351275152576513>.

129 “Интервью Оливеру Стоуну,” Президент России, June 19, 2019, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61057>.



to be reckoned with on the world stage.<sup>130</sup>

While echoing nearly all of the above, the Russian president has also referred to Ukraine as Russia's "ancestral territories" and lamented their loss during his annual year-end press conference in December 2020.<sup>131</sup> During his infamous annexation of Crimea speech, Putin insisted that relations with Ukraine were of "foremost importance" to Russia.<sup>132</sup> Though Putin is the most high profile and vocal of the Russian elite, similar sentiments are shared by other Russian officials, such as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and the aforementioned Surkov, and are generally representative of those in positions of power overall.<sup>133</sup>

Thus, it would seem that Ukraine — much like the territory of Karelia to the Finnish people between the late 19th century and 1945 — represents something more than a political entity, geographical area, profitable market, or land of kinfolk in the Russian perception. Instead it is a conglomeration of elements, formulating an ontologically critical idea of a territory that is worth fighting for. In the case of the Finns, it took several decades, multiple desecuritization strategies and phases, and, ultimately, losing a war for the need to control Karelia to disappear from the national consciousness.<sup>134</sup> With Russia, such reconciliation is far from certain. The country's conception of its western neighbor transcends any single desire, instead symbolizing a sweeping attachment that appears to require maintaining in order for Russia to feel whole. To be sure, the tangible qualities of Ukraine that Russia prizes, such as its proximity and a shared language, feature prominently in the Russian consciousness.<sup>135</sup> However, its ultimate worth likely goes well beyond any one attribute.<sup>136</sup>

## Accounting for Inadequacies

Based on this discourse analysis, it would appear that Russia's invasion into Donbas was motivated, primarily, by ontological insecurity. In Table 2, the basic components of an ontological security crisis are laid out with the corresponding components in the case of the Donbas invasion, which are summarized below. Ukraine assumed the role of Russia's "other" in its internally perceived self-other relationship. For at least the four years that Yanukovych and his Russo-loyal party were in power, Moscow was able to establish a relatively predictable practice of manipulating and controlling Ukrainian affairs. This routine reinforced Russia's ontological security, as the maintenance of influence over Ukraine — a country of particular cultural and historical significance — represented a key characteristic of the Russian self-identity. Due to the existentially traumatic 2014 Maidan Revolution that ended in the removal of Yanukovych and the disintegration of his party, this ontologically securing routine was upended, bringing about deep-seated ontological insecurity. No longer appearing to act rationally, given the harsh penalties and exorbitant costs it would incur, Moscow generated an armed conflict in the region of Ukraine closest to its own territory. When viewing the problem of what motivated the event from the standpoint of the Kremlin, which by the time of the invasion was still reeling from ontological insecurity, the incursion appears not just rational, but also likely the only logical option to try to prevent the imminently forthcoming loss of command.

However, the test for whether or not an ontological security-based explanation applies lies not only in checking the boxes, but also in how well

130 Russian Embassy UK (@RussianEmbassy), "President Putin: Any Integration of Russia and Ukraine, along with Their Capacities and Competitive Advantages, Would Lead to the Emergence of a Rival, a Global Rival for Europe and the World. No One Wants It. That's Why They'll Do Anything to Pull Us Apart," *Twitter*, Feb. 22, 2020, <https://twitter.com/RussianEmbassy/status/123120696465227760?s=03>.

131 Vladimir Socor, "Putin and Ukraine's Black Sea Lands: Another Iteration of Novorossiia?" *The Jamestown Foundation*, Jan. 14, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/putin-and-ukraines-black-sea-lands-another-iteration-of-novorossiia/>.

132 Bridget Kendall, "Crimea Crisis: Russian President Putin's Speech Annotated," *BBC News*, March 19, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26652058>.

133 Андрей Ванденко, "Сергей Лавров: Поставлена Цель Любой Ценой Вывести Россию Из Равновесия – ТАСС," *TASS*, 2018, <https://tass.ru/top-officials/1432200>; Taras Kuzio, "Six Years of War Fail to Cure Putin's Ukraine Delusions," *Atlantic Council*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/six-years-of-war-fail-to-cure-putins-ukraine-delusions/>; "Russia Is Waiting for Concrete Steps to Cease Hostilities in Southeastern Ukraine," *The State Duma*, June 7, 2019, <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/45242/>; "Adequate Support for Russians in Crimea to Be Prepared Soon – Slutsky," *Interfax*, Feb. 25, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140430013159/https://interfax.com/newsinf.asp?id=483827>; Denis Volkov, "Russian Elite Opinion After Crimea," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, March 23, 2016, <https://carnegie.ru/2016/03/23/russian-elite-opinion-after-crimea-pub-63094>; and Igor Torbakov, "Perspectives: Examining the Origins of Russians' Superiority Complex Vis-à-Vis Ukrainians," *Eurasianet*, May 26, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-examining-the-origins-of-russians-superiority-complex-vis-a-vis-ukrainians>.

134 Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, "The Ontological Significance of Karelia: Finland's Reconciliation with Losing the Promised Land," in *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties*, ed. Bahar Rumelili (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

135 Екатерина Чимириш, "Российско-Украинские Отношения 2020: Уравнение Со Многими Переменными. Взгляд Из России," *РСМД*, Dec. 4, 2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/rossiysko-ukrainskie-otnosheniya-2020-uravnenie-so-mnogimi-peremennymi-vzglyad-iz-rossii/>.

136 Giovanna De Maio, *Russia's View of Ukraine after the Crisis*, *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 2016, <http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai-wp1604.pdf>.

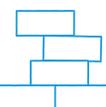


Table 2: Ontological Security and the Russia Case

Ontological Security Component	Correspondence to Russia
“Other”	Ukraine
Established routine vis-à-vis “other”	Influence over internal affairs
Routine-breaking trauma/ontological insecurity catalyst	Maidan Yanukovych ouster Party of Regions collapse Prospect of reform
Response	Invasion of Donbas
Ontologically re-securing behavior	Protracted war

that explanation makes up for the shortcomings of other theories. As stated in the introduction, ontological security goes further in determining the root of Moscow’s motives. Frozen conflict, diversionary war, and land-grab explanations do not hold up under closer scrutiny. Much the same can be said for Crimea-focused explanations as they do not pertain to Donbas.

Though the remainder of the explanations have their drawbacks, they are not so easily dismissed. Rather than invalidating these explanations, ontological security instead incorporates them and accounts for their inadequacies. Take the explanation that Russia acted out of fear of Westernization. This fear is a manifestation of ontological insecurity on the part of Russia in relation, first and foremost, to Ukraine. Although there was very little prospect of Ukraine actually joining NATO or the European Union in the foreseeable future, its pursuit of closer ties with the West would have meant loss of influence for Moscow. This caused Russia existential anxiety given the self-perception among Russian officials that Russia is the rightful external manager of Ukrainian affairs.<sup>137</sup>

Ontological security can also answer for the shortcomings of the “Geopolitical Explanations.”<sup>138</sup> As to why China is not treated with as much hostility as the West, the solution perhaps lies in the fact that China is not seeking to subsume Ukraine into its orbit. Moreover, while invading eastern Ukraine may appear not to make much geopolitical sense given the consequences involved, that is because the decision to invade was, principally, of only bilateral importance.

The identity crisis experienced by Russia at the time was in direct response to events that had transpired in Ukraine. Any realist considerations that went into the decision, such as the conservation of power and interests, were, in all likelihood, made with Russo-Ukrainian — rather than Russo-Western — relations in mind. In this light, Russia’s behavior appears much less incoherent. Finally, as to why Russia did not invade Donbas earlier, the ontological security answer would suggest that a sufficiently routinized relationship between Russia and Ukraine had not developed — and then dissolved — in quite the same way as it had between 2010 and 2014.

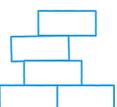
“Ideational Explanations” tend to have most of the story correct, but get the variables wrong. Many of the ideational accounts rightly identify self-perception factors as driving Russia’s foreign policy. However, they position them in relation to the West and ascribe policies to Moscow’s desire for great-power status.<sup>139</sup> By shifting the focus to the ontological self-other relationship with Ukraine, the problems with these explanations no longer exist. In the wake of Maidan, Russia was primarily concerned with sustaining its hold on Ukraine, which had come to represent an ontologically securing routine. The predominance that ontological security took over other interests meant that any contradicting voices were not afforded serious consideration.

The concern over why Russian aggression only gained traction in 2004 and not earlier is also addressed by a Ukraine-focused ontological security approach. 2004 was the year of the Orange

137 Marten, “Putin’s Choices,” 190.

138 Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 240–41.

139 Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 236; Hansen, “Russia’s Relations”; and Kari Roberts, “Understanding Putin: The Politics of Identity and Geopolitics in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse,” *International Journal* 72, no. 1 (March 2017): 28–55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702017692609>.



Revolution, a Western-influenced, popular protest movement in Ukraine that focused its ire on Yanukovich.<sup>140</sup> Given the importance of Ukraine to Russia, it comes as little surprise that 2004 marked the beginning of Russian belligerence. However, as Tsygankov notes, Russia adopted a non-military approach following the Orange Revolution and, realizing that such a style did not successfully accomplish the desired effect, tried an alternate tack when the situation reemerged a decade later.<sup>141</sup>

Relatedly, this point further serves to address the problem of why Russia would attempt to secure a sphere of influence to “gain greater international status” despite the failure of previous similar endeavors.<sup>142</sup> For one, the invasion of Donbas would have been carried out not for international status, but to remedy overwhelming ontological insecurity with regard to Ukraine. Indeed, not only did Donbas not gain international credit for Moscow, it cost the country dearly. Such an expenditure of prestige can only be explained in terms of the offset gained in ontological security. Moreover, the invasion was distinct in character from any former efforts Russia had undertaken.

Finally, there is the fact that “Ideational Explanations” neglect “material factors.”<sup>143</sup> Ontological security does not ignore these factors, but instead incorporates them. For instance, the economic interplay between Russia and Ukraine is more than likely to have contributed to the states’ routinized relations, initially reinforcing Russia’s ontological security but, when threatened, then enhancing the sense of insecurity.<sup>144</sup> This is best understood by considering the centrality to events of the E.U. Association Agreement — a sprawling document in which one of the primary objectives is “to establish conditions for enhanced economic and trade relations leading towards Ukraine’s gradual integration in the EU Internal Market.”<sup>145</sup>

Given the above elements, it would seem that

the Donbas situation does indeed fit the bill for having been motivated by ontological insecurity. The events surrounding the invasion correspond appropriately to the ontological security framework, and such an approach goes further than previous explanations that have come before, accounting for the identified shortcomings.

### **Enhancing Ontological Security Through War?**

The primary purpose of this paper is to present an alternate explanation of Russia’s motives in initiating the war in Donbas. However, given the ontologically securing nature of protracted conflict, it is necessary to briefly consider the reinforcing effects that the hostilities may have in relation to either side’s self-identity. As Mitzen argues, “Where conflict persists and comes to fulfill identity needs, breaking free can generate ontological *in*security, which states seek to avoid.”<sup>146</sup> Thus, it is of considerable import to examine whether the war in Donbas has come to represent a means of identity-fulfilling routinization, as this can have significant implications for how best to approach putting an end to the fighting.

Aside from the work of Mitzen and others who have found that intractable conflicts are often typified by belligerents that are made ontologically secure through the war-fighting process in spite of the physical threats it poses, there is additional, case-specific evidence that one can point to regarding the war in Donbas.<sup>147</sup> For instance, on the Ukrainian side, former President Petro Poroshenko made the war against Russia a focal point of his political ideology, using “*army*, language, faith” as the credo of his most recent political campaign.<sup>148</sup> The war has allowed for a dramatic rise in nationalistic tendencies throughout Ukraine, positioning Russia as the definitive enemy to Ukrainian

140 Adrian Karatnycky, “Ukraine’s Orange Revolution,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 2 (March/April 2005), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2005-03-01/ukraines-orange-revolution>.

141 Andrei Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin’s Last Stand: The Sources of Russia’s Ukraine Policy,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 4 (2015): 288–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2015.1005903>.

142 Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 238.

143 Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 238.

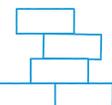
144 Rilka Dragneva and Kataryna Wolczuk, “Between Dependence and Integration: Ukraine’s Relations with Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 4 (2016): 678–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1173200>.

145 “Association Agreement between the European Union and Its Member States, of the One Part, and Ukraine, of the Other Part,” *Official Journal of the EU*, May 29, 2014, [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2016/november/tradoc\\_155103.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2016/november/tradoc_155103.pdf)

146 Mitzen “Ontological Security,” 343.

147 Bahar Rumelili, *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2014).

148 Christopher Miller, “Poroshenko Camp in Damage-Control Mode as Ukrainian Election Nears,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/poroshenko-camp-in-damage-control-mode-as-ukrainian-election-nears/29819376.html>, emphasis added.





sovereignty.<sup>149</sup> Although Russia is not a formal party to the war, a similar phenomenon has arisen there, wherein the Ukrainian government is painted by the Russian media as an evil, fascist nemesis in need of defeating.<sup>150</sup> In short, both sides have constructed war-time narratives that have come to support their respective identities.

A further indication that the war has taken on the role of an ontologically securing mechanism is the way in which the conflict is being fought. Despite the immense material capabilities now at the disposal of either side, the war continues to be waged in a relatively low-tempo, albeit kinetic, manner, with primarily small arms and artillery being used.<sup>151</sup> Based on the media reporting from both sides of the contact line between January and July 2019, the impression is one of two exceedingly capable powers not necessarily trying to win the war they are engaged in.<sup>152</sup> Despite its availability, there are almost no instances of advanced weaponry being used. Conversely, however, soldiers from either side continue to be killed with some regularity, a humanitarian crisis endures, and a lasting peace remains out of sight.<sup>153</sup> This all may change given the recent leadership shakeup in Kyiv, the replacement of Surkov with the more pragmatically minded Dmitry Kozak, and renewed focus on internal affairs within Russia.<sup>154</sup> However, it appears as though, for the time being, the parties fighting the war in Donbas have become accustomed to conflict for identity's sake.

## Conclusion

The war in eastern Ukraine has presented something of a conundrum to scholars since it first began over seven years ago. Why, many ask, would Moscow determine that an invasion of its West-

ern-aligned neighbor would be worth the tremendous material and reputational consequences? This question has been answered in a multitude of ways, with analysts and commentators employing any number of theories and methods for discerning a suitable solution. Theories range from the behavior having been motivated by a neo-imperialist drive to it being the logical extension of Russia's cultural disunion with the West. However, a number of researchers, Marten and Götz among them, have systematically identified shortcomings with each of the existing explanations.

Likewise, this paper has found that oftentimes Russia's war in Donbas is attached to the annexation of Crimea when it comes to explaining Moscow's behavior, despite the quite obvious differences between the two events. Furthermore, alternate explanations propose end-goals motivating the invasion that could have been achieved in a much more orderly fashion. In addition, many explanations simply do not retain plausibility under close examination. But what is most often the case with these alternate explanations is that they are better suited as indicators of a more wide-ranging theory.

The ontological security approach provides a more robust explanation to account for the drawbacks of the prevailing alternate theories. Ontological security involves the need for an agent to feel confident in its uninterrupted identity in order to experience a sense of wholeness in relation to others. Attaining ontological security is typically achieved through establishing routine relations with an "other" and by employing a self-fulfilling narrative that dictates the agent's relational identity. If an established routine is jeopardized, the agent is likely to experience overwhelming ontological insecurity, as its entire perceived identity has been upended — a feeling best understood as an existential crisis.

149 Volodymyr Kulyk, "National Identity in Ukraine: Impact of Euromaidan and the War," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 4 (2016): 588–608, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1174980>.

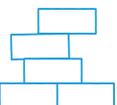
150 Andreas Umland, "Russian Media and the War in Ukraine," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1, no. 1 (2015), [https://www.academia.edu/12566447/Russian\\_Media\\_and\\_the\\_War\\_in\\_Ukraine](https://www.academia.edu/12566447/Russian_Media_and_the_War_in_Ukraine).

151 Denys Kiryukhin, "The Ukrainian Military: From Degradation to Renewal," Foreign Policy Research Institute, August 17, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/08/the-ukrainian-military-from-degradation-to-renewal/>; and *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations*, Defense Intelligence Agency, (2017), <https://www.dia.mil/portals/27/documents/news/military%20power%20publications/russia%20military%20power%20report%202017.pdf>, 29–46.

152 Data collected by the Center for Analytics. Access available upon request. Each article collected was disaggregated into unique events separated by date, location, event type, reported weapons system, actor, and target.

153 Illia Ponomarenko and Volodymyr Petrov, "Trench Warfare Rages on Donbas Frontline," *Kyiv Post*, July 5, 2019, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/trench-warfare-rages-on-donbas-frontline.html>; and "Ukraine," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, accessed Jan. 31, 2019, <https://www.unocha.org/ukraine>.

154 Balázs Jarábik, "In Search of a Compromise: Zelensky's Emerging Donbas policy," *Emerging Europe*, July 16, 2019, <https://emerging-europe.com/voices/in-search-of-a-compromise-zelenskys-emerging-donbas-policy/>; "Russians Are Losing Interest in Foreign Policy, Poll Says," *Moscow Times*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/06/21/russians-losing-interest-foreign-policy-poll-says-a66101>; "Zelensky: Peace Can Be Returned to Ukraine Only by Diplomatic Weapons," *Unian*, July 8, 2019, <https://www.unian.info/politics/10610436-zelensky-peace-can-be-returned-to-ukraine-only-by-diplomatic-weapons.html>; and Ivan Preobrazhensky, "The Destiny of Donbas ... Without Surkov?" *RIDDLE*, Jan. 30, 2020, <https://www.ridl.io/en/the-destiny-of-donbas-without-surkov/>.



In the case of Russia and the war in eastern Ukraine, Russia represents the primary agent (the “self”), while Ukraine embodies the interpersonal “other.” The routine created in this self-other relationship was one in which Russia maintained a significant level of influence over Ukrainian affairs. The imagined narrative that demanded this influence was one in which Ukraine was viewed not as an independent entity but as a part of Russia. Severing the routine somewhat unexpectedly, the 2014 Maidan Revolution sent Russia into a fit of ontological insecurity. In response, Moscow acted out, seeking to preserve the routine it had come to require over the past several years. On the surface, the invasion seems irrational, however, given the disruption to Russia’s identity taking place, it is likely that this appeared to be the best chance at salvaging the routine and fulfilling Russia’s narrative.

Ontological security goes further in explaining the motivations for the invasion than all available alternates. When the conflict is viewed through an ontological security lens that places Ukraine in the position of “other” rather than the West, this identity-based explanation can account for the aforementioned weaknesses present in those explanations that cannot be dismissed out of hand.

Further drawing upon ontological security, the now protracted nature of the war in Ukraine suggests that the parties to the conflict have formed identities based upon fighting one another. The prolonged conflict has resulted in new-found ontological security, making prospects for ending the fighting all the less likely.

Applying an ontological security lens to explain the motivation behind, as well as the perpetuation of, the war in Donbas is beneficial within two domains: academia and policymaking. In terms of its academic value, this present paper adds to the growing body of ontological security scholarship — a critically important, yet still relatively undersized, sub-field of international relations. Viewing Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine through an ontological security lens helps to gauge the likelihood of additional invasions occurring. Whether it be with regard to the Baltics or Belarus, understanding the fundamental role of ontological security in Russia’s foreign policy decision-making can help researchers to carry out more vigorous analyses. Future consideration of potential military action in Russia’s “near abroad” will be better served by taking into account factors such as routinized relations and identi-

ty-based narratives. Recognizing the singularity of the Russo-Ukrainian relationship can lead to more balanced and less alarmist forecasts.

Extending to both scholars and policymakers, there are any number of pressing security situations and intractable conflicts around the globe that would benefit from an ontological security-based evaluation. Examining the particular significance of Hong Kong to Beijing or the narratives driving hostilities in Kashmir from an ontological security perspective can deepen our understanding of these developing conflicts.<sup>155</sup> Likewise, such an approach may contribute to handling seemingly intransigent territorial disputes, like that over Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>156</sup> Regardless of the situation, discerning the exact motivations behind most any emerging, ongoing, or expected conflict could be improved through the application of ontological security.

In the policy realm alone, appreciating that the war in Donbas is motivated by and perpetuated by the desire for ontological security indicates the necessity of engaging in conflict resolution from a different angle. Typically, it is thought that the side with the greater capabilities in a conflict is more likely to win, which has led Western countries to provide materiel to Ukraine. However, in a war sustained by ontological security wherein neither side is necessarily seeking victory, achieving a lasting peace requires taking a novel approach. Thus, it is necessary to explore routine-making mechanisms, such as the various tools of transitional justice, and how they can be put to use in the context of Donbas. Only when the now-routinized practice of war is replaced with an equal, but peace-focused, structure will the hostilities come to a conclusive cessation. 📌

**Brendan Chrzanowski** is a project coordinator and lead researcher at the University of New Haven’s Center for Analytics. He holds a B.S. in National Security Studies and an M.S. in Global Affairs. He formerly served as a Seabee in the U.S. Navy in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

155 “Hong Kong Remains Crucially Important to Mainland China,” *The Economist*, Aug. 8, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2019/08/08/hong-kong-remains-crucially-important-to-mainland-china>; and “Kashmir: Why India and Pakistan Fight Over It,” *BBC News*, Aug. 8, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/10537286>.

156 Benyamin Poghosyan, “Is a New War in Karabakh Inevitable?” *New Eastern Europe*, Aug. 21, 2019, <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/08/21/is-a-new-war-in-karabakh-inevitable/>.

