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

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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.
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. 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. 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. Predictions of military adventurism on the part of Russia, comparable to that in Ukraine, became an increasingly common occurrence following the events of 2014. 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. Secondly, and more germane to the topic at hand, Ukraine plays a singular role in relation to Russia’s self-identity. 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.

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 comprehensive understanding of how 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 policies. 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.

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...
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 Yanukovych 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. Dissatisfied with this blatantly pro-Russian move — Russia had long opposed closer ties between Ukraine and the West — Ukrainians took to the streets. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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. 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
disputed — that would set the stage for the momentous geopolitical events that followed.29

The Annexation

So went the events of Maidan, or the Revolution of Dignity, as it later came to be known.20 Within a day of the killings, Yanukovych 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.21

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.22 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.23 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.”24

By March 1, 2014, Moscow’s “little green men” had seized installations throughout Crimea,25 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.26 Meanwhile, protests opposed to those taking place in Kyiv — known as the anti-Maidan movement — gained momentum in Ukraine’s southern and eastern regions.27 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.28 Russia formally annexed the Crimean peninsula on March 21, 2014, citing the aforementioned declaration of independence and referendum in its legislation.29 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.30 Although similar rhetoric was employed regarding the Donbas region, leading observers to

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 Crimea blogger referred to them as such.
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. 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. 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. 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.

Since then, the conflict has generated two, at best partially effective, ceasefire agreements, respectively known as Minsk I and Minsk II. 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. 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. 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.

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. Western governments and independent organisations agree with this assessment, with reports highlighting Russian involvement in the conflict.

References:
34. Fischer, "The Donbas Conflict."
researchers alike have, by now, extensively documented the provision of Russian materiel to Ukrainian separatists.40 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.41

However, providing material support is not that unusual. The United States provides lethal weapons to many foreign fighting forces, including those of Ukraine.42 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.43 From NATO confirmation to eyewitness testimony to independent corroborations, the presence of Russian military members fighting on the side of the separatists has been documented at length and in detail.44 The question that remains is what, exactly, drove the Kremlin to go to such lengths.45

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

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.44 Although analyses abound,45 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.48 Perhaps the most prevalent of the Ukraine-specific explanations involves NATO expansion and the threat that a change in...
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.”\(^5\) 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 mis-calculated the cost of invading Donbas. Taking into account a number of factors, ranging from lax penalties for the 2008 Georgian war to discord through-the-West world, Moscow may have simply underestimated the ramifications of its actions.\(^5\)

### 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,” comprises explanations that are rooted in Putin’s personality. Drawing on the outpouring of Putin-centric books and scholarship published in recent years,\(^6\) 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.\(^7\) 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 administrative role 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.\(^8\)

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,
The 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.”

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. 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, the conflict has never warranted such a characterization, due to Moscow’s perpetual involvement. 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. 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

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Russian president is by no means running a one-man show. Additionally, the elite class broadly supports Russian foreign policy decisions, and particularly when it comes to Ukraine, the general populace does as well. 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. Both of these points are in alignment with Eugene Rumer’s “Primakov Doctrine” thesis. Taken together, these four problems leave the theory that Putin’s personality is responsible for episodes such as the invasion of Donbas wanting.

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 divert attention would not have existed. Notably, leading up to the conflict, Putin was enjoying his highest approval ratings to date. Notably, leading up to the conflict, Putin was enjoying his highest approval ratings to date. 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. Indeed, the ineffectiveness of diversionary war, and the Kremlin’s penchant for eschewing it, remains as apparent as ever. 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.

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 concerned with the rise of China as it is with NATO expansion. This, of course, has not been the case. Though Russia and China have not engaged in any sort of formal alliance, they have become increasingly close in recent years. Second, realist explanations do not address Russia’s inconsistent projection of power — it formally annexed Crimea, but not other territories it has invaded. Third, there is the question of why Russia

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).
61 Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 231–32.
63 Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 234.
65 Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 235.
67 Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 235.
68 Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 240.
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.  

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. 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. Lang 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. 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.

Not long after Giddens introduced the sociological application of ontological security, the concept was adopted by a series of international relations scholars. 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 pertained to international relations. 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.” 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
An Episode of Existential Uncertainty: The Ontological Security Origins of the War in Donbas

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.79

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.”80 Departing from Mitzen, Steele insists that ontological security is, in fact, more important than physical security, as it “affirms ... [a state’s] physical existence.”81 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.82 In making his argument, Steele emphasizes that he employs ontological security not to explain the outcomes of specific decisions, but to “provide a more complete understanding.”83 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,84 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.85 As Steele notes, “All mainstream approaches to IR [international relations] ... assume some type of human emotion operating at the level of states.”86 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.”87 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.”88 In other words, “state agents seek to satisfy the self-identity needs of the states which they lead.”89 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.90

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.”91 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

80 Steele, Ontological Security, 2.
81 Steele, Ontological Security, 2.
82 Steele, Ontological Security, 3.
83 Steele, Ontological Security, 7–8.
86 Steele, Ontological Security, 16.
87 Steele, Ontological Security, 17.
88 Steele, Ontological Security, 15.
89 Steele, Ontological Security, 19.
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. 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 reimage Russia's place within the international system. Interestingly, the authors also allude to the cyclical nature of national-level Russian identity crises. 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.” 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.


96 Rumer, “The Primakov.”


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-other dialogue taking place within Russia. This strays from Mitzen’s ontological security theory wherein the focus is commonly on the routinized self-other relations between states. 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. 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. 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. Additionally, the Crimean Peninsula was swiftly and officially appropriated by the Russian state, which has not been the case with eastern Ukraine. 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.

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.

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.

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.
102 Gejl Pedersen, The Russian Quest, 43.
political elite perceive Ukraine as part of their country’s own identity.”

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 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 sovereignty, as the country is, to them, not its own, but Russia’s.

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. 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 Yanukovych 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. 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. 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. 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 legitimised by the need to protect the welfare of the whole ‘organism.’” 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 corruption of the Ukrainian government under Yanukovych and how this made it easier for Moscow to manipulate Ukraine. 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 Yanukovych 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.
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 Yanukovych, 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. 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. 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. 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.


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.121 Others liken the current Russian elites’ obsession with Ukraine to that of the early Soviet leadership.122 Still others reach back even further, marking the beginning of Ukraine’s importance to the mid-17th century.123 Regardless of the date, however, there is no doubt about Russia’s unparalleled and historic regard for Ukraine.124 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.125 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 living in Russia.126 The other most prevalent narrative is that “the Russian and Ukrainian peoples are practically one single people.”127 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.”128 More recently, Putin suggested that not only do the two countries constitute “one nation,” but that “some form of integration” between them is “inevitable.”129 This integration, Putin believes, would result in an unstoppable force.

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 reckoned with on the world stage.130

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 2020.131 During his infamous annexation of Crimea speech, Putin insisted that relations with Ukraine were of “foremost importance” to Russia.131 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.132

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.133 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.134 However, its ultimate worth likely goes well beyond any one attribute.135


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, 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.\(^{137}\)

Ontological security can also answer for the shortcomings of the “Geopolitical Explanations.”\(^{138}\) 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.\(^{139}\) 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

### Table 2: Ontological Security and the Russia Case

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

\(^{137}\) Marten, “Putin’s Choices,” 190.

\(^{138}\) Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 240–41.

Revolution, a Western-influenced, popular protest movement in Ukraine that focused its ire on Yanukovych.\footnote{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.} 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.\footnote{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.}

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.\footnote{Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 238.} 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.”\footnote{Götz, “Putin, the State, and War,” 238.} 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.\footnote{Riika 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.} 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.”\footnote{“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}

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 insecurity, which states seek to avoid.”\footnote{Mitzen “Ontological Security,” 343.} Thus, it is of considerable import to examine whether the war in Donbas has come to represent a means of identity-fulfiling 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.\footnote{Bahar Rumelili, Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2014).} 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.\footnote{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.} The war has allowed for a dramatic rise in nationalist tendencies throughout Ukraine, positioning Russia as the definitive enemy to Ukrainian
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 Western-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.

Conclusion

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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. Sev- ering the routine somewhat unexpectedly, the 2014 Maidan Revolution sent Russia into a fit of ontological insecurity. In response, Moscow acted out, seek- ing to preserve the routine it had come to require over the past several years. On the surface, the inva- sion 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 afore- mentioned weaknesses present in those explana- tions that cannot be dismissed out of hand.

Further drawing upon ontological security, the now protracted nature of the war in Ukraine sug- gests 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 consider- ation of potential military action in Russia’s “near abroad” will be better served by taking into account factors such as routinized relations and identi-

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 coun- tries to provide materiel to Ukraine. However, in a war sustained by ontological security wherein nei- ther 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 transi- tional justice, and how they can be put to use in the context of Donbas. Only when the now-routin- ized practice of war is replaced with an equal, but peace-focused, structure will the hostilities come to a conclusive cessation.

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