The Russo-Ukrainian War: Facts & Context

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Ukraine. Map: Vanyka-slovanyka / Wikipedia.

Ukraine within Europe. Disputed areas are in paler green. Map: Rob984, GrandEscogriffe and others/ Wikipedia.

RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR, PART 1

Intro to a series of posts on Putin, Ukraine, and Zelensky: questions, topics, caveats, sources.

When President Zelensky met with recently inaugurated POTUS Trump on 2/28/2025, it became clear that people were using Ukraine as a litmus test. If you were a Democrat, you wholeheartedly supported Zelensky. If you were a Republican, you approved of Trump's behavior.

As a historian, I really, truly hate being asked to make judgments without adequate facts and context. Daily news coverage wasn't giving me those, so I set out to teach myself about the Russo-Ukrainian War and what led to it. I'm sharing this set of posts for those who don't have a month to spare to do a deep dive on this topic. The main posts (Parts 2-4) are factual. I'll present my interpretations and opinions in Part 5.

QUESTIONS

Here's what I wanted to know when I set out to research the Russo-Ukrainian War.

• What's the historical context: the backstory of Ukraine and of its relationship with Russia? I'm especially curious whether, as neighbors, they have long-standing grudges that make it difficult to maintain the peace.

• What is the moral stature of the leader of Russia and the leader of Ukraine? I don't believe one can judge "the Russians" or "the Ukrainians" as collective nationalities, but their leaders can certainly be held accountable for their actions and for the principles they seem to be operating on.

• Who's responsible for the current war? Is it as simple as who invaded whom? I've heard some say, for example, that Putin only invaded because Ukraine was moving to join NATO, so really, the war is Ukraine's fault. Closely related issue: Should Ukraine be allowed to join NATO? Some say that might well lead to nuclear war. On the other hand, Putin tends to retreat when an American president is clearly willing to hold his ground. Is it worth continuing to resist, in hopes Putin will cave?

• Does the US have skin in this game? For example, is the stability of the region important to us? Do we have important allies there? Do we have long-term strategic goals in the area? Does helping either side serve the principles on which the US was founded?

If we do have skin in the game, to what extent should we get involved: money, weapons, advisors, troops, humanitarian aid?

SECTIONS OF THIS REPORT

As I was doing the research, what I thought would be a single report morphed into five separate parts.

1. Introduction: the questions I'm attempting to answer.

2. Putin: a look at his actions over the past quarter century, as context for the invasion of Ukraine.

3. Ukraine's geography, people, and history, including sections on Crimea and Donbas, with an account of the Russo-Ukrainian War through March 2025.

4. Zelensky: his background and his actions as leader of Ukraine since 2019.

5. Conclusion: answers to the questions set out in the introduction.

These sections are mostly stand-alone, but I've included cross references among the reports when it's useful for context.

CAVEATS

• Repeating what I said in the second paragraph: I've aimed to keep the sections on Putin, Ukraine, and Zelensky factual, restricting my opinions to the conclusion. However, any good writer (and I'm a very good writer!) can slant a presentation of facts by omission or juxtaposition. I've aimed to give you enough names, dates, and specifics that you can investigate further if you think something's skewed.

• These posts are intended as broad, informational purposes on a current hot topic. But a month is about as long as I'm willing to spend on this topic, so I can't promise there are no errors. If I were publishing these posts in book form, I'd spend a lot more time double- and triple-checking, and I'd also delve into primary sources. If you do notice errors, feel free to contact me via Substack.

SOURCES

I'd never used AI as a research tool before, and I still don't let it dictate my opinions. But I have to admit Grok made it much easier to track down specific events and statistics - for example, the strategic importance of South Ossetia and the number of miles of pipeline built in Ukraine during the Soviet era.

Maps and most other images are from Wikipedia.

RUSSO·UKRAINIAN WAR, PART 2

A look at Putin's 25-year career as leader of Russia..

1. OVERVIEW OF PUTIN'S LIFE & CAREER
- Born 1952, Leningrad
- Russian intelligence officer 1975-1991
- Prime minister of Russia 1999, 2008-2012
- President of Russia 1999-2008, 2012-present
-

In this report: Putin's domestic policy (see §4), his foreign-policy goals (see §6.0), where he has intervened militarily (including maps, strategic importance, and timeline for each) (see §6.1-6.11), and cyberwarfare and cybercrime (see §7). The final section – because Putin and Zelensky are often compared – is a quick look at the worst that can be said about Putin.

2. CHILDHOOD & EARLY CAREER
Putin was born in 1952 in Leningrad, USSR (now St. Petersburg, Russia). He took a law degree from Leningrad State University in 1975. From there he went to the KGB, the USSR's notorious secret service. He retired in 1991 as a lieutenant colonel. From 1991-1996, he served as head of external relations for the mayor of St. Petersburg.

3. BEGINNING OF PUTIN'S POLITICAL CAREER
- 1997: Putin was recruited into the administration of Boris Yeltsin, President of the Russian Federation.
- 1998: Yeltsin appointed Putin head of the FSB, successor to the KGB.
- 1999: Yeltsin appointed Putin prime minister.
- 1999 (Dec. 31): When Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned (at a mere 68 years old), he named Putin acting president.

In 1999, Putin was virtually unknown. After the Second Chechen War (see §6.2), he came to be consid-

ered a successful, no-nonsense leader.

Because I'm mostly interested in the Russo-Ukrainian War, foreign policy is going to be the focus of most of this paper. Several aspects of domestic policy are relevant to Putin's actions abroad: we'll look at those first.

NOTE: Since Putin's election in 1999, Russian policy at home and abroad has basically been "whatever Putin wants". That could change, of course, but for now, saying "Putin does XYZ" is interchangeable with saying "Russia does XYZ."

4. DOMESTIC POLICY

4.1 Oligarchs

After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, state-run industries were privatized. A handful of oligarchs suddenly controlled oil and gas, metals and mining, banking, media, and manufacturing. When Putin came to power, he reinstituted highly centralized control within Russia. By some estimates, the state now controls about 70% of Russia's economy.

Although the oligarchs are still enormously wealthy, they're now required to be personally loyal to Putin and to refrain from politics.

4.2 Pipelines

Russia has huge reserves of oil in Siberia and the Urals. But when the USSR collapsed, it had only a single major oil pipeline, the Druzhba, which was constructed 1960-1964 and runs from Samara (near Kazakhstan) to Eastern Europe.

Putin ordered construction of many more pipelines, including major ones running from Kazakhstan to the Black Sea (1999-2001); from north of Moscow to the Baltic (ca. 2000-2012); and from eastern Siberia to China, Japan, and South Korea (2006-2011). See map here.

Oil and natural gas sales bring in 50-60% of Russia's total export income, as of 2024-2025. Putin raked in profits as the price per barrel of oil jumped from about $15 in 1999 to a peak of $110 in 2012. By the time Russia invaded Ukraine, the price dropped to about $65. Russia makes (or loses) about $2 billion for every $1 rise (or drop) in the price per barrel of oil.

Before Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Europe imported roughly 30% of its crude oil from Russia. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU banned seaborne oil imports from Russia. Today the Europe imports only 2-3% of its oil from Russia, although the Druzhba pipeline still supplies some Eastern European countries (Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic).

4.3 Elections

Putin was elected president of Russia in 1999 and re-elected in 2004. The Russian constitution prohibited anyone from serving more than two consecutive terms as president, so from 2008-2012, Putin served as prime minister under President Dmitry Medvedev. During those four years, most observers still considered Putin to be the power in the Kremlin.

While Putin was prime minister, the term limits were changed. He was elected president in 2012, 2018, and 2024. Under current law (subject to change without much notice), he could potentially serve until 2036.

The term coined by Western observers for Putin's system of government is the nicely vague "managed democracy". Democratic institutions and elections exist, but Putin can easily suppress dissent, and outcomes are always predetermined. Opponents are routinely prevented from running against him. Sometimes they die mysteriously (as Alexei Navalny) or violently (as Boris Nemtsov). The Russian state-run media unflaggingly promotes Putin.

In 2024, Putin won 87.28% of the vote against 3 token candidates. There was no independent monitoring of elections. Ballot-stuffing and voter coercion were reportedly common. Parliament and the judiciary obey Putin's orders.

In 2024, Freedom House gave Russia a score of 12 out of 100 for freedom. That puts it at the level of China and Iran—better than North Korea at 2, but far worse than highest-ranking Finland, at 70, or even the US, at 64.

Putin is Russia's longest-serving leader since Stalin, who was in power 1929-1953. In 2007, *Time* magazine named Putin Person of the Year, stating that he had the most significant impact on global events that year—for better or worse.

5. UPGRADING THE MILITARY

When he came into power in 1999, one of Putin's top priorities was modernizing the Russian military. First he increased defense spending, stressing the need for protection against internal threats such as the Chechens (see §6.2) and external threats such as NATO (see §6.3.3). Military spending increased as the price of oil skyrocketed (see §4.2). The rearmament program announced in 2010 aimed to replace 70% of Soviet-era equipment within a decade. By 2015-2016, defense spending was 4.5-5% of GDP.

If you've bought a trillion-dollar hammer, a lot of

things begin to look like nails.

Putin has often carried out military operations in the Middle East, Africa, and the "near abroad" with a "hybrid model" (see §6.0.1). Using mercenaries such as the Wagner Group (see §6.4.3) rather than regular Russian troops keeps costs down and allows Putin some deniability.

6. FOREIGN POLICY

6.0 Putin's overarching foreign policy goals

Judging from Putin's actions in the past quarter century, he has two primary aims in foreign policy.

6.0.1 "Near abroad": stopping the growth of EU & NATO

Putin is determined to prevent Western influence in Russia's immediate vicinity, the "near abroad". The "near abroad" is the former territory of the USSR (Russia and the other 14 Soviet Socialist Republics). More broadly, the "near abroad" includes any European country bordering Russia (Norway, Finland, Poland).

For Putin, "Western influence" means membership in the EU and/or NATO. He considers membership in the EU a mere prelude to membership in NATO. And indeed, 21 of 27 members of the EU are also members of NATO.

The USSR's method of preventing Western influence was to march troops into a country that seemed to be leaning westward. That required massive amounts of troops and funding. Putin has developed a much more efficient means of thwarting EU and NATO membership: he supports separatists who wish to secede from that country. The continuing unrest is enough to prevent acceptance into the EU or NATO.

Why? Per the Copenhagen Criteria (1993), candidates for EU membership must have stable institutions, a functioning market economy, and the ability to implement EU laws and policies. An ongoing insurrection makes it difficult for a nation to qualify.

NATO's charter forbids it to allow any new member who's experiencing a "frozen conflict", for fear NATO will be dragged into an ongoing war. To prevent NATO members in the "near abroad", Putin has (as of early 2025) sent troops to Moldova, Chechnya, Georgia, Crimea, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. (See §6.1., 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.8, 6.10, 6.11.) None of these has joined NATO. A little chaos goes a long way.

The pretense for Putin's support of separatists is usually the need to protect "ethnic Russians" or "Russian compatriots" in those territories. These terms are deliberately left ambiguous. Depending on Putin's needs of the moment, they can refer to:
- People who speak Russian as their first language.
- People who are Russian under a citizenship law that says: if your grandparents were Russian and Russian is your native language, you can get a Russian passport. Many residents of the "near abroad" hedge their bets by applying for Russian passports.
- People tied historically, culturally, or linguistically to Russia.

6.0.2 Middle East & Africa: influence and wealth

Beginning in the 1950s, the USSR made an effort to cultivate allies in the Middle East and Africa, in order to counterbalance the influence of the US and EU in those regions. The USSR ostensibly sought to spread Communist ideology. Military advantages such as missiles in Cuba and a naval base in Syria (see §6.5) were bonuses.

Putin has a more concrete goal. Under his rule, Russia has become the most heavily sanctioned nation on earth, particularly in the economic realm. (In the Ukraine report, see §7.3-7.4 and 10.4.1.) Putin intervenes in countries that have diamonds, gold, and oil: valuable natural resources that are easy to sell untraceably. Russia is among the top five producers of gold, diamonds, and oil worldwide, but gaining access to them from other nations allows Putin to circumvent international financial sanctions. Putin has gained access to such resources from interventions in the Central African Republic, Libya, and Mali (see §6.6, 6.7, and 6.9)

Next up: the most notable of Putin's foreign interventions, in chronological order. Each one has maps, notes on strategic importance, a timeline of events, and a note on the status of Russian involvement in

2025.

6.1 Transnistria, Moldova, 1992-present
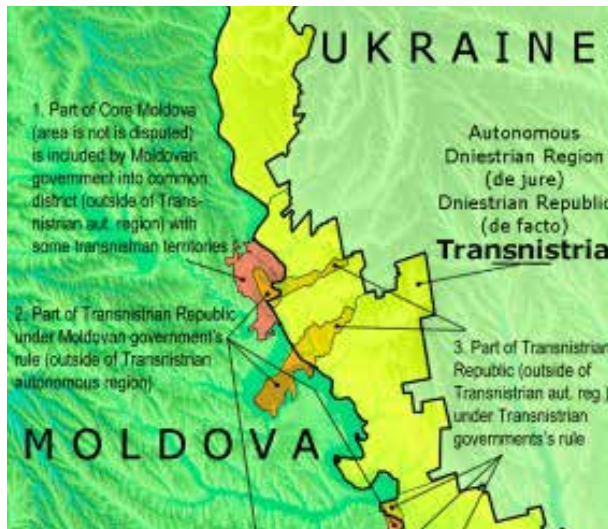
Transnistria. Maps: TUBS; Spiridon Ion Cepleanu;

6.1.1 Strategic importance of Transnistria

• Transnistria is a buffer between Moldova, which is cozying up to NATO, and Ukraine, which Putin insists must never join NATO.

• Transnistria is a convenient staging area for attacks on western Ukraine, including Odesa, a major port on the Black Sea.

• The Cobasna arms stockpile (dating from the last decades of the USSR) is one of Europe's largest, very convenient for attacks on Ukraine. It is manned by Russian troops.

6.1.2 Timeline

Transnistria ("beyond the Dniester River") is a relatively flat region along Moldova's 250-mile border with western Ukraine. Its population is about 60% Slavic (Russian and Ukrainian) and 30% Moldovan. Moldovans are predominantly Romanian, a non-Slavic people.

• 1992: Separatists in Transnistria established a breakaway state unrecognized by most other nations except Russia. In this case Russian support for separatists began before Putin's presidency, but he has continued it on the grounds that he's protecting ethnic Russians, who are about a third of Transnistria's population. (See §6.0.1.)

• 1994-2014: Moldova's constitution requires that it be neutral, but it became a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1994, and an Enhanced Opportunities Partner in 2014.

• 2022: Moldova applied for admission to the EU at the same time as Georgia and Ukraine did—right after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (See § 6.11.)

• 2025: The unsettled state of Transnistria hampers its accession to the EU. Putin currently has about 1,500-2,000 troops stationed in Transnistria. Until 1/1/2025, Russia subsidized Transnistria's government

by providing free natural gas.

6.2 Chechnya, 1999-2000

Chechnya within Europe, and with its neighbors. Maps: Danloud & no credit / Wikipedia (with added labels).

6.2.1 Strategic importance of Chechnya

• Chechnya is in the North Caucasus Mountains, which form a natural barrier protecting its 200-mile border with Russia. Its mountain passes were once part of the Silk Road. Control of them gives access to Georgia, and from there to the Middle East.

• In the USSR era, Chechnya was part of the Russian Federation, not one of the supposedly independent SSRs. Putin doesn't consider it the "near abroad": it's part of Russia.

• Chechnya has a 50-mile border with Georgia, which aims to join NATO.

• During the 1990s, Chechen fighters allied with global jihadists. For Putin, controlling Chechnya

means being able to control the terrorists—at least more than he could if Chechnya were independent.

6.2.2 Timeline

Islam was introduced to Chechnya by the Mongols in the 13th century. It is now predominantly Muslim.

In 1858, the Chechens were conquered by the Russians. The two never had a happy relationship. In 1944, Stalin accused the Chechens of collaborating with the Nazis. He deported half a million Chechens, of whom about 20-30% died en route to exile. When the Chechens were allowed to return, beginning in 1957, they found their homes occupied by others. Decades after Stalin's death, the memory of those deportations is still vivid.

• 1994-1996: First Chechen War. In the chaos following the dissolution of the USSR, Chechens declared their independence. Russia (under Yeltsin) sent in troops that were mostly conscripted, and had been issued long-outdated Soviet equipment. After 50,000-100,000 deaths, Russia was humiliated and Chechnya became de facto independent, although legally still part of Russia.

• 1999 (Aug. 7): Second Chechen War broke out after landlocked Chechnya invaded the neighboring province of Dagestan, which has a long coast on the Caspian Sea.

• 1999 (Aug. 9): Yeltsin named Putin prime minister.

• 1999 (Sept.): The war was escalated by a series of bombings in apartment complexes in Moscow and elsewhere that killed about 300 people and injured hundreds more. Some claimed that the bombings were a false-flag operation, the work not of Chechens but of the FSB (successor to the KGB), which Putin led as recently as 1998. (See §3.) Putin billed the Chechen war as an anti-terrorist campaign rather than the suppression of a rebellion.

• 1999 (Oct.): The September bombings were used to justify an invasion of Chechnya. Putin's role in the Second Chechen War transformed Russians' perceptions of him from an obscure bureaucrat who had never held an elected office, into a powerful leader capable of protecting Mother Russia. During this war the Russians, led by Putin, were better prepared, and considerably more ruthless.

• 2000 (Mar. 31): Last major combat in Second Chechen War. Attacks such as suicide bombings continued for some years.

• 2000 (Mar. 26): Putin was voted in as president. He was inaugurated 5/7/2000.

• 2025: Chechnya is governed by Ramzan Kadyrov,

who is backed by the Kremlin. A few thousand Russian troops are probably still in place.

6.3 Russo-Georgian War, Aug. 2008

Georgia within Europe. Map: www.armenica.org / Wikipedia.

Georgia within Europe, and Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Map: Nordwestern & Ssolbergj / Wikipedia (added: Chechnya).

Georgia, one of 15 former republics (SSRs) of the USSR, is located between the Black and Caspian Seas, just south of the Caucasus Mountains. Georgia shares a border with Chechnya. (See §6.2.) It also shares a border more than 500 miles long with Russia, making it one of Putin's areas of concern in the "near abroad". Less than 1% of the population is ethnic Russian.

Along the Russo-Georgian border are South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which have been trying to secede from Georgia almost since the dissolution of the USSR. Russia has supported them in that attempt. South Ossetia (capital Tskhinvali), with a population of about 56,000, has (no surprise!) strong ethnic ties with North Ossetia, just across the Russian border. The Ossetians are of Iranic ethnicity. The dominant ethnicity in Abkhazia is Abkhaz (50%), descended from a group in the south Caucasus Mountains. In other words: neither South Ossetia nor Abkhazia is predominantly of Russian heritage.

### 6.3.1 Strategic importance of Abkhazia & South Ossetia

- Abkhazia has a shoreline on the Black Sea. Russia announced in 2023 that it will build a naval base there.
- South Ossetia and North Ossetia (in Russia) are connected by the Roki Tunnel (2.3 miles long), a key route through the Caucasus for trade and military operations.
- South Ossetia's border is only about 30 miles from Tbilisi, Georgia's capital.
- Georgia has a 50-mile border with Chechnya. Preventing Georgia from joining NATO also helps box in Chechnya.
- "Frozen conflict" within Georgia prevents it from moving forward with NATO or EU membership.

6.3.2 Timeline

- 1991: Fighting broke out between Georgians and ethnic Ossetians. South Ossetia has been attempting to secede from Georgia for most of the years since then.
- 1993: Abkhazia (capital Sukhumi) declared its independence from Georgia and became de facto autonomous.
- 1994: Georgia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program.
- 2003: With the Rose Revolution, Georgia (under Mikheil Saakashvili) began to turn to the West, seeking to become a member of the EU and NATO.
- 2004: Georgia adopted an individual Partnership Action Plan to bring the nation into line with NATO standards.
- 2008 (Aug. 1): After bombings by Ossetians, Georgia retaliated with strikes against South Ossetia.
- 2008 (Aug. 8): Putin, on grounds that he was protecting Russian citizens, deployed over 100,000 troops, who routed Georgian forces in 5 days.
- 2008 (Aug. 26): Russia formally recognized the independence of Abkhazia, as did Russian allies Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, and Syria. The rest of the world still considers South Ossetia and Abkhazia (which comprise about 20% of Georgia's territory) to be part of Georgia.
- South Ossetia has declared its intention of joining Russia, but has not had a referendum on the subject.
- As of 2025, Russia keeps about 4,500-5,000 troops in Abkhazia, another 3,500 in South Ossetia. About 80% of South Ossetia's budget comes from Russia, and perhaps 30-50% of Abkhazia's.

Georgia is as close to a NATO member as is possible for a non-member to be: it hosts joint NATO exercises and contributes troops to NATO missions. However, the unresolved status of South Ossetia makes Georgia a "frozen conflict" zone. As such it is ineligible for

admission to NATO. (See §6.0.1.) NATO has set no timeline for Georgia's admission to the alliance.

6.3.3 NATO status of former SSRs and Warsaw Pact countries by 2025
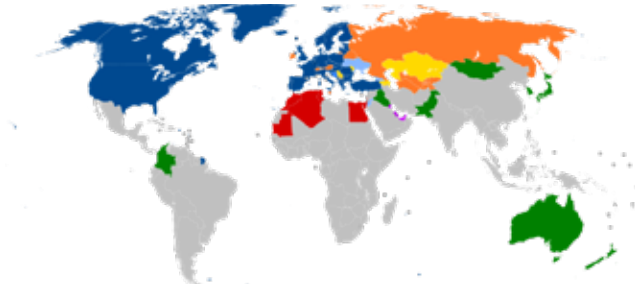
NATO members and associates. Navy blue = member state, medium blue = accession protocol signed, light blue = candidate. Dark green = NATO global partner (an ally but not a member). Yellow: Individual Partnership Action Plan. Orange: Partnership for Peace. Red: Mediterranean Dialogue.
Map: Wikipedia.

The 15 Soviet Socialist Republics that comprised the USSR were Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

The eight members of the Warsaw Pact, established in 1955 as a reaction to NATO, were the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania.

By 2008, all the former Warsaw Pact countries had joined NATO, as had several of the 15 SSRs.
- 1990: East Germany, after reunification with West Germany
- 1999: Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary
- 2004: Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia (split from Czechoslovakia in 1993). Former SSRs Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania also joined NATO in 2004.
- 2009: Albania
- Aspiring members as of 2025: Bosnia and Herzegovina (part of former Yugoslavia), Georgia, Ukraine

All members of NATO are included in Article 5 of NATO's original charter (1949), which states:

> an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.

But aside from full membership, there are other ways to be associated with NATO. In 1994, NATO launched the Partnership for Peace program, whose aim is to create trust and cooperation between the member states of NATO and other (mostly European) states. To date, the Partners include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Serbia (part of former Yugoslavia), Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Even Russia joined the Partners for Peace in 1994 - but its membership was suspended after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

NATO also has an Enhanced Opportunities Partnership, which involves high-level cooperation. Currently this includes Ukraine, Georgia, Jordan, and Australi.

Summarizing: by 2009, of the fifteen SSRs and eight Warsaw Pact countries, only Russia and Belarus have

no active ties of any sort with NATO.

6.4 Crimea, 2014-present

Crimea within Europe; detail of Crimea. Maps: The Emirr, Spesh53; and Vankya-Slovankya / Wikipedia.

6.4.1 Strategic importance of Crimea

NOTE: This section also appears as §6 in the Ukraine report.

• Russia's Black Sea Fleet (its largest concentration of ships) is headquartered in Sevastopol. This is Russia's most important warm-water naval base anywhere in the world, despite the fact that it has no direct access to major oceans. (See §6.4.4 on Russian naval bases.)

• Kerch Strait and Kerch Bridge, at the east of Crimea, are vital for control of the Sea of Azov. Russian control of that area makes it easier to supply its troops in Crimea, and makes Ukraine more vulnerable.

• Missiles launched from Crimea can easily reach the port of Odesa and other areas of Ukraine.

• Crimea was Ukraine's main port, with 70% of Ukraine's coastline. Its loss meant a drop in Ukraine's exports by sea.

• The Black Sea off Crimea has significant gas and oil deposits.

6.4.2 Timeline

NOTE: For more details, see §6 in the Ukraine report. In brief:

• 2014 (Feb. 26-27): Armed men without insignia (the Wagner Group, see §6.4.3) surround the major airports in Crimea and occupy the Crimean parliament building. Putin moves troops into the area.

• 2014 (Mar. 16): In a referendum (with some irregularities), 97% of Crimeans vote to join Russia.

• 2014 (Mar. 18): Putin signs treaty incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation, and Russian troops take over bases in Crimea.

6.4.3 Wagner Group

Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group was part of Russia's "hybrid warfare" policy: ensuring plausible deniability by using mercenaries rather than Russian troops. Wagner first appeared in Crimea in 2014, as masked men in unmarked gear fighting with Russian weapons. After Crimea was annexed by Russia, Wagner was deployed in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

NOTE: For more on the Wagner Group, see the Ukraine report §6.3 & 7.

6.4.4 Note on Russian naval bases worldwide

Russia's coastline is about 24,400 miles long, but only a few of its ports are free of ice for all or a significant part of the year.

1. Murmansk, inside the Arctic Circle at the north end of Finland and Sweden. It is kept above freezing most of the year due to the North Atlantic Current, an extension of the Gulf Stream. To reach the Atlantic, however, ships from Murmansk must pass Skagerrak Strait (flanked by NATO members Denmark and Norway), and then the GIUK (Greenland/Iceland/UK) gap in the North Sea (flanked by NATO members Britain, Denmark, and Iceland).

2. Vladivostok, on the Pacific near the Chinese border, is ice-locked for 4 months a year. Access to the Pacific is restricted by the need to pass through the Sea of Japan, whose exits are monitored by US allies Japan and South Korea.

3. Sevastopol in Crimea, annexed by Russia from Ukraine in 2014, is open all year long. (See §6.4.1.) To reach the Mediterranean from Crimea, ships must sail through the Bosporus, which is under the jurisdiction of long-time NATO member Turkey. Turkey only allows a limited number of Russian ships to make the transit, and it could halt all transits if war broke out. After entering the Mediterranean, Russian ships still have either to reach the Atlantic via Gibraltar (with NATO member Spain on the north, and NATO partner Morocco on the south), or to reach the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal (in the jurisdiction of Egypt, a NATO ally).

4. Novorossiysk, a smaller port on the Black Sea, is also subject to Turkey's control of the Bosporus.

5. Tartus, on the Mediterranean, is leased from Syria. It is open year round and has unimpeded access to the Mediterranean. Tartus has limited supply and replenishment facilities, but it saves Russian ships having to return all the way to the Black Sea. But Russian ships sailing from Tartus to the Atlantic or Indian Oceans are subject to the same restrictions as those from Crimea, at Gibraltar and the Suez.

6.5 Syria, 2015-2016

Syria and the eastern Mediterranean; Syria detail. Maps: TUBS & Ras67 / Wikipedia.

6.5.1 Strategic importance of Syria

- An alliance with Syria gives Russia a say in what happens in the Middle East.

- Russia leases naval facilities at Tartus, on the Mediterranean coast just east of Cyprus. (See §6.4.4.)

6.5.2 Timeline

- 1955: USSR allied with Syria against Israel, which was supported by the US. This began a long-standing Russian policy of not allowing the West (especially the US) to have unchallenged dominance in the Middle East.

- 1971: Syria granted the USSR access to a naval base at Tartus.

- 2000: Bashar al-Assad came to power in Syria. Putin soon became his staunch ally.

- 2011 (Mar. 15): Syrian Civil War broke out, following protests that were part of the Arab Spring. Assad and the Syrian government, with allies Iran and Hezbollah, were pitted against several Syrian rebel factions, ISIS (a militant Sunni Islamist group), and the Kurds (an ethnic group that dominates politics and the military in the northeast). Putin sold Assad military equipment.

- 2014 (Sept.): An international coalition that included the US, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia formed to oppose ISIS, mostly by air strikes.

- 2015 (Sept.): To prevent Assad's regime from crumbling, Russian Aerospace Forces and the Russian navy launched airstrikes and missiles. Although some of the attacks were against ISIS (hence Putin touted this as an anti-terrorism campaign), others were aimed at anti-Assad rebels such as the Free Syrian Army.

- 2015 (Oct.?): About 2,500 members of the Wagner Group (see §6.4.3) were sent to Syria, along with some 3,000-4,000 Russian military advisors, marines, and members of the Spetsnaz (special forces).
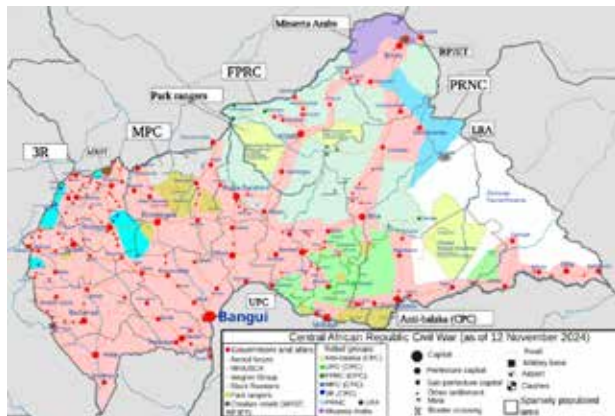
- 2017: Syria and Russia signed a 49-year lease on the Tartus naval base.

- 2018: Assad controlled most of Syria.

- 2024 (Dec. 8): Assad was overthrown by a coalition of rebel groups led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS),

which is an Islamist group. Assad was granted asylum in Russia.

6.6 Central African Republic (CAR), 2018-present

Central African Republic, location in Africa and current war. Maps: Alvaro1984 18 & : Borysk5 / Wikipedia.

6.6.1 Strategic importance of CAR

• Central location in Africa, bordering Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Republic of the Congo, and Cameroon.

• Natural resources: CAR has massive amounts of gold, diamonds, and uranium.

• Role in a politically volatile region: rebel soldiers, weapons, and refugees move through CAR to its neighbors. Chad, Sudan, and Rwanda have backed factions in CAR's civil wars.

6.6.2 Timeline

• 1960: Ubangi-Shari, a French colony, gained independence as the Central African Republic (capital Bangui).

• 2012: Violent civil war broke out, which still continues. There are bitter divisions over religion (Muslim vs. Christian), over ethnicity (various tribes), and between nomadic herders and farmers. All are driven by a desire to have power in the government, and to control the gold and diamond mines that are one of CAR's few sources of wealth.

• 2015: President Faustin-Archange Touadéra came to power.

• 2018: At Touadéra's invitation, Putin dispatched members of the Wagner Group (see §6.4.3) to CAR, to provide security and to train CAR troops. As payment, Russian companies linked to Putin and Wagner Group received concessions for exploration and extraction of gold and diamonds, including at the Ndassima gold mine, CAR's largest. Sale of gold and diamonds mined abroad allow Putin to evade international banking sanctions—effectively serving as money laundering. (See §6.0.2.)

• 2020 & 2023: Touadéra was reelected, in elections that were condemned as fraudulent. As of 2023, his forces held only about 29% of CAR territory.

- 2025: About 1,000-2,000 members of the Wagner Group (now Africa Group) are stationed in CAR.

6.7 Libya, 2019-present

Libya within Africa and Libya detail. Maps: M.Bitton & CIA / Wikipedia.

6.7.1 Strategic importance

- Libya has an 1,100-mile Mediterranean coast, with all that implies for engaging in or hampering shipping in the Mediterranean. (In the 16th-19th centuries, Libya was a notorious haven for pirates.) For Putin, a naval base on the south side of the Mediterranean would add an option to the Tartus base in Syria and the Sebastopol base in Crimea. (See §6.4.4.)
- Through Libya, one can reach sub-Saharan Africa. It gives a foothold for Wagner Group to make excur-

sions into CAR and other central African states. (See §6.4.3.)
- Libya is less than 200 miles from Italy. Many African emigrants cross to Europe from Libya.
- Libya has the largest proven oil reserves in Africa, and the ninth largest globally. Libyan oil feeds Europe via tankers and pipelines, making it an alternative to oil shipped from the turbulent Middle East. Libya also has significant gas reserves. If Russia had a share in the oil, then—as with gold and diamonds (§6.6.2)—it could use sales to circumvent Western economic sanctions.
- Jihadist groups in Libya export terrorism to neighboring states.

6.7.2 Timeline

- 1969 (Sept. 1): Muammar Gaddafi came to power via a military coup.
- 1970-1991: Libya was a client-state of the USSR.
- 2011: Gaddafi was executed by rebels during the Arab Spring.
- 2012 (Sept. 11-12): Benghazi attack. In the chaos following Gaddafi's death, Islamic jihadists murdered the US ambassador to Libya and three other Americans. POTUS Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were accused of covering up security lapses at the US compounds.
- 2014: Libya had two rival governments: the Government of National Accord (GNA), recognized by the UN as the legitimate government of Libya; and the House of Representatives, aligned with the Libyan National Army (LNA). The LNA was led by Khalifa Haftar, a former Gaddafi general who was trained in the USSR.
- 2016-2018: Haftar's LNA fought for and ultimately gained control of oilfields and the oil terminals of Sidra and Ras Lanuf.
- 2018-2020: To aid Haftar, Putin dispatched Sukhoi jets and Wagner Group mercenaries (see §6.4.3) to Libya.
- 2019 (Apr. 4): The LNA attacked Tripoli (Libya's capital), attempting to overthrow the GNA and gain control of the Central Bank and Libyan oil revenues. This soon became a proxy war, with Turkey supplying drones and troops for the GNA, and Russia, Egypt, and the UAE backing Haftar.
- 2020 (Oct. 23): The LNA was driven back and signed a ceasefire.

• 2025: A small number of Wagner troops (1,800-2,000?) are still stationed in eastern Libya.

6.8 Belarus, 2020-present
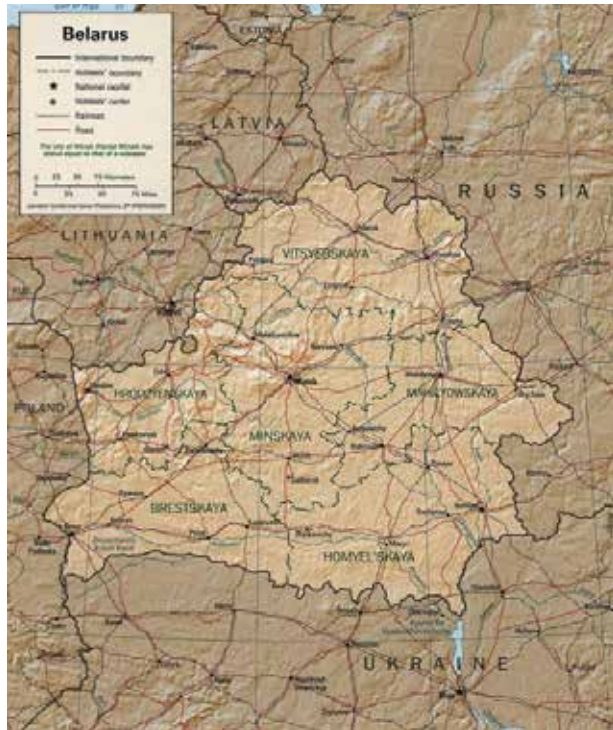
Belarus in Europe; Belarus detail. Map: theEmirr & CIA / Wikipedia.

6.8.1 Strategic importance of Belarus

• Belarus is bordered by Russia to the east and northeast, and Ukraine to the south. Belarus serves as a buffer for Russia from NATO members to the west and north: Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.

• Belarus's plains have historically been a pathway for invasion (Napoleon, Hitler) as well as a trade conduit (currently a railroad hub).

• The Druzhba and Yamal-Europe pipelines carry Russian gas through Belarus to Europe. Belarus earns transit fees.

• Belarus's 700-mile border with Ukraine made it a convenient staging ground for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russia's 2022 attack on Kyiv (see §6.11.2) was launched from Belarus, whose southern border is about 50 miles from Kyiv.

6.8.2 Timeline

• 1991 (Aug. 25): Belarus became independent.

• 1994: Alexander Lukashenko was elected Belarus's first president. He has been serving as president ever since. None of the subsequent elections have been rated free and fair by outside observers. Under Lukashenko's leadership, the state still owns most key industries in Belarus.

• 1999 (Dec. 8): Belarus joined with Russia to form the Union State of Russia and Belarus, making it Russia's nearest and dearest ally.

• 2020: Presidential election resulted in massive anti-government protests. Putin didn't deploy troops

to Belarus, but provided financial, political, and security support to Lukashenko.

6.9 Mali, 2021-present

Mali within Africa and in detail. Map: United Nations / Wikipedia.

6.9.1 Strategic importance of Mali

• Mali (twice the size of Texas, capital Bamaka) borders 7 African countries. Although it is 80% desert, it is a crossroads for trade routes through the Sahel, the semi-arid belt that stretches across Africa just south of the Sahara Desert. These routes are also used by Africans emigrating from Algeria or Libya to Italy and the rest of Europe.

• Mali's location means that its civil wars and jihadists often spill over into neighboring countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso.

• Mali is Africa's fourth-largest producer of gold, which provides half its export revenue. In the north are unexploited uranium deposits.

6.9.2 Timeline

• 1960: Mali, formerly part of French Sudan, became independent.

• 1960s: Mali accepted arms and advisors from the USSR.

• 1968: Moussa Traoré became president in a military coup. He led a single-party state for the next 23 years.

• 1980s: Support from the USSR tapered off as the Afghanistan war drained funds. Mali turned for support to western institutions such as the International Monetary Fund.

• 1991 (Mar. 22-26): March Revolution. After 31 years of one-party rule, Moussa Traoré was overthrown. Mali became a multi-party state.

• 2012: Fighting broke out between numerous rebel factions who variously sought autonomy for certain ethnic groups, the imposition of Islamic law, or national unity.

• 2014: The French began Operation Barkhane, sending 5,000 troops to maintain the peace against Islamic jihadists in Mali.

• 2021 (May 24): Colonel Assimi Goïta came to power via a coup.

• 2021 (Dec.): At Putin's orders, the Wagner Group (see §6.4.3) deployed more than 1,000 troops to Mali to provide security and train troops. Russia also supplied helicopters and weapons. In return, Russian companies were given permission to mine gold, whose sale abroad helps Putin evade Western banking sanctions imposed after the Crimea and Ukraine invasions in 2014 and 2022. Putin calls Russia's efforts in Mali an effort to contain NATO's imperialism.

• 2022 (Aug. 15): French troops left Mali.

• 2025: About 1,000 members of Wagner Group, now

known as Africa Corps (see Ukraine report §10.3), remain in Mali.

6.10 Kazakhstan, 2022

Kazakhstan in Asia, and in detail. Maps: TUBS & CIA / Wikipedia.

6.10.1 Strategic importance of Kazakhstan

• Kazakhstan is the world's ninth-largest country, larger than all the countries of Western Europe combined.

• Kazakhstan's borders touch Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. It is a crossroads for routes to and from Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

• Kazakhstan's border with Russia, to its north, is 4,750 miles long. Its size makes it a great buffer for Russia; in enemy hands, it would be an equally huge threat.

• Kazakhstan's 900-mile coast on the Caspian Sea gives easy access to other nations on the Caspian (Russia, Turkmenistan, Iran, Azerbaijan) and to the enormous oil reserves under the Caspian.

• Kazakhstan has tremendous gas and oil reserves, ranking twelfth in production worldwide. It is the world's top producer of uranium (43% of global supply in 2022), critical for weapons and nuclear power. Kazakhstan also has significant supplies of minerals and rare earth elements.

• Khorgos, just across the Chinese border from Kazakhstan, has been since 2010 a cornerstone of China's Belt and Road Initiative (a.k.a. the "new Silk Road"), a multi-trillion-dollar project to extend China's trade (and other) power via roads, railways, and pipelines.

6.10.2 Timeline

• 1992: Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was established, a NATO-like group of (currently) 6 nations. Russia supplies 90% of the manpower and funding. The CSTO is considered a tool for Putin.

• 2022 (Jan.): Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's rule was threatened by protests against corruption and economic hardship. Putin sent 2,500 troops, under the auspices of the CSTO. The protests were quickly crushed, and Russian troops were recalled.

• 2025: Kazakhstan's foreign policy is "multi-vector"—it maintains ties with Russia, but also has rela-

tions with China, the US, and the EU.

6.11 Ukraine, 2022-present

Ukraine in Europe (occupied areas in paler green) and Ukraine in detail. Maps: Rob984, GrandEscogriffe and others, & Vanyka-slovanyka / Wikipedia.

6.11.1 Strategic importance of Ukraine

NOTE: This section appears in the Ukraine report as §10.1.

On the strategic importance of Crimea, see §6.4.1 in this report.

• Ukraine is the largest country that lies wholly within Europe. Russia is larger, but three-quarters of Russia is in Asia.

• Ukraine has a 1,200-mile border with Russia and a 674-mile border with Russia's close ally, Belarus. At its closest border, Ukraine is only 280 miles from Moscow. A hostile Ukraine is a "near abroad" danger to Russia.

• Ukraine borders four states that belong to both NATO and the EU: Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. That makes Ukraine a sizeable buffer between the West and Russia.

• Ukraine is a crossroads and a pathway. It was a battleground when Napoleon's and Hitler's troops marched toward Moscow. In peacetime, its roads and rails and ports carry trade.

• Ukraine is pivotal as a connection between the Black Sea and Eastern Europe. Ports like Odesa and Crimea are crucial for commercial and naval power.

• Ukraine is the "breadbasket of Europe." Until the Russian invasion in 2022, it produced 10% of global wheat exports (the seventh-largest producer).

• Before 2014, 40% of Russia's gas to Europe was conveyed via pipelines running through Ukraine. (See Ukraine report §3.3.) As of 1/1/2025, Ukraine is not allowing Russia to use those pipelines.

• The Donbas region, which has large deposits of coal and iron ore, produced very substantial amounts of steel until 2014, when war disrupted production.

6.11.2 Timeline

For the invasion of 2/24/2022 and its context, see Ukraine report. The short version:

• 2022 (Feb. 24): Russia invaded Ukraine, including Kyiv, Mariupol, and areas in Donbas.

• 2022 (Sept. 30): Zelensky signed Ukraine's NATO application.

• 2022 (Sept. 30): Putin announced the annexation of the Donetsk People's Republic, the Luhansk People's Republic, and the Zaporizhzhya and Kherson Oblasts (southeastern Ukraine).

• 2025 (Jan. 1): Ukraine halted flow of Russian gas in pipelines through Ukraine.

• 2025 (Jan.-Mar.): Trump attempts to broker a

ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia.

7. CYBERWARFARE AND CYBERCRIME

Putin views cyberspace as an arena for "information countermeasures", which includes everything from hacking to disinformation. Cyberwarfare and cybercrime are strategic tools to maintain control within Russia, to destabilize foreign adversaries, and to attain Putin's geopolitical objectives. Such low-cost, deniable attacks can yield gratifyingly large disruption.

Russia protects hackers committing cybercrimes. Also, several Russian government institutions are involved, including the FSB (successor to the KGB)—especially its Information Security Center (18th Center)—and the GRU (military intelligence), including Fancy Bear (APT28).

7.1 Estonia, 2007

Estonia (capital: Tallinn), a former Soviet Socialist Republic in the USSR, is now one Europe's most digitally advanced countries. It became a NATO member in 2004.

In early 2007, Estonia announced that it would move the _Bronze Soldier_, a WW2 memorial, from the Tallinn city center to a military cemetery. The Russian government called the move "disastrous". Many of Estonia's numerous ethnic Russians rioted.

From 4/27/2007 to 5/9/2007, Estonia suffered the first known instances of a nation being cyberattacked (a.k.a. Web War One). The attack disrupted online banking, halted government communications, and blocked media outlets from delivering news. Observers assumed Russia was behind these attacks because they were traced to Russian IPs, and online instructions for them were mostly in Russian.

The attack on Estonia led to the formation of NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, and to the criminalization of cyberattacks.

7.2 Ukraine, 2015-2017

On 12/23/2015, when Russia had just annexed Crimea and was supporting separatists in Donbas, BlackEnergy malware took out the power grid for some 225,000 Ukrainians. BlackEnergy was created in 2007 by a Russian hacker. It has since become a highly sophisticated tool for stealing bank credentials and destroying files.

On 6/27/2017, the NotPetya malware attack was unleashed against Ukraine's banks, power grid, airports, and government systems. It then spread laterally across networks to 60 countries, affecting Maersk and FedEx (shipping), Merck (pharmaceuticals), and others, with damage estimated at $10 billion.

While NotPetya appeared to be ransomware, it was in fact malware that destroyed data beyond all chance of recovery. Hence it qualifies as sabotage rather than ransomware. NotPetya's implementation has since been attributed to the GRU's Sandworm group (APT44).

7.3 US presidential election, 2016

The driving force and connection between these events is not clear to me at this time, but here they are, for your consideration.

• 2015 (May 22):-2016 (Feb. 29): After a Freedom of Information Act request, the State Dept. released 30,000 work-related emails from Hillary Clinton that had been stored on a private email server. Many were related to Benghazi. (See §6.7.2.)

• 2016 (Oct. 7-Nov.) Wikileaks published over 20,000 emails from Clinton's campaign chair, John Podesta. Subjects included campaign strategy and internal debates.

• 2016 (Oct. 7): "Russiagate". The Dept. of Homeland Security and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence jointly stated that the email leaks were part of a Russian campaign to undermine US democracy by favoring Trump over Clinton.

• 2016 (Oct. 9): In a televised presidential debate, Clinton blamed Putin for the Wikileaks release of Podesta's emails.

• 2016 (Oct. 28): FBI Director James Comey announced (two days before the POTUS election) that the FBI would investigate emails on the laptop of Anthony Weiner, who had shared a laptop with his wife, a Clinton aide. On 11/6/2016, the FBI announced it would not press charges.

• 2016 (Dec. 29): On grounds of "significant malicious cyber-enabled activities" in the 2016 election, POTUS Obama imposed sanctions on Russian intelligence services, freezing US assets of the GRU, FSB, and several senior GRU officials, expelling 35 Russian

intelligence operatives from the US, and closing two Russian compounds in the US.

• 2017 (Jan. 6): The head of National Intelligence released a declassified report from mid-2016 that concluded Putin ordered an influence campaign to help Trump win the election, which included the DNC hacks and the Wikileaks release of Podesta's emails. The accusations were widely publicized.

• 2017 (Jan. 10): Steele dossier was published on BuzzFeed, days before Trump's inauguration (1/20/2017). The dossier, described as unverified raw intelligence, purported to prove Russian collusion with Trump in the 2016 election. Trump and his allies denounced it as lies; others urged verification.

• 2017 (Jan. 11): The *Wall Street Journal* revealed that the author of the Steele dossier was Christopher Steele, a British national and ex-MI6 officer, who was paid by Fusion GPS. Later it turns out that Fusion GPS was part of an intermediary for the Clinton campaign, meant to conceal the Clinton campaign's payment to Steele.

• 2017 (May 17)-2019 (Mar. 22): After a 22-month investigation that cost $40 million, Special Counsel Robert Mueller found no evidence of a provable agreement or active collaboration between the Trump campaign and Putin. Mueller avoided using the Steele Dossier as a source in his investigation, which cast doubt on its authenticity.

• 2019 (Dec. 9): A report from the Inspector General of the Justice Department declared that the Steel dossier contained "unconfirmed and uncorroborated" material, including hearsay and inconsistencies: in a word, smears and fake facts. The DoJ report criticized the FBI's handling of the investigation.

7.4 US presidential election, 2020

NOTE: Part of this section is a repeat of the section on the Bidens and Burisma in the Ukraine report, §8.

• 2014 (Apr.): VP Joe Biden's son Hunter accepted a seat on the board of Burisma Holdings. He was reportedly paid up to $1 million annually, despite his utter lack of expertise in the energy field.

• 2016: VP Biden threatened to withhold $1 billion in US loan guarantees if Ukraine didn't fire Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin. Shokin had been investigating Burisma, so Biden's push for dismissing Shokin might have been due to Hunter's influence. On the other hand, Shokin was widely seen as corrupt: the EU and the International Monetary Fund also wanted him dismissed. Shokin was dismissed in 3/29/2016.

• 2019 (Feb.)-2020 (Sept.): During POTUS Trump's first term, two Senate committees looked into Hunter Biden's foreign business dealings.

• 2019 (Apr.): Hunter Biden left a laptop unclaimed at a computer repair store. After 90 days, the owner looked at the contents and contacted the FBI. He also made a copy of the hard drive, which he later gave to Rudy Giuliani's attorney in September, when the FBI seemed to be ignoring Hunter's laptop.

• 2019 (Dec. 9): Hunter's laptop was subpoenaed by the FBI.

• 2020 (Jun. 30): In an FBI document, a confidential informant alleged that Burisma's Zlochevsky paid Joe and Hunter Biden $5 million to use their political clout to get Shokin dismissed. No other evidence to back up that claim has surfaced.

• 2020 (Sept. 23): The Senate report (initiated Feb. 2019) stated that Hunter and his associates were paid at least $4 million by Burisma (based on banking records) and millions more by other foreign entities. The Senate probe deemed Hunter's actions "problematic", but didn't find fault with Joe Biden.

• 2020 (Oct. 14): A few weeks before the 2020 POTUS election, the New York Post published "Smoking-gun email reveals how Hunter Biden introduced Ukrainian businessman to VP dad." The article cited an email on the laptop of April 2015, in which a Burisma executive thanked Hunter for arranging a meeting with Joe Biden—a strong suggestion that influence-peddling was going on. The visibility of the *Post's* story was limited on Facebook and Twitter, who claimed the story was unverified and/or based on hacked sources.

• 2020 (Oct. 19): Former acting CIA Director Michael Morrell persuaded 50+ senior intelligence officials to sign and release a letter claiming the emails on Hunter Biden's laptop had "all the classic earmarks of a Russian information operation" –a.k.a. "disinformation". This statement was undermined in 2022, when the *Washington Post* authenticated some of the emails.

• 2023 (Feb. 1): Hunter's lawyers claimed the data on the laptop was Hunter's private information, and was

accessed and shared without his consent.

7.5 Cybercrime

The FSB (successor to the KGB) protects hackers' activities, allowing Russia to benefit from hackers' crimes while denying responsibility. For example: in 2021, the DarkSide group launched a ransomware attack on Colonial Pipeline, which runs 5,500 miles from Texas to New Jersey and supplies 45% of the East Coast's gas, diesel, and jet fuel. The pipeline was shut down for almost a week, leading to shortages up and down the East Coast. Colonial paid a $4.4 million ransom to unlock its data. Darkside, a cybercrime syndicate, appears to be based in Russia.

8. THE WORST THAT CAN BE SAID ABOUT PUTIN

• Russia under Putin is, to use words that sound nice but are not, a "managed democracy". What happens is what Putin decides will happen. Most Russians have no say in their government.

• Putin quashes dissent. There is no free press to tell the nation or the world at large what's going on in Russia.

• Putin has allegedly amassed enormous personal wealth via a corrupt, kleptocratic system: for example, skimming money from state-run industries such as oil and taking kickbacks for the Sochi Olympics (2014). Much of his wealth is in the name of proxies. Estimates of Putin's net worth range from $40 to $200 billion.

• The man is a mass murderer. When Putin's troops pulled back in Ukraine, mass graves were often found: bodies thrown into a ditch and bulldozed over. (See Ukraine report, §10.2.) Such mass graves have been discovered in Bucha (suburb of Kyiv), Izium (near Kharkiv), Mariupol, Chernihiv, and Kozacha Lopan. Estimates of the total number of bodies: 1,000 or so. One mass grave might be an accident – a vicious commander in one particular location. Multiple occurrences of mass graves kicks the responsibility up the ladder to Putin.

Russo-Ukrainian War, Part 3: Ukraine

A history of Ukraine from prehistoric (yes!!) times, with emphasis on relations with Russia.

CONTENTS

1. CURRENT CRISIS

In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, part of Ukraine. At the same time, Putin began supporting separatists (a.k.a. anti-government rebels) in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

In February 2022, Russia invaded Donbas. At a very conservative estimate, the war has so far resulted in 174,000 deaths: 46,000 Ukrainian soldiers; 95,000 Russian soldiers; 21,000 Donbas militia; 12,000 Ukrainian civilians. Those figures use deaths that the Russians and Ukrainians admit to. Actual deaths are probably a multiple of that number. Estimated property damage to March 2025 is some $200 billion. At least 10 million Ukrainians—a quarter of the pre-war population—have fled their homes, either to western Ukraine or out of the country altogether.

2. If you knew Ukraine before, you knew it for …

• Elaborate Easter eggs (*pysanky*), a thousand-year-old folk-art tradition that involves incised wax and multiple dips.

Ukrainian Easter eggs (psyanky). Photo: Wikipedia.

• Borscht, a beet-based soup that originated in Ukraine in the Middle Ages

• Cossacks (15th-17th c.), famous for their military prowess and that quad-killing dance (at 5:18 in this video)

• Crimean War (1853-1856), which included the colossal military blunder immortalized in Tennyson's 1854 "Charge of the Light Brigade": "Theirs not to reason why, / Theirs not to make reply, / Theirs but to do and die, / Into the valley of death rode the 600 …"

• Chicken Kiev, pounded chicken breast wrapped around a garlic-herb butter filling, breaded, and fried. It probably originated in Kiev in the late 19th c.

• Pogroms that led to the death of tens of thousands of Jews (1881-1884, 1903-1906, 1918-1921, 1941-1944), and eventually to the migration of millions of Jews from Russia to the US, Western Europe, and Palestine. (See §5.5.2 and 5.6.)

• Alexander Archipenko, a well-known modernist sculptor whose works were on display at the 1913 Armory Show, was born in Ukraine. He later moved to Paris, then to the US.

Archipenko, La vie familiale (Family Life), exhibited in Paris, 1912 and at the New York Armory Show, 1913. Photo: Wikipedia.

• Holodomor (1932-1933), a massive famine under Stalin. (See §5.6.)

• Yalta, town on the Sea of Azov where FDR, Churchill, and Stalin met on 2/4-11/1945 to draw the post-WW2 map of Europe.

Winston Churchill, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin at Yalta, February 1945. Photo: Wikipedia.

• Chernobyl, near Kyiv, site of the worst nuclear power accident in history in 1986. (See §5.6.)

• Oksana Baiul, figure skater who won a gold at the 1994 Winter Olympics at Lillehammer. Helluva performance here in 1995.

3. GEOGRAPHY

NOTE: The Ukraine on the map today is quite a recent nation and quite a recent shape. Although the history of Ukrainian culture and literature can be traced back to the 9th century, the territory where Ukrainian is spoken has usually been fragmented. As a sovereign state, Ukraine existed just after WW1, 1918-1920 (see §5.6), and then not until 1991. During its years as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, bits and pieces were added in the east and west during the 1920s-1950s. Crimea only became part of the Ukraine SSR in 1954, as a goodwill gesture from Khrushchev. So while "Ukraine" is convenient shorthand, it's imprecise to use it to mean "today's Ukraine" until the end of the 20th century.

Ukraine. Map: Vanyka-slovanyka / Wikipedia. Larger version of this map appears on p. 2.

Today Ukraine (capital Kyiv, Russian Kiev) is the second-largest country in Europe, after Russia. To the east and north of Ukraine is Russia (1,400-mile border), with Belarus, a close ally of Russia, to the north (670-mile border). On the south, Ukraine borders the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. To the southwest are Romania (a NATO member) and Moldova. To the west are Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland (all NATO members).

3.1 Topography & urban centers

Ukraine is part of Eastern Europe. Ninety-five percent of the country is plains (average elevation 574'), which are broken up by river valleys. The Carpathian Mountains to the west separate Ukraine from Hungary and Romania. There are no natural topographical barriers between Ukraine and Russia, which helps explain why Ukraine's shape has varied so much over the years. (See §3.)

Kyiv sits on the Dnieper River—the longest in the country—which has hydroelectric dams with huge reservoirs.

In the south and southeast, the Donets River provides water for the Donets Basin—an area often referred to as the "Donbas region" or "Donbas". Donbas includes the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (administrative zones) in eastern Ukraine.

Donbas (Donets River basin) in eastern Ukraine, in 2022. Map: Goran_tek-en / Wikipedia.

In southern Ukraine, the Crimean peninsula juts into the Black Sea. It's connected to the mainland by the Isthmus of Perekop (3-4 miles wide). Sevastopol, Crimea's major city, was the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet, the USSR's largest naval concentration. At its eastern side, Crimea is separated from Russian territory by the Kerch Strait (9 miles at its widest).

The Crimean Bridge, completed in 2018, crosses the Kerch Strait.

Crimea and southern Ukraine. Map: Vanyka-slovanyka / Wikipedia.

Ukraine's location is very favorable to trade.
• Ukraine is bisected by the last stretch of the Dnieper River, a water route giving access to the Baltic, some 1,400 miles to the north.
• Ukraine is near the western end of the Eurasian Steppe, a mostly flat area stretching from Mongolia westward some 5,000 miles. The steppe's terrain facilitates migration of people, movement of goods, and invasions from the East.
• Ukraine is near the eastern end of the North European Plain, which gives access to western and northern France, Belgium, the Netherlands, northern Germany, and much of Poland.

Goods brought overland or down the Dnieper from the far north and east (see §5.2) were transferred to ships at ports on the Black Sea or the Sea of Azov. From there they could be carried to the Mediterranean and Europe. Or goods could be transshipped at Ukraine and carried overland to Asia. Due to this geographical serendipity, the Ukrainian region has been a trading center for a long time. Among the evidence: amber from the Baltic has been found in burials in Ukraine dating to ca. 4,000 BC.

Today most of Ukraine's population lives in urban areas in the southeast and south-central regions, including Donbas and the coasts of the Black Sea and Sea of Azov. The largest cities are (in descending order) Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhya, Lviv, and Kryvyy Rih.

Cities in Ukraine. Map: US Dept. of Defense. Added to the map: Dnipro (Dnipropetrovsk), Kryvyy Rih, and Kherson. The green area at the east is Donbas.

3.2 Climate & agriculture

Temperatures range from the 20s F in winter to the 70s F in summer. Crimea's Mediterranean-type climate (it's on the same latitude as southern France) has attracted tourists for well over a century.

Two-thirds of Ukraine has soil that is extremely fertile—hence the country's nickname, the "breadbasket of Europe." Until the Russian invasion of 2022, it produced 10% of global wheat exports and was also a major producer of potatoes, sugar beets, and sunflower oil.

3.3 Natural resources

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, plentiful supplies of coal and iron ore made Ukraine one of the top ten steel producers worldwide. Most of the steel industry is in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region. As the country's industrial heartland, Donbas also has the largest rail network. But the war that broke out in 2022 is being fought mostly in this area, severely diminishing production in leading steel cities such as Mariupol, Kryvyy Rih, Dnipro (Dnipropetrovsk), and Zaporizhzhya.

As a member of the USSR, Ukraine exported huge amounts of natural gas. For its transportation, the Soviets built 10,000 or more miles of pipeline in Ukraine. More were added post-independence.

But after independence in 1991, Ukraine became a net importer of natural gas. At first it imported gas from Russia, but since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, it imports from Europe and the US instead.

Until 1/1/2025, Ukraine's gas pipelines were still used by Russia to send gas to Europe. At that point a five-year transit agreement expired, and Ukraine stopped the flow of Russian gas through its territory. (See §10.2.)

3.4 Environmental issues

As part of the USSR, Ukraine underwent massive, rapid industrialization and intensive farming during the 20th century. The industries in Donbas cause significant air pollution, especially in Dnipropetrovsk, Kryvyy Rih, and Zaporizhzhya. Major rivers are significantly polluted with pesticides, fertilizers, and untreated sewage. In many areas, overcultivation has led to soil depletion and severe erosion.

4. People & culture

4.1 Population

By 2010, about one in seven Ukrainians were working outside the country, in Russia or the EU. This combined with a declining birthrate was already leading to a decrease in Ukraine's population. In 2013, Ukraine's population was about 45 million. By 2025, as people fled the war, it dropped to some 39 million—less if you subtract those living in territories that Russia has occupied. (See §1 on stats for deaths and displaced persons during the Russo-Ukrainian War.)

4.2 Language & ethnicity

The dominant and official language is Ukrainian, an East Slavic language that emerged in the 9th century. (See §5.2.) Ukrainian is related to Russian and Polish, and written with a form of the Cyrillic alphabet.

Use of the Ukrainian language has ebbed and flowed through the centuries, as various nations took

over parts of the territory that is modern Ukraine. (See §5.3, 5.4, 5.5.3.) In the 1930s, when Stalin pushed for Russification of the whole USSR, teaching Ukrainian was forbidden. The prohibition was relaxed for about a decade after his death, then reinstated. The suppression of the Ukrainian language is one of several grudges that many Ukrainians hold against Russians.

When Russia invaded in 2022, ethnic Ukrainians were about 75% of Ukraine's population. The largest minority were Russians, at just under 20%. Other ethnicities within Ukraine's current borders include Belarusians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, and Crimean Tatars.

Of those, the Tatars are the only ones not associated with a modern nation. Tatars are descendants of local Turkic tribes and the Mongols who came with Genghis Khan (d. 1227). The Tatars settled in Crimea by the 15th century. They remained the dominant group there for several centuries, developing a language called Crimean Tatar. In 1944 Stalin deported some 200,000 Tatars to Uzbekistan and ordered traces of them effaced from Crimea. In 1989 the Tatars began to return to Crimea, but after Russia's annexation of the peninsula in 2014, they were again persecuted. The Tatars are another group with a grudge against the Russians.

4.3 Religion

About 50% of Ukraine's population belongs to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, formed in 2019 by merging the Eastern Orthodox and Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Churches. Religious minorities include Protestants, Roman Catholics, Muslims, and Jews (see (see §5.5.2). More than 40% of Ukrainians are not religious.

5. HISTORY

It's worth looking at Ukraine's history because residents of this area have long, long, memories, and can carry a grudge for centuries. For example: the hatred of Jews that led to pogroms in the 19th and 20th centuries (see §5.5.2 & 6) can be traced back to the 16th century. (See §5.3.)

5.1 Trade posts & migrations, 7th c. BC to 11th c. AD

The location of modern Ukraine made it enticing for trade even in prehistoric times. (See §3.1.) By the 7th and 6th centuries BC, Greeks had established trading colonies on the northern coast of the Black Sea, in Crimea, and around the Sea of Azov.

From the 1st to 11th centuries, the Roman and then the Byzantine Empires had only a tenuous and sporadic hold in this area. Why? Because while the location of Ukraine makes it favorable to trade (see §3.1), it also opens it up to mass migration by nomadic tribes galloping in from the east or west. During the 3rd to 11th centuries, Ukraine was invaded by:

- Goths (from Europe), ca. 200 AD
- Huns (Central Asia), ca. 375
- Bulgars and Avars (Central Asia), 5th-6th centuries
- Slavs (Carpathian Mountains), 5th-6th centuries
- Magyars (Ural Mountains), late 9th century
- Pechenegs (Central Asia), 10th-11th centuries
- Polovtsians (Central Asia), 11th century

5.2 Kyivan Rus, mid-9th—13th c.

Tradition has it that Kyiv was founded in 482, by Slavs who spoke Old East Slavic—ancestor of modern Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian.

Some 350 years later—traditionally in 826, Kyiv was taken over by … wait for it … Vikings!

How? The "Dnieper trade route" or "the route from the Varangians to the Greeks" linked the Baltic to the Byzantine Empire via a relatively easy water route. (See §3.1.) Down from the Baltic came the Scandinavian warriors, traders, and settlers who were known in the Byzantine Empire as Varangians. We call them Vikings.

According to a contemporary account, local tribes invited Rurik, a Viking leader, to rule over them and end their constant fighting. Rurik ruled Novgorod (between modern St. Petersburg and Moscow). A few years later, another Norse chieftain conquered Kyiv and united it with Novgorod into the territory known as "Kyivan Rus". The etymology of "Rus" is debated, but it gave us the term "Russian", for people living in that area and, later, a much broader area.

In 988 the ruler of Kyivan Rus, Volodymyr the Great (Vladimir I), converted to Eastern Orthodox Chris-

tianity. The head of the Kyivan church was appointed by the patriarch of Constantinople. Ukrainian literature began after Ukraine became Christian. Written in Kyivan Rus, it included sermons, tales, and lives of saints. (See §4.2.)

At its greatest extent, Kyivan Rus stretched from the Black Sea north to the Baltic, the Gulf of Bothnia, and the White Sea.

Kyivan Rus, ca. 1054. Map: Vitaliyf261 / Wikipedia.

The power of Kyivan Rus began fading in the 12th century. In the 1220s, the Mongols swept in from the east. They sacked Kyiv in 1240, burning much of the city to the ground. Its population dropped from perhaps 50,000 to a few thousand.

5.3 Poland, Lithuania, & the Golden Horde, 14th-18th c.

In the 14th century, after the collapse of Kyivan Rus, the territory of modern Ukraine was divvied up. The king of Poland ruled the northwestern area. The Grand Duke of Lithuania ruled the western area. The Tatar Golden Horde, of Mongol and Turkic descent, ruled the eastern, central, and southern parts, including Crimea. (See §4.2 on the Tatars.) These three powers introduced Roman Catholicism (from Lithuania and Poland) and Islam (from the Tatars).

By the mid-15th century, the territory ruled by the Golden Horde (the Crimean Tatars) was disintegrating. Ukrainian-speaking areas of its territory were split among the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Grand Principality of Moscow (est. in the late 13th c.), and the Ottoman Empire.

In 1569 (Union of Lublin), most of what is now Ukraine was annexed to Poland. Gradually the old nobility of Kyivan Rus gave up their distinct language and culture in favor of Polish. Even in Ukrainian cities, Ukrainians speakers became a minority.

Ukrainian peasants (mostly Orthodox) became serfs. The owners of the estates they worked on were usually Polish Catholics. The managers of the estates—the ones who kept the books and oversaw the work—were often Jewish. Unlike Catholics, Jews needed to read in order to practice their religion—hence they were able to do the record-keeping that estate-management required.

Social discontent, then and later, often fell along religious lines: the poorest people hated Catholics, their distant overlords, but they especially hated Jews, who were the visible face of repression.

5.4 Cossacks & Catherine the Great, 15th-18th c.

The Cossacks appeared In the 15th century in eastern Ukraine, centered at Zaporizhzhya. "Cossack" comes from *kazak:* an adventurer, wanderer, or free man. Among those who became Cossacks were hunters, dissatisfied noblemen, and escaped serfs. Their government organization was military, with a general assembly and a commander-in-chief (*hetman*). Cossack territory was known as the Hetmanate. The Cossacks served as a buffer against invasions from the east. The Polish government sometimes hired them as mercenaries for wars in central Europe.

In 1648, Cossacks led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky rebelled against Polish estate owners, officials, Catholic clergy, and Jews. In 1654, Khmelnytsky allied himself with Moscow.

And now we come to another long-standing grudge of Ukrainians against Russians. We don't have a complete copy of the 1654 Treaty of Pereiaslav, and the

two sides remember it very differently. The Ukrainians said that by this agreement, Russians recognized Ukrainian independence. The Russians said that by this agreement, the Ukrainians recognized the tsar as their ruler. In 1954, the USSR celebrated the 300th anniversary of Russia's unification with Ukraine—an event that, according to Ukraine, never happened.

By the 1660s, Cossack rule was collapsing. In 1667, Ukraine was partitioned along the Dnieper. The west and central area, a.k.a. Right Bank, went to Poland. The east plus Kyiv, a.k.a. the Left Bank, went to Russia. (This only makes sense if you're looking at Ukraine from Moscow's point of view.)

In Russia's territory, the head of the Orthodox Church was switched from Constantinople (see §5.2) to Moscow. This, too, was later held by Ukrainians as a grudge against Russians.

In 1783, Catherine the Great (ruled 1762-1796) swiped Crimea from the Tatars, who had held it for about 300 years under the Ottoman Empire. (See §4.2 & 5.3.) This gave Russia its first warm-water port. After Poland-Lithuania was divvied up and deleted from the map in 1795, the territory at the west end of Ukraine, Galicia, became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The rest of what is now Ukraine was controlled by the Russian Empire.

By this time, Russians considered Ukrainians a subset of Russians. Russian rulers eventually banned publications in Ukrainian. Ukrainians became Russified. This Russian ban of Ukrainian language and literature was one of the grudges Ukrainians held against Russia when nationalist feeling began surging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

5.5 Russian Ukraine, 19th c.

In the early 19th c., the Ottoman Empire prohibited Russian ships from passing through the Bosporus, Sea of Marmara, and Dardanelles (a.k.a. the Turkish Straits). That meant Russian ships docked at Crimea (see §5.4) could not pass into the Aegean and Mediterranean. Ottoman control of the Bosporus was a sticking point with Russia for decades. After the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-1829, Russia controlled the northern shores of the Black Sea, plus Georgia and parts of Armenia .. but still not the Bosporus.

Black Sea and surrounding area after the Russo-Turkish War, 1828-1829. Red is Russian territory; green is the Ottoman Empire. The Bosporus is just off the map at lower left. Map: Spiridon Ion Cepleanu / Wikipedia.

In the Crimean War (1853-1856), Russia was defeated by an alliance of the Ottoman Empire, France, and Britain. The Battle of Balaclava, 10/25/1854, inspired Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade". (See §2.) The victors declared the Black Sea a demilitarized zone and forbade Russia to maintain a fleet there. This neutralization of the Black Sea lasted only until 1871, when the London Straits Convention allowed Russia to again dock warships in the Black Sea. After WW1, the Montreux Convention allowed passage to Russian warships and submarines, subject to certain restrictions.

This battle for the Turkish Straits is a lesson relevant to the present: Russians will fight and die for passage from their Crimean naval base to the Aegean and Mediterranean.

5.5.1 Serfs and industrialization of Donbas

In Russia, peasants were tied to the land until 1861. The emancipation of the serfs freed some labor for industrial development, which in Ukraine began in Donbas. (See §3.3.) Most of the workers in Donbas were immigrants from in Russia, so the industrial cities in eastern Ukraine became Russian-speaking islands in a Ukrainian sea.

5.5.2 Jews

Beginning in 1791 (under Catherine the Great), Russian Jews were forbidden to take up residence in major cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg. They were allowed to live only in the Pale of Settlement—the western fringe of the Russian Empire—which included parts of Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, western

Russia, and western Ukraine. Kyiv, Odesa, Lviv, and other cities were hubs of Jewish trade and culture. In the late 19th century, about 25% of the world's population of Jews (estimated at 110 million) lived in the territory of modern Ukraine.
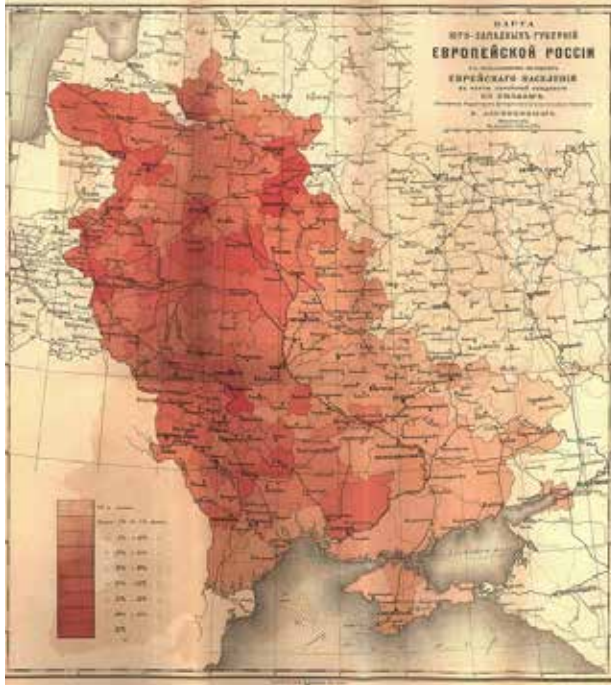
Pale of Settlement in 1884. The colors range from 1% Jewish or less (beige) to 35% Jewish (deep red). Use the Crimean Peninsula to orient yourself. Map: Wikipedia.

On 3/13/1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated by revolutionaries in St. Petersburg. Many believed the revolutionaries were Jews. In 1881-1884, during a wave of pogroms, dozens of Jews were murdered. (A pogrom is a lynch mob that operates with the implied or explicit approval of the government.)

As a result of the 1881-1884 pogroms, millions of Jews migrated from Russia to the US, Western Europe, and Palestine. Successive pogroms and then the Holocaust (see §5.6) reduced Jewish numbers even more. Many emigrated to Israel in the 1980s and 1990s. Jews now make up about 1% of Ukraine's population.

The Pale of Settlement was abolished by the Bolsheviks in 1917.

5.5.3 Ukrainian literature & nationalism

In the 16th-18th centuries, under Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian rule, writing or even speaking Ukrainian was discouraged. Many authors born in Ukraine wrote in Polish or Russian. For example: Nicolay Gogol (Ukrainian: Mykola Hohol, 1809-1852) wrote works with Ukrainian themes, but he wrote them in Russian.

Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), a poet and painter, was one of the earliest to write Ukrainian literature in Ukrainian. By describing an ideal Ukraine that was free and democratic, his works helped develop a Ukrainian consciousness.

The first proposal for an independent Ukraine came in 1900. At that time, however, most Ukrainians were not demanding full independence. Instead, they wanted some local autonomy and the right to use the Ukrainian language.

5.6 Independence, USSR, independence again: 20th c.

- 1914-1918: In World War 1, Ukraine—split between the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Galicia, in the west: see §5.4) and Russia (east)—suffered attacks from both the Central Powers and the Allies. Villages and infrastructure were destroyed. Agricultural production fell sharply. By some estimates, 1.5 million Ukrainian soldiers and civilians died. Many more were displaced from their homes.
- 1917-1918: While World War 1 was still in progress, the Russian Revolution erupted. In Kyiv, the Central Rada (parliament) refused to accept the 11/7/1917 Bolshevik coup in St. Petersburg. Instead, in January 1918, the Rada proclaimed an independent Ukrainian National Republic.
- 1917-1921: The Bolsheviks immediately sent the Red Army to attack Kyiv. Partisan fighting broke out. In wave of pogroms from 1918-1921, tens of thousands of Jews were murdered. (See §5.5.2 on the pogroms of 1881-1884.)
- 1920-1945: The territory of modern Ukraine was split between Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the USSR. The Ukraine SSR ceded to the USSR its rights to manage military, trade, transportation, and foreign relations.

- 1921-1922: Under the New Economic Policy of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, a famine killed about 1 million Ukrainians.
- 1928: Stalin began forcing industrialization. By WW2, Ukraine's industrial output quadrupled, mostly via new factories in Donbas. Meanwhile, Stalin attacked *kulaks* ("wealthy" peasants), with taxes, quotas, confiscation of property, and deportation. By March 1930, 60% of farms were collectivized, despite mass resistance.
- 1932-1933: During the Holodomor (a.k.a. the Great Famine or Ukrainian genocide), Stalin's government required rebellious peasants to provide impossibly large quantities of grain. Failure to do so was cause for execution. About 4 million Ukrainians died of starvation or were shot for "stealing" from the government. Most were buried in mass graves. Meanwhile, the USSR shipped a million tons of grain to the West.
- 1930s-1940s: In the 1930s, responding to rising nationalism in Ukraine SSR, the Communist Party began suppressing all things Ukrainian. In a wave of purges beginning in the 1920s, the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine lost half its members, and 99 members of its Central Committee (out of 102) were shot. Writers and artists were required to adhere to Socialist Realism, which emphasized brawn over brains. Those who did not comply were usually imprisoned or executed.
- 1941-1944: The Nazis invaded the USSR in 1941, occupying most of Ukraine by late November. Mass killings of Jews began immediately and continued through 1944. At Babi Yar, near Kyiv, 34,000 Jews were killed in 2 days (9/29-30/1941). Overall, an estimated 1.5 million Jews were killed—a quarter of Jewish Holocaust victims. Some 2.2 million Ukrainians were taken to Germany as slave laborers, where their survival rate was 10-20%. At least 400,000 Ukrainian Jews fled east into Russia to escape the Nazis. By late 1944, the Germans had retreated from Ukraine. At that point, all of Ukraine fell under USSR control.

- 1945: By the end of WW2, Ukraine's population had dropped from about 41 to 36 million. More than 700 cities and towns and 28,000 villages were destroyed. Only 20% of industry was functional. Also at the end of WW2, Bukovina, Transcarpathia, Galicia, and Volhynia became part of Ukraine SSR, giving Ukraine most of its modern territory.
- 1945: Ukraine became a charter member of the UN. It and Belarus were the only two UN members who were not sovereign nations.
- 1946-1947: Famine due to drought and dislocation killed almost 1 million Ukrainians. Ukrainians also carry a grudge (actually too mild a word) for the millions killed in man-made famines under Russian control, in 1921-1922, and 1932-1933 as well as 1946-1947.
- Ca. 1946-1950s: Under Stalin (d. 1953), Ukraine was again forcibly Russified, not merely by suppressing use of Ukrainian language, but by sending half a million Ukrainians to concentration camps and Siberia. Victims included real or alleged Nazi collaborators, former POWs, Ukrainian nationalists, and members of the Greek Catholic Church. Khrushchev continued the Russification policy, albeit less murderously.
- 1982: Kyiv celebrated the 1,500[th] anniversary of its founding, traditionally 482. (See §5.2.)
- 1986 (Apr. 26): The worst nuclear power accident in history occurred at Chernobyl, 80 miles north of Kyiv. Dozens died; tens of thousands were evacuated. By 2025, the area around the reactor was still too contaminated with radiation to allow anyone to live there. The Chernobyl incident helped create an environmental movement in Ukraine, and led to an increased hatred of the USSR and desire for political independence from it.

Chernobyl area today, with the confiscated/closed zone (no human habitation) in dark red. Kyiv is just south of the contaminated zone. Map: Makeemlighter / Wikipedia.

• Late 1980s: As Gorbachev's reforms were instituted in the USSR, Ukrainian nationalist sentiment increased. Supporters included not only Ukrainian intellectuals, but Russian-speaking workers in Donbas whose complaints of working conditions had been ignored by Moscow.

• 1991 (Aug. 24): Ukrainian parliament declared its independence from the USSR. This was confirmed by a referendum on 12/1/1991. After independence, Ukraine had within its borders 750,000 members of the USSR armed forces, 5,000 nuclear weapons (more than any nation except the US or Russia), and massive quantities of conventional weapons and ammunition. The nukes were decommissioned from 1991-1996, with the help of Russia and the US.

• 1991-1999: Government corruption. Ukraine struggled to recover from Communist economic policies. But with the Soviet government as a historical model and the new Russian oligarchs as a current model, Ukraine's politicians became increasingly corrupt as they struggled for power and wealth. (For more on corruption, see Zelensky report §2.)

• 1992-1997: Ukraine laid claim to the entire (former USSR) Black Sea Fleet, based at Sevastopol, Crimea. Eventually Ukraine conceded most of the fleet to Russia, in exchange for forgiveness of a huge debt for natural gas imports. In 1997, Ukraine and Russia signed a 20-year lease for Sevastopol.

• 1992-1999: Hyperinflation. The annual inflation rate was 2,000% in 1992, 10,155% in 1993. Ukraine's post-independence government printed massive amounts of paper money, ran huge deficits to continue Soviet-era pensions and healthcare, and was walloped with pent-up inflation that had for decades been suppressed by Soviet decree. On top of that, industrial production of steel and other goods dropped sharply, and Russia raised gas prices from $2 to $80 per 1,000 cubic meters. After the Ukrainian government implemented stricter monetary policy, the inflation rate dropped to 80% in 1996, and 19.2% in 1999.

• 1994: Ukraine joined NATO's Partnership for Peace Programme, whose stated aim is to create trust and cooperation between the member states of NATO and other (mostly European) states.

• 1997 (Jul. 9): Ukraine established a "distinctive partnership" with NATO, which formalized political dialogue and cooperation on defense reform, peacekeeping, and security.

5.7 Early 21st c., 2000-2013

5.7.1 Ukraine

• 2004: The Ukrainian presidential election was between Viktor Yushchenko, running on an anticorruption platform, and Viktor Yanukovych, strongly supported by Putin. Yanukovych won. Protestors wearing Yushchenko's campaign color, orange, demonstrated for 2 weeks: hence the protests were dubbed the "Orange Revolution". The Ukrainian Supreme Court threw out the election results. In a runoff, Yushchenko won by 52%, and was inaugurated on 1/25/2005. NOTE: Putin claims that the Orange Revolution was backed by the CIA, and that Yushchenko was a pro-Western puppet. Although there is no documentation of this, it is worth noting that from 2001-2004, pro-Western / pro-democracy movements in Ukraine were funded by American NGOs (National Endowment for Democracy, USAID) to the tune of $65 million.

• ca. 2005: Pres. Yushchenko announced that Ukraine would not renew Russia's lease on Sevastopol base in Crimea (Russia's only warm-water port), signed in 1997 and due to expire in 2017.

• 2006: Russia, the main supplier of fossil fuels to Ukraine, cut off Ukraine's supply of natural gas, claiming Ukraine hadn't paid its bills.

• 2008: NATO promised Ukraine eventual membership but did not set a timeline for it. (See §5.7.2.)

• 2010: Yanukovych won the presidency. In April 2010, parliament extended Russia's Sevastopol lease until 2042, in exchange for cheaper natural gas (Kharkiv Pact). In June 2010, Ukraine officially stopped seeking NATO membership.

• 2013 (Nov.): Euromaidan protest. Yanukovych, facing pressure from Putin, cancelled a planned agreement to strengthen ties with the EU. The largest protests since the Orange Revolution broke out in Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), with protesters demanding Yanukovych's resignation. Yanukovych signed laws restricting the right to protest, which were followed by protests by hundreds of thousands of citizens.

• 2014 (Feb.): Dozens were killed and hundreds wounded when troops tried to clear the Maidan. The EU imposed sanctions against Ukraine. Meanwhile, pro-Yanukovych demonstrations broke out in eastern Ukraine (Donbas). In late February 2014, Yanukovych fled to Russia. Parliament stripped him of his presidential powers and issued a warrant for his arrest, charging him with the deaths that occurred when the army tried to clear the Maidan.

5.7.2 NATO status of former Warsaw Pact members and Soviet Socialist Republics
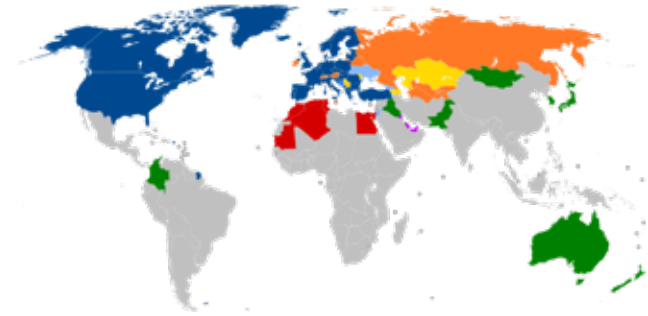
NATO members and associates. Map: Wikipedia. Navy blue = member state, medium blue = accession protocol signed, light blue = candidate. Dark green = NATO global partner (an ally but not a member).

For more on the NATO status of former Warsaw Pact countries and former SSRs, see Putin report §6.6.3. Summarizing: of the 15 SSRs and 8 Warsaw Pact countries, the only ones with no active ties with NATO are Russia and Belarus.

Ukraine was promised NATO membership in 2008, but no timeline has been set for it. As long as there are "frozen conflicts" (rebellions in Crimea and Donbas), Ukraine cannot become a member. (See Putin report §6.0.1.)

5.7.3 US Defense policy, 2001-2012

• 2001 (Dec. 13): POTUS George W. Bush announced that the US would withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia. The ABM Treaty, signed in 1972 (during the Cold War), limited missile defense systems in order to preserve "mutual assured destruction"—a theoretical deterrent to a nuclear first strike. Following the 9/11/2001 attacks,

Bush prioritized defense to counter strikes from Iran, which was developing nuclear weapons.

• 2007: POTUS Bush proposed a missile defense system in Eastern Europe that would be able to intercept an attack from Iran: ten ground-based interceptors in Poland plus a radar system in the Czech Republic. The missile defense system was also viewed as a way to strengthen new NATO members Poland and the Czech Republic, formerly under USSR control. Putin viewed this proposed defense program as a threat to his sphere of influence.

• 2009 (Mar. 6): Two months after POTUS Obama's first inauguration, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton promised Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov a "reset" in US/Russian relations. On 9/17/2009, Obama canceled the defense system in Eastern Europe and proposed instead the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA), which would deploy missile interceptors on ships, and later in Eastern Europe. In 2009, Obama also ended the Multiple Kill Vehicle program (one launch with several interceptors). Phase 1 of the EPAA was functional by late 2011 (interceptors on ships and a base in Turkey).

• 2012 (Mar. 26): At the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul, South Korea, in an exchange meant to be off-mic, POTUS Obama told Russian President Dmitry Medvedev that the missile defense issue "can be solved", but that he needed Putin to "give me space" until after the 2016 POTUS election. Medvedev promised to relay the information to Putin. In 2013, Obama cancelled the fourth phase of the EPAA, which called for more advanced interceptors.

6. Crimean crisis, 2014

Crimea and southern Ukraine. Map: Vanyka-slovanyka / Wikipedia.

6.1 Strategic importance of Crimea

• Russia's Black Sea Fleet (its largest concentration of ships) is headquartered in Sevastopol. This is Russia's most important warm-water naval base anywhere in the world, despite the fact that it has no direct access to major oceans. (See Putin report §6.4.4.)

• Kerch Strait and Kerch Bridge, at the east of Crimea, are vital for control of the Sea of Azov. Russian control of that area makes it easier to supply its troops in Crimea, and makes Ukraine more vulnerable.

• Missiles launched from Crimea can easily reach the port of Odesa and other areas of Ukraine.

• Crimea was Ukraine's main port, with 70% of Ukraine's coastline. Its loss meant a drop in Ukraine's exports by sea.

• The Black Sea off Crimea has significant gas and oil deposits.

6.2 Timeline

Rewinding for a moment: by the 1990s, Crimea's population was ethnic Russians, by an overwhelming majority. In 1991, it was given the status of an autonomous republic within Ukraine. Crimeans voted (with the rest of the country) in favor of Ukrainian independence. But many Crimeans became disgruntled when schools begin teaching in Ukrainian, and Russian was not made even an official second language.

Meanwhile, soon after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Russian leaders began vowing to defend the rights of Russian citizens in the "near abroad"—i.e., the territory that used to comprise the USSR. Soon they insisted Russia would defend any substantial population of ethnic Russians, whether they were Russian citizens or not. (See Putin report, §6.0.1.) Crimea and Donbas both have a majority of ethnic Russians. Putin encouraged separatists in Crimea when they demanded independence from Ukraine.

• 2014 (Feb. 26-27): groups of armed men without insignia surrounded the major airports in Crimea (Sevastopol and Simferopol) and occupied the Crimean parliament building. The elected members were dismissed and a pro-Russia politician installed as prime minister. Voice and data links to Ukraine were severed. Putin moved troops to the area on the pretense of protecting ethnic Russians and military assets.

- 2014 (Mar. 16): In a referendum, 97% of Crimeans voted to join Russia. Outside observers noted irregularities at the polls, including the presence of armed men.
- 2014 (Mar. 18): Putin signed a treaty incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation. Russian troops immediately took over military bases in Crimea.
- 2014 (Apr.): Within a few weeks of the takeover of Crimea, Putin increased the price of natural gas to Ukraine by 80%. With the loss of Crimea, Ukraine also lost most of its naval forces, which was stationed in Sevastopol.
- 2025 (Mar.): Some 30,000-40,000 Russian troops are stationed in Crimea.

6.3 Wagner Group

Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group was part of Russia's "hybrid warfare" policy: ensuring plausible deniability by using mercenaries rather than Russian troops. (See Putin report, §5.) Wagner's chief, Prigozhin, knew Putin from decades back and had catering contracts with the Kremlin. Prigozhin had no military experience, so could be relied upon to take orders from the Kremlin.

Wagner's head of military operations was Dmitry Utkin, a veteran of the GRU Spetsnaz (special forces) during the First and Second Chechen Wars, 1994-1996 and 1999-2000. (See Putin report, §6.2.) Utkin retired in 2013 and joined Wagner soon afterwards. Many of Wagner's original members were Spetsnaz veterans.

Wagner first appeared in Crimea in 2014, as the masked men in unmarked gear fighting with Russian weapons. After Crimea was annexed by Russia, Wagner was deployed in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. (See §7.)

7. Separatists in Donbas, 2014-2015

Donbas (Donetsk River basin) in eastern Ukraine, in 2022. Map: Goran_tek-en / Wikipedia.

7.1 Strategic importance of Donbas (Donetsk River Basin)

- Donbas (see §3.1) shares a border with Russia. Controlling Donbas and the area just north of the Sea of Azov would allow Russians to resupply Crimea overland. Without it, they must approach Crimea by sea, or via the bottleneck of the Kerch Bridge.
- Donbas has huge coal and iron ore reserves. Because of these, its steel industry accounted for 20-25% of Ukraine's GDP until the Russo-Ukrainian War broke out.
- Donbas is a manufacturing hub, producing machinery, chemicals, and tanks. (See §5.5.1.)
- Because it's a manufacturing hub, Donbas has lots of transportation (roads, railroads) that allow quick movement of troops and supplies.
- Mariupol in Donbas is on the Sea of Azov. Control of the Azov would make control of Crimea even more secure.

7.2 Timeline

- 2014 (Apr.): Russia massed some 40,000 troops at Ukraine's eastern border. Pro-Russian militia stormed government buildings in eastern cities, including Donetsk and Kharkiv, and launched an assault on Mariupol, a port on the Sea of Azov. Separatists set up their own governments in the oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk.
- 2014 (May): Separatists organized a referendum in Donbas. The response was in favor of separation from Ukraine, but the wording of the referendum made it unclear whether one was voting for independence, or merely for broader autonomy within Ukraine. In any case, the separatists declared the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. Some separatist leaders considered this a step toward integration with Russia.
- 2014 (Jun. 7): Petro Poroshenko won the presidency of Ukraine in a landslide victory.
- 2014 (Jun. 27): Poroshenko signed an association agreement with the EU. Putin strenuously objected.
- 2014 (Jun.-Jul.): Separatists in eastern Ukraine began to use increasingly sophisticated weapons, probably supplied by Russia.
- 2014 (Jul. 17): Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 was shot down over the Donetsk oblast, by a Russian-made surface-to-air missile fired from rebel-controlled territory. All 298 passengers and crew died.
- 2015 (Feb. 12): A ceasefire (the Minsk II agreement) was negotiated by the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany. Although the agreement was sporadically broken by both Russia and Ukraine, both sides did withdraw heavy weapons from the front lines.
- 2015 (Sept.): UN estimated that 8,000 had been killed in the conflict in Donbas and 1.5 million displaced.
- 2015 (Dec. 23): When Russia had just annexed Crimea and was supporting separatists in Donbas, BlackEnergy malware took out the power grid for some 225,000 Ukrainians. BlackEnergy was created in 2007 by a Russian hacker. It has since become a highly sophisticated tool for stealing bank credentials and destroying files. (See Putin report §7.2.)

7.3 US Sanctions

- 2014 (Mar. 16-Apr. 28): POTUS Obama froze US assets of Russian and Ukrainian officials involved in the Crimea operation, then froze the assets of Putin's inner circle and of former President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych. Sectoral sanctions were imposed against Russian companies in financial services, energy, metals and mining, engineering, and defense materiel. "Sectoral sanctions" typically involve restricting or eliminating access to loans and investments, banning tech export, limiting imports and exports in that sector, and/or prohibiting companies in that sector from providing services. Determining which sanctions to apply was the task of Obama's secretaries of State and Treasury.
- 2014 (Jul. 17): After Malaysia Airlines MH17 was shot down, POTUS Obama imposed sanctions on major Russian firms in oil, energy, finance, and defense.

Because Russia was still occupying Crimea, this set of sanctions was still in place in 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. (See §10.4.)

7.4 EU Sanctions

The EU's sanctions against Russia were less severe, reflecting the EU's urgent need for Russian gas and oil. In 2015, about 25% of Europe's gas and oil came from Russia. Latvia, Slovenia, Finland and Estonia were 100% reliant on Russian gas. The Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Lithuania relied on Russia for 80% of their gas. Greece, Austria, Hungary relied on it for 60%, and Germany for 50%.

- 2014 (Mar. 17-Apr. 28): EU froze assets and banned travel for 48 individuals involved in the annexation of Crimea or the separatist uprisings in eastern Ukraine.
- 2014 (Apr. 29-Jul. 31): EU froze assets of more individuals, and also several Crimean companies. Then it imposed sectoral sanctions on Russia's state-owned banks, banned export of goods that could be used by Russia's military, and halted sales of oil exploration equipment. Like the US, the EU targeted Russia's energy sector, but since the EU was dependent on Russian gas, it made some exemptions such as Gazprom's gas operations.

Because Russia was still occupying Crimea, this set of sanctions was still in place in 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. (See §10.4.)

8. The Bidens & Burisma, 2014-2020

For the Bidens and Burisma in the context of Putin's actions, see Putin report §7.4.

By late February 2014, Russia had annexed Crimea, dozens had been killed in protests in Kyiv's Maidan Square, and Ukrainian President Yanukovych had resigned. (See §6.2 and 5.7.1.) At the time, Joe Biden, Obama's vice-president, was assigned the task of supporting Ukraine as it resisted Russian influence, and of helping Ukraine's government reduce its notorious corruption. (See §5.6, and Zelensky report §2.)

Burisma, owned by Ukrainian oligarch Mykola Zlochevsky, was one of Ukraine's largest natural gas producers, controlling some 20% of Ukraine's private-sector output. By 2014, Zlochevsky was under investigation for money-laundering and tax evasion.

The timeline from there:

• 2014 (Apr.): VP Joe Biden's son Hunter accepted a seat on the board of Burisma Holdings. He was reportedly paid up to $1 million annually, despite his utter lack of expertise in the energy field.

• 2016: VP Biden threatened to withhold $1 billion in US loan guarantees if Ukraine didn't fire Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin. Shokin had been investigating Burisma, so Biden's push for dismissing Shokin might have been due to Hunter's influence. On the other hand, Shokin was widely seen as corrupt: the EU and the International Monetary Fund also wanted him dismissed. Shokin was dismissed in 3/29/2016.

• 2019 (Feb.)-2020 (Sept.): During POTUS Trump's first term, two Senate committees looked into Hunter Biden's foreign business dealings.

• 2019 (Apr.): Hunter Biden left a laptop unclaimed at a computer repair store. After 90 days, the owner looked at the contents and contacted the FBI. He also made a copy of the hard drive, which he later gave to Rudy Giuliani's attorney in September, when the FBI seemed to be ignoring Hunter's laptop.

• 2019 (Dec. 9): Hunter's laptop was subpoenaed by the FBI.

• 2020 (Jun. 30): In an FBI document, a confidential informant alleged that Burisma's Zlochevsky paid Joe and Hunter Biden $5 million to use their political clout to get Shokin dismissed. No other evidence to back up that claim has surfaced.

• 2020 (Sept. 23): The Senate report (initiated Feb. 2019) stated that Hunter and his associates were paid at least $4 million by Burisma (based on banking records) and millions more by other foreign entities. The Senate probe deemed Hunter's actions "problematic", but didn't find fault with Joe Biden.

• 2020 (Oct. 14): A few weeks before the 2020 POTUS election, the New York Post published "Smoking-gun email reveals how Hunter Biden introduced Ukrainian businessman to VP dad." The article cited an email of April 2015 from the laptop, in which a Burisma executive thanked Hunter for arranging a meeting with Joe Biden—a strong suggestion that influence-peddling was going on. The visibility of the Post's story was limited on Facebook and Twitter, who claimed the story was unverified and/or based on hacked sources.

• 2020 (Oct. 19): Former acting CIA Director Michael Morrell persuaded 50+ senior intelligence officials to sign and release a letter claiming the emails on Hunter Biden's laptop had "all the classic earmarks of a Russian information operation" –a.k.a. "disinformation". This statement was undermined in 2022, when the *Washington Post* authenticated some of the emails.

• 2023 (Feb. 1): Hunter's lawyers claimed the data on the laptop was Hunter's private information, and was accessed and shared without his consent.

9. UKRAINE & RUSSIA, 2016-2021

• 2017 (Jun. 27): The NotPetya malware attack was unleashed against Ukraine's banks, power grid, airports, and government systems. It then spread laterally across networks to 60 countries, affecting Maersk and FedEx (shipping), Merck (pharmaceuticals), and others, with damage estimated at $10 billion. (See Putin report §7.2.) While NotPetya appeared to be ransomware, it was in fact malware that destroyed data beyond all chance of recovery. Hence it qualifies as sabotage rather than ransomware. NotPetya's implementation has since been attributed to the GRU's Sandworm group (APT44). (See Putin report §7.2 on Cyberwarfare and cybercrime.)

• 2019 (Feb. 7): Ukraine amended its constitution to state that it would seek membership in NATO and the EU.

- 2019 (Apr. 21): After Poroshenko was accused of massive corruption, Zelensky was elected president in a landslide. His party also won a majority in parliament. (See Zelensky report, §3.3.)
- 2019 (Jul. 25): POTUS Trump spoke to Zelensky on the phone about US aid for Ukraine: $400 million had been approved by Congress but not yet released. Trump suggested that Zelensky investigate Hunter Biden, who had served on the board of Burisma, one of Ukraine's largest natural gas companies. (See §8.) Democrats in Congress promptly tried to impeach Trump, accusing him of demanding that Ukraine attack one of Trump's political opponents in order to receive US aid.
- 2020: Ukraine gained Enhanced Opportunities Partner status with NATO, which recognizes non-NATO members for significant contributions to the alliance. The other Enhanced Opportunities Partners are Australia, Georgia, and Jordan (all 2014).

10. RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR, 2022-PRESENT

10.1 Strategic importance of Ukraine, early 21st c.

NOTE: This section also appears in the Putin report (see §6.11).

On the strategic importance of Crimea, see §6.1; on Donbas, see §7.1.

- Ukraine is the largest country that lies wholly within Europe. Russia is larger, but three-quarters of Russia is in Asia.
- Ukraine has a 1,200-mile border with Russia and a 674-mile border with Russia's close ally, Belarus. At its closest border, Ukraine is only 280 miles from Moscow. A hostile Ukraine is a "near abroad" danger to Russia.
- Ukraine borders four states that belong to both NATO and the EU: Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. That makes Ukraine a sizeable buffer between the West and Russia.
- Ukraine is a crossroads and a pathway. It was a battleground when Napoleon's and Hitler's troops marched toward Moscow. In peacetime, its roads and rails and ports carry trade.

- Ukraine is pivotal as a connection between the Black Sea and Eastern Europe. Ports like Odesa and Crimea are crucial for trade and naval power.
- Ukraine is the "breadbasket of Europe." Until the Russian invasion in 2022, it produced 10% of global wheat exports (the seventh-largest producer).
- Before 2014, 40% of Russia's gas to Europe was conveyed via pipelines running through Ukraine. (See §3.3.) As of 1/1/2025, Ukraine is not allowing use of the pipelines.

10.2 Timeline

- 2021 (Nov.-Dec.?): Putin ordered a build-up of troops along the Ukraine-Russia border and in Crimea. Troops were also stationed on the Ukrainian borders in Transdinistra (Moldova) and Belarus. (See Putin report, §6.1 & 6.8.1.) In the Black Sea, amphibious units were deployed. Western sources estimated that as many as 190,000 Russian troops encircled Ukraine.

Ukraine. Map: Vanyka-slovanyka / Wikipedia. Larger version on p. 2.

2021 (Dec. 17): Putin demanded that NATO accept no new members, especially Ukraine and other former SSRs. NATO members rejected his proposals.
- 2022 (Feb. 21): Putin recognized the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk—not just the areas of those oblasts (provinces) held by separatists since 2014 (see §7), but the entire oblasts.

- 2022 (Feb. 24) Putin announced the beginning of a "special military operation" and sent "peacekeeping" troops into Ukraine.
- 2022 (Feb. 24-Apr. 2): Russian troops attacked Kyiv from Belarus, in the north and northwest. Facing unsustainable losses, they withdrew from the area after 36 days. After the withdrawal, evidence of atrocities was discovered, including mass graves of executed civilians. The invasion revealed problems with logistics and corruption in the Russian military.
- 2022 (Feb. 24-May 20): Attack on Mariupol, a port on the Sea of Azov in the Donetsk oblast. Control of Mariupol and the area to its west would have provided an overland connection from Crimea to Russia. Besieged by air bombardment, artillery, and ground troops, Mariupol held out for three months. At that point there had been some 25,000 civilian deaths and 90% of the city's structures were damaged or destroyed. A theater that was clearly marked as the city's main bomb shelter was bombed, with deaths as high as 600. About 400,000 Mariupol residents were displaced.
- 2022 (Apr. 14): Neptune anti-ship missiles (built by Ukraine) sank the missile cruiser Moskva, the flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet, some 80-90 miles south of Odesa.
- 2022 (Sept. 21): Putin announced that 300,000 reservists would be mobilized for the war effort. Many had no military training, and were given little equipment. Also at this time: men of military age began fleeing Russia; Putin imposed a penalty of up to 15 years in prison for criticizing the war; and a number of Putin's opponents began to die suspiciously, some by defenestration (falling from windows), a favorite Soviet-era tactic.
- 2022 (Sept. 23-27): Referenda on whether to join Russia were held in the occupied parts of Donbas (Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic), as well as Zaporizhzhya and Kherson. The results were reported as overwhelmingly in favor; but there was no independent observation or verification of the results.

- 2022 (Sept. 30): Zelensky signed Ukraine's NATO application. No accession protocol (the next step) has been signed as of 4/2/2025. The "frozen conflict" status of the Russo-Ukrainian War puts the NATO application on hold. (See Putin report, §6.0.1.)
- 2022 (Sept. 30): Putin announced the annexation of the Donetsk People's Republic, the Luhansk People's Republic, and the Zaporizhzhya and Kherson Oblasts (southeastern Ukraine).
- 2023-2025: Ukraine's drones have been among its most effective weapons, dropping bombs as far north as Moscow.
- 2024 (Nov. 4): Ukrainian soldiers in Russia's Kursk region (beginning Aug. 2024) find themselves fighting North Koreans. Western intelligence estimates that 10,000-12,000 North Korean troops are in Russia, at first as support troops but later on the battlefield.
- 2025 (Jan. 1): Ukraine halted the flow of all Russian gas in pipelines through Ukraine, after a five-year agreement expired on 12/31/2024. The only Russian gas pipeline to Europe that's still operational is TurkStream, which runs under the Black Sea to Turkey, and from there to Hungary, Serbia, and parts of southeastern Europe.
- 2025 (Apr. 2): Putin announced that 160,000 more men will be conscripted to serve in the Russian army. The North Koreans are presumably still fighting on Russia's behalf. Russia currently occupies about 43,000 square miles of Ukraine's 233,000 square miles, or about 18% of its territory. Ukraine captured about 460 square miles in Russia's Kursk region in Aug. 2024, but as of April 2025, the Russians have recaptured nearly all that area.

10.3 Wagner Group goes back in Donbas, and mutinies

- 2022 (Mar.) at latest: Putin outsourced some of the fighting in Ukraine to Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group, who had been in Donbas 2014-2015. (See §6.3.) For this operation, Wagner recruited from Russian prisons. The recruits were sent in human wave attacks against Bakhmut (Donetsk Oblast). By the time Ukraine withdrew from Bakhmut in May 2023, an estimated 20,000 Russian troops had died. By then the city was mostly rubble, with a population of 500 or so.

- 2023 (Jun. 23): Prigozhin "declared war" on the Russian defense ministry. Leading a column of 25,000 or so Wagner troops, he crossed into Russia. Wagner killed dozens of Russian troops before halting about 120 miles south of Moscow. On 6/24/2023, Lukashenko of Belarus (see Putin report, §6.8) brokered a deal: Wagner mercenaries would be granted amnesty and offered new contracts; Prigozhin would go into exile in Belarus.
- 2023 (Aug. 23): Prigozhin's business jet crashed north of Moscow. Prigozhin, Utkin, and 6 others died. Wagner is now split into various units in Russia and in Africa, where it is now known as "Africa Corps".

10.4 Western reaction

10.4.1 Sanctions added from 2022 to present

When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, the sanctions from 2014 (see §7.3 & 7.4) were still in place. In the meantime, much of Europe had weaned itself of Russian oil and gas in favor of supplies from the US and elsewhere. In 2021, Russia supplied 45% of the EU's gas imports and 27% of its oil imports. By 2024, gas imports dropped to 18% of the total EU imports, and oil imports to 3-6% of the total EU imports. The countries still most reliant on Russia—Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Austria, and Bulgaria—are so mostly because they're landlocked, hence have difficulty getting supplies except from Russian pipelines.

Decreased dependence on Russian energy gives the EU more flexibility in imposing sanctions.

New sanctions include:
- Russian banks cut off from international finance, including banking and capital markets. To some extent, this is offset by the diamonds, gold, and oil that Russia collects outside its borders. (See Putin report, §6.6., 6.7, & 6.9.)
- Assets of some Russian oligarchs (Putin's allies) were frozen.
- Russian air traffic was no longer allowed in the airspace of the EU, US, Canada, or the UK.
- Export of high-tech goods to Russia was banned.

Russia is now the most heavily sanctioned country in history.

NATO has refused to enforce a no-fly zone over Ukraine, which might well involve the alliance in a shooting war.

10.4.2 Military & other aid

The EU and US have provided Ukraine with billions of dollars in military aid.

Western European countries sent anti-tank weapons and surface-to-air missiles to Ukraine. The US sent high-tech artillery systems that allowed precision strikes behind Russian lines.

From 3/15/2022 to 4/24/2024, Congress authorized about $175 billion in military, economic, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. It is estimated that as of March 2025, $60-75 billion in military aid has been sent there.

10.4.3 EU membership

- 6/23/2022: the EU granted Ukraine candidate status.

10.4.4 NATO membership

- 2022 (Jul. 5): Finland and Sweden (famously neutral) signed accession treaties with NATO. They become full members on 4/4/2023 and 3/7/2024, respectively.
- 2022 (Sept. 30): Ukraine applied for "accelerated accession" to NATO. NATO had already (7/11-12/2023) waived the Membership Action Plan for Ukraine, which often involves elements such as anti-corruption efforts and proof of ability to coordinate military with NATO forces. Although NATO has repeatedly stated that Ukraine will be welcome in the alliance, as of 4/2/2025, it has not set a timeline for admission, and cannot do so while the Russo-Ukrainian War is unresolved.

RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR, PART 4: ZELENSKY

A look at Zelensky's career and presidency.

CONTENTS

1. QUICK OVERVIEW

- Born 1978 in Kryvyy Rih, eastern Ukraine
- Comedian, actor, producer, 1997-2018
- President of Ukraine, 2019 to present

2. CHILDHOOD & EARLY CAREER

Zelensky was born 1/25/1978 to Jewish parents in Kryvyy Rih, an industrial center in the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast of central Ukraine, when Ukraine was still the Ukrainian SSR. Zelensky grew up speaking Russian, then became fluent in Ukrainian and English. In 2000, he earned a law degree from the Kryvyy Rih Economic Institute, part of Kyiv National Economic University.

But law was not his real love. While in college, Zelensky became active in theater. From 1997-2003, his "Kvartal 95" was a popular TV improv group. In 2003, Zelensky cofounded Studio Kvartal 95, which became a highly successful entertainment company. From 2012-2015 he appeared in a couple feature-length films: rom-coms and a historical farce.

SIDE NOTE FOR CONTEXT: Ukraine's government has a long-standing reputation for corruption. The authoritarian rule of the Soviets was not conducive to transparency and honesty. (See Ukraine report §5.6.) When newly independent Ukraine was trying to adjust to life after communism by privatizing major companies, a few men—the oligarchs—gained enormous wealth. With wealth came power to bribe those in politics, media, and the judiciary. There was no system for supervising those in power under the Soviets, and 35 years after the fall of the USSR, Ukraine is still feeling the effects of that. Bribery, fraud, embezzlement, inflated contracts, and nepotism are all reportedly common. Ukrainians are skeptical of government's honesty and of its ability to change.

BACK TO ZELENSKY: His life changed in October 2015, with his appearance in *Servant of the People,* an enormously popular political satire / comedy series that ran for three seasons (11/16/2015-3/28/2019) and was adapted into a feature-length film (2016). Zelensky played Vasiliy Goloborodko, a history teacher whose obscenity-laced denunciation of government corruption went viral on the Internet … and led (in the show) to Goloborodko becoming president of Ukraine.

3. POLITICAL CAREER

3.1 Zelensky's campaign

In 2018, Kvartal 95 registered "Servant of the People" as a political party. The following year, Zelensky ran for president of Ukraine, campaigning with comedy routines and short speeches on YouTube and Instagram. His campaign promises included:

- End corruption. He promised to make sure corrupt officials, judges, and legislators were exposed and punished.
- Institute transparency and accountability in government. Zelensky argued that his lack of political experience made him less likely to cooperate with corrupt politicians.
- Reach peace in Donbas via negotiation, with Donetsk and Luhansk returned to Ukrainian control.
- Help the economy thrive by reducing corruption and bureaucracy, giving more autonomy to local governments, and cracking down on oligarchs. By these and other means, he proposed to make Ukraine more attractive to foreign investment.
- As a native Russian speaker from eastern Ukraine, Zelensky promised to unite Ukrainians, whether they spoke Ukrainian or Russian.

3.2 Poroshenko's campaign

Petro Poroshenko, Zelensky's opponent, was a wealthy businessman who had been in office since the ouster of Yanukovych in February 2014. Poroshenko was in charge when Russia annexed Crimea and when the separatist movements arose in Donbas. (See Ukraine report, §6 & 7.) By the Minsk agreements (Sept. 2014 and Feb. 2015), most fighting in Donbas was scaled back, although Ukraine did not regain complete control of the area.

Poroshenko began modernizing the military, but his goal was to isolate Russia rather than defeat it on the battlefield. To that end, he signed an association agreement with the EU and pushed for NATO membership. He also reduced Ukraine's dependence on Russian gas. In January 2019, he secured the independence of the Ukrainian Church from the patriarchate of Moscow. (See Ukraine report, §4.3, 5.2, 5.4.)

On the domestic front, Poroshenko signed laws promoting Ukrainian as the official language of Ukraine, and decentralized some government functions to local communities.

In the 2019 campaign, Poroshenko promised:
- To reach peace in Donbas.
- To help the economy via decentralization of the government (more local autonomy) and instituting reforms suggested by the International Monetary Fund.
- To modernize Ukraine's military and develop international alliances for protection against Russia, including full membership in the EU and NATO. Constitutional amendments in February 2019 (before the presidential elections) stated that seeking to join the EU and NATO would be Ukraine's policy henceforth.
- To promote Ukrainian language through new laws, uniting the nation against Russian influence. His slogan: "Army, Language, Faith."
- To reduce energy dependence on Russia.

Just before the 2019 presidential election, a scandal broke involving Ukroboronprom, Ukraine's state-owned defense conglomerate, a USSR-era relic. High-level officials of Ukraine were accused of embezzlement and profiteering: selling smuggled and/or substandard military parts to the military for hugely inflated prices. This scandal was particularly damaging to Poroshenko because he was running on a platform of patriotism and military strength.

3.3 Election results

- 2019 (Mar. 31): In the first presidential election, Zelensky earned over 30% of the vote.
- 2019 (Apr. 21): In the run-off election, Zelensky earned a whopping 73% of the vote.
- 2019 (May 20): Zelensky was inaugurated for a five-year term.
- 2019 (Jul. 21): In the parliamentary elections that immediately followed the inauguration, Servant of the People won 254 of 450 seats.

3.4 Possible US involvement in elections

Mike Benz has argued that rather than being a popular landslide, Zelensky's election was engineered

by Ukrainian oligarchs and the US. According to Benz, POTUS Obama engineered a change of regime in 2014, when Yanukovych, who favored working with Putin, was ousted in favor of Poroshenko, who favored NATO and the EU. (See Ukraine §5.7.1.) In Benz's view, Zelensky is a puppet manipulated by the US and NATO, whose campaign promises were merely populist bait for Ukrainians.

There is no evidence of such a US-engineered regime change: no publicly available documents, no whistleblowers' testimony, no financial trail. On the other hand, the CIA has engaged in covert operations for regime change worldwide since the 1950s in (to cite the best-documented ones) Iran, Guatemala, Cuba, Dominican Republic, South Vietnam, Brazil, Chile, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua. "Helping" Zelensky get elected would not be out of character for the CIA.

3.5 Trump phone call with Zelensky

On 7/25/2019, in a phone call with Zelensky, POTUS Trump asked Zelensky to investigate Hunter Biden's involvement with Burisma, a Ukrainian energy conglomerate. (See Ukraine report, §8.) At the time, Joe Biden was running against Trump for POTUS. Trump said he did *not* make a Burisma investigation a necessary condition for dispensing the $400 million of aid that Congress had authorized for Ukraine. The Democrat-controlled House of Representatives believed otherwise, opening an impeachment hearing on the matter on 9/24/2019. The Senate acquitted Trump on 2/5/2020.

During the COVID pandemic, Zelensky imposed lockdowns for two months, followed by weekend lockdowns, quarantines, and masking for about two years. Local governments pushed back against these measures, and Zelensky's party lost support.

4. RUSSO-UKRAINIAN War

When Russia invaded Ukraine on 2/24/2022 (see Ukraine report §10.2), Zelensky, with his media savvy, became the face of Ukrainian resistance. In response to a US offer to evacuate him, he reportedly said, "I need ammunition, not a ride."

Zelensky on 4/1/2022. Photo: President Of Ukraine from Україна / Wikipedia

Soon a series of Western leaders traveled to Kyiv to visit Zelensky. Among them was European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who delivered documents that resulted in Ukraine being granted status as a candidate for the EU on 6/23/2022.

In December 2022, Zelensky was named *Time's Person of the Year*. (Putin had been hailed that way in 2007.)

On 12/21/2022, Zelensky addressed a joint session of Congress, in person. "We stand, we fight, and we will win because we are united: Ukraine, America, and the entire free world." On 12/29/22, Congress voted $47.3 billion in aid to Ukraine.

5. The worst that can be said of Zelensky

Supporters of Zelensky point out that Zelensky is leading Ukraine under extreme circumstances, and that his ability to maintain national morale and to rally international support is invaluable for the war effort. Others find him problematic, for several reasons.

5.1 Ignoring warnings of the Russian invasion

In November 2021 and January 2022, Western intelligence sources warned Zelensky that Russian forces were massing on the borders of Ukraine, and that an attack might be imminent. Zelensky downplayed the warnings. Supporters say he was trying to avoid panic and financial collapse. Critics say this delayed Ukraine's military preparations.

It is difficult to pass judgment on this issue without knowing the state of Ukraine's military in late 2021, or how prone Ukrainians would be to panic at the idea of a second Russian invasion of their territory within eight years.

5.2 Consulting with inner circle (creeping autocracy)

Opponents suggest that as a comedian with no political experience before 2019, Zelensky is out of his depth. They say he relies on an inner circle of advisors who may not have adequate expertise in military or economic affairs. Some Ukrainian lawmakers and observers say he ought to have more discussions with opposition leaders or parliament: they fear he's becoming authoritarian.

Like Zelensky's reaction to warnings of the Russian invasion, Zelensky's use of advisors is a difficult matter to judge. But it's something to bear in mind going forward.

5.3 War strategy

Opponents have criticized Zelensky's military decisions, including the 2024 incursion into Kursk (Russian territory) and subsequent withdrawal. (See Ukraine report §10.2.) He's been criticized for agreeing to the US-brokered truce in the Black Sea in March 2025. His conscription policies have been attacked. among them that men ages 25-60 are subject to conscription; that men ages 18-60 cannot leave the country; and that there is currently no time limit on military service.

It's easier to find someone to second-guess a policy than to develop and execute one, and in war, it's difficult to judge any actions until the long-term effects play out … Again, I withhold judgment, but keep this question in mind going forward.

5.4 Corruption charges

Zelensky campaigned on an anti-corruption platform (see §3.1). However, he himself has been accused of corruption, both before and during his career in politics. A report by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists from 2021 states that Zelensky and his associates owned offshore companies in tax havens like the British Virgin Islands and Belize. Beginning in 2012, those companies received $40+ million from firms linked to Ihor Kolomoisky. Kolomoisky is one of the oligarchs who took control of Ukraine's assets after the dissolution of the USSR. (See Ukraine report §5.6.) His 1+1 TV channel showed the initial run of *Servant of the People* (see §2) and helped promote Zelensky's candidacy in 2019.

Since Zelensky's election in 2019, widespread corruption has been reported in the military, including embezzlement, inflated prices, questionable procurement, and bribery. Zelensky fired many officials and on 9/2/2023, jailed Kolomoisky for fraud and money-laundering.

A poll in mid-2023 found 78% of Ukrainians think Zelensky's actions are responsible for this corruption, although some think he is not personally profiting.

Some Western nations providing financial and military assistance are asking for greater transparency before sending more aid.

5.5 Elections postponed

On 5/20/2019, Zelensky was sworn in for a five-year term. When Russia invaded on 2/24/2022, Zelensky declared martial law for 90 days, which was confirmed by the Rada (parliament). As defined by law in 2015 (soon after the annexation of Crimea), martial law is a temporary state of emergency that allows the government to mobilize resources for defense, conscript men ages 18-60, enforce curfews, implement enhanced security protocols, and if necessary, ban political activities.

Since 2/24/2022, Zelensky has extended martial law every 90 days, and the Rada has confirmed it. Per Ukrainian law, no presidential, parliamentary, or local

elections can be held while martial law is in force. Per the Ukrainian constitution, the president must remain in office until a successor is sworn in. Parliament confirmed this in Feb. 2025. In a poll of Oct. 2023, 81% of Ukrainians opposed wartime elections.

Cities in Ukraine. Map: US Dept. of Defense. Added to the map: Dnipro (Dnipropetrovsk), Kryvyy Rih, and Kherson. The green area at the east is the area occupied by Russians (Donbas, with the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk).

Zelensky has been criticized by Trump and Putin for not holding elections. But even if it were legal to do so under martial law, conducting free and fair elections while the war continues would be exceedingly difficult. Concretizing that: this photo of Zelensky includes his speech of 4/1/2022 to Ukrainians, describing conditions as the Russians withdrew from Kyiv:

Secondly, they are mining all this territory. Mining houses, equipment, even the bodies of killed people. Too many tripwire mines, too many other dangers... We are moving forward. Moving carefully. And everyone who returns to this area must also be very careful! It is still impossible to return to normal life as it was.

Even in areas where Russian troops have withdrawn, life did not go back to normal.

As of mid-March 2025, Russian troops occupy 18-20% of Ukrainian territory—the most densely populated areas. (See Ukraine report §3.1.) Of a pre-war population of 43 million, some 10 million Ukrainians are no longer in their homes. Of those displaced, a third are living elsewhere in Ukraine and the rest have fled the country.

RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR, PART 5: CONCLUSIONS

Answers to the questions in Part 1—my thoughts on the war.

CONTENTS

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The question: What's the historical context: the back-story of Ukraine and its relationship with Russia? I'm especially curious whether, as neighbors, they have any long-standing grudges that make it difficult to maintain the peace.

Ukraine has several long-standing grudges with Russia.

• Ukrainian independence (or not). Based on a 1654 treaty that survives only in incomplete copies, Ukraine thinks Russia recognized its independence. Russians believe that by the same treaty, Ukraine acknowledged Russia's rule, and since that time has considered Ukraine part of Russia. (See Ukraine report §5.4.)

• Russification, a.k.a. suppression of Ukrainian language and culture. Under Stalin and Khrushchev, Ukrainians were forced to learn and write in Russian (See Ukraine report §4.2, 5.6 .)

• Control of Crimea. Crimea is connected by a peninsula to Ukraine, and is Ukraine's major harbor. It's also the home base of Russia's largest fleet—and the only year-round warm-water port to which Russia has access. Crimea was controlled by the Ottoman Empire for more than 300 years before being annexed by Russia in 1783. It remained part of Russia until 1954, when Khrushchev "gifted" it to the Ukrainian SSR.

• Control of Donbas. Ukraine's most important industrial area has a majority population of ethnic Russians that dates back to the late 19th century. (Ukraine report §5.5.1.) Here and elsewhere, Putin claims Russia can intervene if he judges it necessary to protect ethnic Russians living outside Russia's borders. (Putin §6.0.1.)

• Friendship with the West. Like most of the countries in Eastern Europe that were ruled by the USSR's iron hand during the 20th c., Ukraine is turning to the West. Since 2019 it has sought membership in the European Union and NATO. (See Ukraine report §9.) Putin publicly acts as if he believes the West's goal is to defeat and dismember Mother Russia. How many times has NATO invaded a country and taken over the government? Zero. How many times has Russia or the USSR invaded a country and taken over the government? Depending on the criteria you use, at least a dozen, perhaps two dozen.

Conclusion: So many issues exist between Russia and Ukraine that it will be difficult to arrange a lasting settlement that's satisfying for both sides.

2. MORAL STATURE OF PUTIN VS. ZELENSKY

The question: What is the moral stature of the leader of Russia and of the leader of Ukraine? I don't believe one can judge "the Russians" or "the Ukrainians" as collective nationalities, but their leaders can certainly be judged for their actions and for the principles they seem

to be operating on.

Zelensky

Zelensky was elected to lead Ukraine in 2019 in what appears to have been a free and fair election. (See Zelensky report §3.3.) In accordance with the Ukrainian constitution, and per a vote of the Ukrainian Rada (parliament), Zelensky must remain in office until martial law ends, which one would expect to mean until the end of the war. (See Zelensky report §5.5.) Hence there's no basis for Trump and/or Putin accusing Zelensky of refusing to hold elections or holding power illegitimately.

Zelensky may be involved in some corruption: he apparently was before he became president. (See Zelensky report §5.4.) Aside from that, the worst that can be said of him seems to be that he doesn't have a very sophisticated grasp either of the realities of international politics —especially with regard to Big Brother next door—or of military strategy. (See Zelensky report §5.1-§5.3.) That ignorance might cost the lives of millions of Ukrainians, which would be a tragedy. But in general, ignorance is not a moral failing unless it's willful.

I'd have to hear a lot more negatives about Zelensky's actions in 2010-2022 before I condemned him for the way he's behaved in the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Putin

The negatives on Putin go from worse to even worse.

Putin has retained power for 25 years by elections where outside observers are not permitted. The Russian constitution has been amended so that he can remain in office until 2036. (See Putin §4.3.) If he's still alive in 2036, I'm betting the constitution will be amended again so he can continue to wield power. For Putin to criticize Zelensky for not holding elections is laughable.

The corruption of Russia's government is legendary, and has been for a century. There are rumors that Putin has leveraged the corruption to become the wealthiest man in the world, although the wealth is said to be held by close allies rather than in his own name. This is speculation, of course, because Russia has no free speech, no free press, and no checks on government power.

Putin is willing to use any means to maintain and extend his power. The non-physical means range from lies and threats (see Ukraine §10.2) to cyberwarfare and cybercrime (see Putin report §8).

Which brings us to the worst accusation against Putin. He's willing to use brute force to gain his ends, and deaths don't matter to him if he achieves those ends. Political opponents die of poison or defenestration (falling out of windows). (See Putin report §4.3.) Troops invade, tanks roll in, missiles scream through the air to blow up both civilian and military targets. In the areas of Ukraine that Russian troops have withdrawn from, mass graves have been found. (See Putin report §8.)

Nothing Zelensky has been accused of comes even close to what evidence indisputably proves Putin has done.

3. WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CURRENT WAR? − ALSO, UKRAINE & NATO

The question: Who's responsible for the current war? Is it as simple as who invaded whom? I've heard some say, for example, that Putin only invaded because Ukraine was moving to join NATO, so really, the war is Ukraine's fault. Closely related issue: Should Ukraine be allowed to join NATO? Some say that might well lead to nuclear war. On the other hand, Putin tends to retreat when an American president is clearly willing to hold his ground. Is it worth continuing to resist, in hopes Putin will cave?

Re who began the war: Russia invaded because Putin considered it intolerable for Ukraine to join the EU and NATO. (Putin report §6.3.3 & 6.11.1; Ukraine report §9.) There are two sides to this issue, though.

On the one hand: sovereign nations have the right to set their own foreign policy, so of course Ukraine should be allowed to become a member of the EU and of NATO, if it so desires. If Putin wants Ukraine to ally with Russia instead, he should find a way to make that alliance politically attractive, rather than using military force.

On the other hand: Putin's record over the past 25 years shows he's brutal about enforcing what he sees

as Russia's "rights" in the "near abroad". (See Putin report §6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4.) In the cases of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, he's found a way to block EU and NATO membership without a huge commitment of troops or money. He simply foments separatist movements within the boundaries of aspiring members. (See Putin report §6.1 & 6.3.) EU and NATO rules do not allow new members to join who are dealing with internal rebellion. Zelensky and preceding Ukrainian leaders should have recognized Putin's habit of fomenting separatist movements, and figured out in advance how to deal with such problems.

If you're going to challenge the worst bully on the playground, you'd better either be confident in your ability to fight, or be confident that your friends will fly to your rescue. Starting a fight without adequate forethought is a recipe for black eyes and bruises.

As a sovereign nation, Ukraine can and should choose its own international policies—but it cannot expect other nations to rescue it from the consequences of those choices.

The world would be a very dangerous and unstable place if NATO and the US unhesitatingly sent military aid every time a nation made an ill-informed choice about provoking a neighbor.

4. US INTERESTS

The question: Does the US have skin in this game? For example, is the stability of the region important to us? Do we have important allies there? Do we have long-term strategic goals in the area? Does helping either side win serve the principles on which the US was founded? If we do have skin in the game, to what extent should we get involved: money, weapons, advisors, troops, humanitarian aid?

• Stability of the region: Having Russia control eastern Ukraine, or even all of Ukraine, would not be a new and significant threat to the US or NATO. NATO members Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania share borders with western Ukraine. But Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania are protected to some extent by the Carpathian Mountains, and Poland has long been a focus of NATO activity.

• Allies: Ukraine has been a NATO Partner for Peace since 1994, and had a "distinctive relationship" with NATO since 1997. (See Ukraine report §5.6.) Because of the annexation of Crimea and separatist movements in Donbas and eastern Ukraine, the EU and NATO have set no timeline for Ukraine to become a full member of either organization. If Ukraine *were* a full member, the difference would be that NATO's Article 5 would apply: an attack on Ukraine would require that other NATO members respond with military force. (See Putin report §6.3.3.)

• Ideology: Ukraine is not a nation based on the US's principles of individual rights, checks and balances, free speech, etc. It's a recovering Communist nation. As far as operating principles go, I am anti-Russia more than I'm pro-Ukraine.

• Strategic aims: The US doesn't have a lot to lose in that area. If Russia took over all of Ukraine, its armies would still have a long march to reach NATO countries. Its navy would still have to fight their way past NATO allies to get to the Mediterranean, and more NATO allies to get to the Indian Ocean or the Atlantic. (See Putin report §6.4.4.)

Powell Doctrine analysis

Another way of looking at whether we should send troops to Ukraine is to analyze the problem with the Powell Doctrine. This was formulated by General Colin Powell in 1990-1991, after the disastrous Vietnam War, when the US was getting into the Gulf War. Powell proposes that before the US intervenes militarily, the following questions must be answered satisfactorily. I've added my thoughts re Ukraine for each one.

• Is a vital national security interest at stake? For Ukraine: no.

• Is there a clear objective? For Ukraine: presumably driving the Russians out of the areas they occupy in eastern Ukraine.

- Have the risks and consequences been fully analyzed? For Ukraine, this would involve figuring out Putin's likely reactions to US and NATO troops on the ground in Ukraine. Putin's moral compass points unerringly to power and wealth, so we should not overestimate his willingness to be "reasonable" in Western terms.
- Have all non-military means been exhausted? For Ukraine: economic sanctions seem to be having little effect. What else could we try?
- Is there a plausible exit strategy? For Ukraine: no exit strategy, because Russia has been on their border for centuries and is likely to remain there for centuries more.
- Is the action supported by US citizens, and does it have broad international support? For Ukraine: as of early 2025, only about 20% of Americans favor sending troops to Ukraine. About 50-60% approve of sending Americans there for non-combat roles such as intelligence or supplying weapons.

5. FINAL SUMMARY

Is there anything we could gain by supporting Ukraine? I'd prefer that Putin's Russia control less territory rather than more. But Ukraine is not as vital a buffer for NATO'S Eastern European members as it is for Putin's Russia.

Given that, what should we offer Ukraine? NOT troops: we don't have enough skin in the game to require that. I'd like to see Ukraine remain independent, but it has to be strong enough to maintain that independence without foreign troops, since stationing foreign troops so close to Russia is asking for trouble.

For the moment, I'd like to see the US offer a finite amount of military aid (weapons and funds) and humanitarian aid. Since Ukraine's government has had issues with corruption, any aid should require transparency, so official observers can check what the aid is being spent on. And it should require a plan going forward: specific goals, rather than just fighting as long as anyone's willing to give money.