House of Cards: Examining the Justifications Behind Putin’s Failed Gambit in Ukraine

Jonathan Ip

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses

Recommended Citation
Ip, Jonathan, "House of Cards: Examining the Justifications Behind Putin's Failed Gambit in Ukraine" (2024). CMC Senior Theses. 3441.
https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/3441

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you by Scholarship@Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in this collection by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact scholarship@claremont.edu.
House of Cards: Examining the Justifications Behind Putin’s Failed Gambit in Ukraine

submitted to
Professor Hilary Appel

by
Jonathan Ip

for
Senior Thesis
Fall 2023
December 4, 2023
Abstract

This paper examines how Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to legitimize the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The paper focuses on three justifications identified from Putin’s addresses and existing scholarly arguments: the threat of NATO expansion into Ukraine; the use of historical references such as the Great Patriotic War to portray Ukrainians as neo-Nazis and Russophobes; and the reclamation of lost Russian territories through the Russian world concept. This paper concludes that Putin employed such justifications to conceal his expansionist goals of annexing Ukraine. Moreover, this paper assesses how the 2022 invasion backfired for Putin as he not only failed to capture Ukraine, but inadvertently strengthened Ukraine’s case to join NATO after the war.
# Table of Contents

**Chapter One: Introduction** ................................................................. 1

**Chapter Two: Putin’s Justification of NATO’s threat** ........................................ 3

Overview of Putin’s 2014 Crimea Annexation and 2022 Ukrainian Invasion Addresses…... 4
Putin’s Address on the 2014 Annexation of Crimea........................................ 5
Putin’s Address on the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine............................................. 7
Similarities and Differences in Putin’s 2014 and 2022 Addresses.......................... 8
Russia’s Claims About No-NATO Enlargement Agreement................................... 9
Scholarly arguments: What exactly does Putin find threatening about NATO? ..........11
The 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit and Arguments Supporting Putin..................... 15
Analysis of Russia’s NATO Justification to Invade Ukraine................................ 18

**Chapter Three: Putin’s Rhetorical Use of the Past** ...................................... 21

Putin’s Denazification Rhetoric........................................................................ 21
Putin’s Reference of the Great Patriotic War.................................................. 22
Putin’s “Russophobia” Rhetoric: Invoking Anti-Russian Sentiment....................... 23

**Chapter Four: The Russian World Concept** .............................................. 25

Putin’s Address, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”... .............. 26
Scholarly Responses to “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” ........ 27
The Origins of "Russkiy mir"........................................................................... 29
The Russian Diaspora: The First Dimension of "russkiy mir"............................... 29
Increasing Sphere of Influence: The Second Dimension of "russkiy mir"............... 30
2008 Georgian Aggression: Through the Lens of "russkiy mir"............................ 32
Reclaiming Lost Territories: The Third Dimension of "russkiy mir"....................... 33
2014 Crimea Annexation: Through the Lens of "russkiy mir" ......................................................... 33
Inconsistencies within "russkiy mir" and the Russian world concept ........................................ 34
Concluding Discussion of the Russian world concept ................................................................. 35

Chapter Five: Implications of the 2022 Ukrainian Invasion .............................................. 37
NATO’s Status with Ukraine after the 2022 Invasion ............................................................... 37
The End of “Finlandization” ........................................................................................................ 39

Chapter Six: Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 41

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................... 42
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to first thank Professor Appel for agreeing to be my thesis advisor this fall. The weekly office hours and feedback I received from Professor Appel were invaluable, and her expertise in Russian politics and NATO ensured my paper met high standards. I am immensely grateful that the entire process went smoothly during the semester.

I would also like to thank my family for encouraging me to study abroad in London during my junior fall. If not for my semester abroad, I would not have taken classes at University College London’s School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies and realized my interest in post-Soviet politics. Professor Peter Braga was instrumental in developing my passion for Putin and the Russian world concept.

To my thesis buddies, roommates and friends who have been so supportive of me throughout the process, thank you! The infinite number of hours and days spent using the Pomodoro timer at Poppa, South and the reading room were well worth it!

I am thankful for my time at Claremont McKenna College during the past three years. The school has taught me so much, and I will treasure the memories I have made here.
First Chapter: Introduction

When Russia amassed its troops near Ukraine’s borders during the winter of 2021, many military experts believed a full-scale invasion of Ukraine would be highly improbable, yet Putin surprised the world by initiating an attack on Kyiv in February 2022 (Driedger and Polianskii 2023). Putin’s decision to engage in war was a calculated risk and involved multiple stages of planning. He and his staff, however, likely did not anticipate the invasion to go wrong in a multitude of ways. Not only did Putin fail to capture Kyiv, but Russia likely lost its soft power and influence in Ukraine to NATO and the West.

This thesis examines Putin’s justifications for invading Ukraine based on his address, speeches and existing academic journals on the war. The thesis then argues that Putin exaggerated the threat of Ukraine’s possible accession to NATO and the alliance’s willingness to play by its own rules. Next, in order to garner support for the invasion, Putin claimed to “demilitarize” Ukraine from neo-Nazis and Russophobes, in order to justify his special military operation. Finally, Putin justified the need to “reintegrate” lost territories he regarded as his own, through his interpretation of the Russian world concept. Putin’s decision, however, failed to explain why the invasion was none other than his desire to pursue his expansionist goals and expand Russia’s influence in the “near abroad.”

This thesis has six chapters. After an introduction, the next chapter analyzes how Putin justified the Ukrainian invasion as defending Russia against NATO’s eastward expansion. Using Putin’s two speeches addressing the invasion of Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022, this thesis examines how he portrayed the threat of NATO. I then use academic journals and articles to better understand if Putin perceived the alliance as a military, geopolitical, or symbolic threat. The second chapter concludes that Putin leveraged Ukraine’s possible accession into the alliance
as a geopolitical justification to invade Crimea in 2014 and stand up against the West. In regard to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this chapter argues that Putin exaggerated NATO’s threat towards Russia’s borders in order to pursue his expansionist goals and annex Ukraine.

The third chapter discusses Putin’s use of historical references and memory politics to convey the dangers that neo-Nazis in Ukraine posed to Russia. By referencing the Great Patriotic War, Putin justified the invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 as a battle against growing “Russophobia” in the West as well as the illegitimate “neo-Nazi” government. This chapter argues that Putin used historical references and claims to justify his “special military operation”.

The fourth chapter examines Putin’s evolving interpretation of the “russkiy mir” concept to justify the reintegration of lost territories into Russia. Using Putin’s speech, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” as well as existing scholarly journals on the Russian world concept, this chapter argues that Putin’s current interpretation of the Russian world demonstrated his desire to expand Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet sphere. The evolving interpretations of “russkiy mir” proved how Putin crafted his narrative of the Russian world to justify the Russian invasion in 2022.

The fifth chapter discusses the implications of the Ukrainian invasion in 2022 on its future with NATO, former Soviet states, and Russia itself. The chapter considers the next steps, risks and arguments for and against Ukraine joining NATO. Finally, the chapter discusses the implications of Finland and Sweden’s request to join NATO, followed by a concluding discussion on deterring future Russian aggression.
Second Chapter: Putin’s Justification of NATO’s Threat

In his 2007 Munich Security Conference speech, Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke out against a unipolar international order dominated by the United States. He argued that the expansion of NATO carried no intentions of modernization or ensuring security in Europe. Instead, the alliance existed primarily for “military and political” functions operating near Russia’s borders and tilting the balance of power in the West’s favor (Putin 2007).

Sixteen years later, Putin has continued to use the threat of NATO as a justification for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, specifically with regard to the alliance’s eastward expansion towards Russian territory. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 called into question how realistic and truthful Putin was about the threat of the West. While Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine violated international sovereignty norms, this section examines Putin’s justifications and methods of garnering support to invade Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Moreover, to what extent did the Kremlin feel threatened by the West to attack Ukraine? Why did Russia attack Ukraine but not another former Soviet state such as Belarus? This chapter examines to what extent NATO posed a legitimate threat to Russian border security. Alternatively, the chapter analyzes whether Putin used NATO as a justification to pursue territorial gains in Ukraine.

With these questions in mind, this chapter first examines Putin’s two major speeches addressing the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Next, the chapter investigates Russia’s claims about the alleged No-NATO enlargement pledge in 1990 and explores scholarly accounts of Putin’s relationship with NATO. I then provide my analysis of Putin’s speeches in relation to those of other scholars to determine to what extent Putin’s justifications about NATO were legitimate.
Overview of Putin’s 2014 Crimea Annexation and 2022 Ukrainian Invasion Addresses

This section examines two of President Putin’s speeches: his national address after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, as well as his address after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. After identifying the main ideas and common themes, I compare the addresses’ similarities and differences. To fully understand Russia’s basis for the invasion of Ukraine, I take Putin at his word and assume his arguments are sincere before I move to scholarly arguments in academic journals.

In his addresses on the invasion of Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022, Putin cited the threat of NATO expanding and moving closer to Russia, directly threatening his country’s borders and security. Putin in 2014 cited the annexation of Crimea as a domestic affair and peaceful project to reincorporate Sevastopol, Crimea and Russia, as they shared a long history (Putin 2014). Putin rationalized his “reintegration project” by arguing that it was the will of the Crimean people who voted in favor of reunification with Russia. Putin proceeded to defend the invasion of Crimea from counterarguments by outlining how NATO violated international norms, such as the decision to invade Kosovo. Therefore, NATO countries should not have interfered in Russia’s domestic affairs if they did not even follow their own rules.

As for the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin’s address focused intensely on the West’s growing anti-Russian sentiment, the eastward expansion of NATO and its growing proximity to Russia to justify his version of a “special military operation” (Putin 2022). Putin’s 2022 speech emphasized NATO’s supposed anti-Russian sentiment and unwillingness to cooperate with the Kremlin. He justified the annexation of Eastern Ukraine and the Donbass region as a reaction to NATO’s containment of Russian influence and protection of citizens from Ukrainian far-right nationalists who were supported by NATO.
Putin’s Address on the 2014 Annexation of Crimea

In his 2014 Crimea address, Putin characterized himself as a man of the people, assisting Crimeans in seeking peaceful reunification. Putin’s justification for annexing Crimea focused on the alliance’s eastward expansion and its uncooperative agenda with Russia. His address centered around the three main topics: 1) the reunification of Crimea as a referendum-driven resolution that was an internal matter for Russia’s own political decision, 2) NATO’s violation of international laws based on the precedent in assisting Kosovo independence and 3) the importance of safeguarding Crimea and the city of Sevastopol from NATO forces (Putin 2014).

Putin began his speech by outlining an independent referendum where 96% of Crimeans were in favor of reuniting with Russia. He provided a descriptive history of the shared past and pride between Russia and Crimea, as well as the historical city of Sevastopol. The separation of Russia and Ukraine was “impossible to imagine” for Putin because of the fall of the USSR (Putin 2014). By sympathizing with the Crimeans, who he argued were unjustly controlled by far-right nationalists, Putin’s decision to annex Crimea was supported by Crimeans themselves who chose to free themselves from Ukrainian neo-nationalists. Putin made clear that the decision to “reintegrate” Crimea was an internal affair that had to be conducted, as demonstrated by the results of the referendum. He questioned why his colleagues from Western Europe and North America believed that the annexation violated the norms of international law.

Putin’s next focus in his speech concerned the intervention of the West in Russian affairs. Putin provided context on the Western hypocrisy that has set “with its own hands in a very similar situation,” which was the unilateral separation of Kosovo (Putin 2014). Putin argued that the West pursued its own initiative of supporting and legitimizing a breakaway territory, and thus violated the United Nation Charter which stated declarations of independence “may, and often
do, violate domestic legislation” (Putin 2014). The West condemned Putin’s decision to invade another country’s territory, yet Putin argued that the West constantly established international laws but violated its own decrees soon after (Brunk and Hakimi 2022). The West’s support of Kosovo’s independence therefore served as a basis for Russia's annexation. From Putin’s perspective, there was no excuse for NATO countries to ignore their own international principles when members of the alliance themselves accused Russia of violating the United Nation Charter. He detailed how NATO had, since the fall of the Soviet Union, brought international extremism and terrorism to Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya - acts which all ignored the UN Security Council and its laws. Furthermore, Putin argued that the intervention in Crimea was perceived by the West as aggressive and expansionist; yet the Crimean residents freely voted in a referendum to reintegrate with Russia. Putin made clear that the West and NATO had no right or reason to interfere in Russia’s internal affairs.

Putin only referred explicitly to NATO towards Russia in the last third of his speech, where he discussed how the Kremlin constantly “strived to engage in dialogue with our colleagues in the West” through improving trust and open, equal and fair relationships (Putin 2014). Instead, the West failed to reciprocate this dialogue and backfired from initial levels of trust. Putin addressed NATO due to the looming and increasing threat he observed, militarily and geopolitically. While Putin denounced NATO for expanding its military infrastructure eastwards towards his borders, his discussion of NATO demonstrated how he viewed a growing Western military alliance that was trying to contain Russia’s sphere of influence and internal affairs. Although Putin did not explicitly refer to NATO as the main reason for invading Crimea, he viewed the potential of “declarations from [Kyiv] about Ukraine soon joining NATO” as a major barrier to his overarching goal of “saving” an historically Russian territory within Ukraine (Putin
2014). His address demonstrated concerns about possible Ukrainian accession into NATO as a direct threat to reclaim the territories of Sevastopol and Crimea. He worried that if NATO were to conquer Sevastopol and seize “Russia’s military glory, this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of Southern Russia” (Putin 2014). Furthermore, Putin implied that NATO represented an armed threat when he argued that he was strongly opposed to “a military alliance making itself at home right in our backyard in our historic territory” (Putin 2014). Throughout his speech, Putin cited the lack of mutual trust between NATO and Russia, where he characterized the military alliance as overreaching, failing to maintain cordial relations with Russia and intervening in other countries’ internal affairs. His 2014 address confirmed his threats about NATO’s sphere of influence and soft power over Russia’s neighboring countries. Putin was therefore forced to annex Crimea to save its residents, but also prevent Ukraine from integrating further with NATO.

**Putin’s Address on the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine**

Academic scholars concede the 2022 invasion of Ukraine as the next phase of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and merely an extension of Putin’s decision to annex Crimea in 2014. In similar terms, Putin’s 2022 speech was a continuation of the 2014 address. Putin’s focus and attention on NATO’s agenda intensified, as he claimed that NATO constantly violated international law. He argued throughout his speech that NATO continued to intervene in Russia’s domestic affairs, such as protecting Ukrainians or “peacefully” reclaiming lost Russian territories. While in 2014, Putin emphasized the shared unity between Russia, Crimea and Sevastopol, his 2022 speech focused almost entirely on NATO’s violation of international law and UN Security Council decrees. Putin stated that NATO “deceived us, or, to put it simply, they have played us,” citing the alliance’s “exceptionalist” and selfish behavior in ignoring Russia’s
“protests and concerns,” while continuing to expand its borders (Putin 2022). Putin conveyed to his audience that Russia was singled out, where old treaties and agreements that were once in place with NATO “[were] no longer effective” and respected by the alliance. Reiterating a similar message to his 2014 speech, he referred to the humanitarian catastrophe NATO countries caused through the illegal use of military power and operations in the Middle East. Moreover, Putin’s 2022 speech magnified an anti-Russian narrative, where he portrayed NATO and the West as taking advantage of a weaker Russia. Putin’s tactic was therefore to garner Russian support and justify his invasion of Ukraine as a symbol of fighting the West and standing up against NATO.

**Similarities and Differences in Putin’s 2014 and 2022 Addresses**

In both addresses, Putin voiced a similar message that NATO threatened Russia’s borders and expanded its military infrastructure. He made clear that his actions were an act of self-defense and the result of direct provocation by the West. He also outlined how NATO’s unjustified attack on Kosovo demonstrated the West’s unwillingness to play by the rules while attempting to control non-NATO countries’ affairs. Putin's reaction to NATO's encroachment can be characterized as an effort to protect and reclaim the sacred and historical sovereignty of Crimea and the Donbass. Putin portrayed himself as a defender and patriot of the Russian nation, rather than an imperialist leader on the offensive. In his 2014 speech, Putin justified the annexation of Crimea as an operation to “reintegrate” a lost Russian territory. He cited NATO only 6 times in his 2014 address in contrast to 41 times in his 2022 speech (Putin 2014, 2022b), and mentioned that the West constantly overstepped boundaries and made decisions without Russia. In essence, Putin warned NATO that he was merely protecting the Crimean and Russian people from the West’s growing threats. Putin questioned the sanctions imposed on him because
of the annexation of Crimea and warned NATO not to involve itself in Russia’s domestic issues (Putin 2014). Putin’s 2022 address, meanwhile, explained that his planned “special military operation” was a reaction to NATO’s encroachment and influence over Ukraine and the Donbass (Putin 2022). Putin’s speech in 2022 engaged in more history of Russia’s relationship with NATO from the beginning of the post-Soviet era to the present day, justifying his invasion as a constitutional obligation to defend his country and prevent NATO from eastward expansion towards Russia’s borders.

**Russia’s Claims About No-NATO Enlargement Agreement**

While Putin’s 2014 and 2022 addresses provided a basic understanding of his perspective on NATO, the addresses themselves did not fully explain or convey Russia’s relationship with the alliance. This chapter now transitions to an examination of Putin's assertions about NATO and explores the basis of his claims. While Putin hinted at NATO’s decision to push the boundaries and cross lines, he did not explicitly refer in his 2014 and 2022 addresses to significant events that may have influenced his decision to invade Crimea and Ukraine, such as the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008. He reiterated that the West “crossed the line” on “numerous occasions,” and in his 2022 address, suggested that the West took full advantage of a weakening Soviet Union and ignored all “old treaties and agreements” (Putin 2022). While Putin did not expand in further detail on the “old treaties,” he alluded to NATO's alleged pledge with Russia that it promised not to expand eastwards. This section analyzes the No-NATO enlargement pledge to understand the context of the 1990 Germany’s reunification negotiations and conclude whether a NATO agreement was brokered by both sides.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian officials claimed that NATO violated its “pledge” made in 1990 not to expand into any former Soviet states (Kramer 2009). In 1997,
Mikhail Gorbachev asserted that NATO violated its pledge not to expand eastward in the event of reunification between West and East Germany. Tensions surrounding the controversial NATO enlargement pledge increased in 2001 when NATO was preparing to offer membership to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, who were all part of the USSR until 1991. Putin further elaborated that the United States “promised the Soviet leadership that NATO jurisdiction or military presence will not expand one inch to the east and that the unification of Germany will not lead to the spread of NATO’s military organization to the east.” (Putin 2022b). The United States’ leaders vehemently denied such allegations and suggested that the former USSR officials fictitiously created a concept of a No-NATO expansion commitment long after the fall of the Soviet Union. No other Western leaders agreed to any “categorical assurances” regarding NATO’s restrictions. Kramer writes that Gorbachev and his colleagues never considered the possibility of NATO expansion to other Warsaw Pact countries beyond East Germany, because he was confident that the USSR would continue to work with its allies in the Warsaw Pact (Kramer 2009). The idea of NATO’s eastward expansion was never a consideration during the 1990 negotiations. Therefore, the former USSR officials, including Gorbachev, would have only brought up the alleged NATO enlargement pledge after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Declassified materials that were eventually published revealed that no formal pledge or assurance was ever made by Western countries on a No-NATO expansion rule, exposing Putin’s accusation as baseless and invalidating his arguments. Putin, however, still claimed that NATO allegedly broke its initial promise, and therefore Russia was the victim in this situation (Wolff 2015). His false narrative of the West as being responsible for ruining lasting and inclusive peace in Europe demonstrated how he used NATO’s no-expansion narrative as a major justification to invade Ukraine.
Despite the declassified records revealing no NATO enlargement agreements were settled between the Soviet Union and the West in the 1990s, Putin still believed that NATO violated its pledge and did not maintain its promises. He may have used the debunked myth to legitimize the invasion of Ukraine and gather domestic support against the decadent West. The question now is what aspects of NATO Putin perceived as a threat to his borders. It is crucial to assess whether NATO’s perceived threats justified his actions to invade Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022.

NATO prides itself on being not only an intergovernmental military alliance but also a democracy-promotion organization. NATO’s goals are to combat military nationalism, chauvinism, racism and other destructive forces that have wrought havoc in Europe’s past (Epstein 2005). The military alliance successfully required countries such as the Baltic States to create democratic norms and institutions. However, for Putin, the act of democratization was seen as NATO exerting its influence abroad. The alliance’s goals ran contrary to his own goals of expanding Russia’s sphere of influence and his attempt to regain superpower status in international order.

**Scholarly arguments: What exactly does Putin find threatening about NATO?**

While the previous section established that the West did not break any promises with Russia about eastward expansion into former Soviet countries, this section assesses what aspect of NATO Putin regarded as a threat, which could justify his decision to invade Ukraine. Scholars who have written about Russia’s relationship with NATO can help answer how the alliance’s military presence near Russia angered Putin. This section addresses the growing threat Putin observed, militarily and geopolitically from NATO.

In his December 2021 speech, Putin and the Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry made unrealistic demands on NATO, calling for the alliance to essentially shut down and dissolve in
Europe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021). Specifically, the unfeasible demands called for NATO to withdraw its troops and weapons from post-Soviet states, to prevent “dangerous military activity” and pledge to “further enlargement of NATO” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021). While the West would never agree to such terms and conditions with Russia, Putin’s demands hinted at his frustration with NATO’s presence and influence in the post-Soviet sphere. William Burns, the current CIA Director, said, in “conversations with key Russian players, from… the Kremlin to Putin’s sharpest liberal critics, I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests” (Mearsheimer 2022). Further examining Russia's relationship with NATO can help explain Putin’s justification behind the invasion of Ukraine, and whether such justifications were based on true threats, or simply an excuse for Putin to advance his imperialist and expansionist goals.

According to the literature, there are varying perspectives on Russia's relationship with NATO. Kimberly Marten argues that NATO serves as a symbolic threat to Russia. The underlying cause of Russian distrust and hostility toward the West was not due to NATO’s geographical enlargement, although a growing alliance certainly aggravated Russia’s mistrust of the West (Marten 2017). Instead, she believes Russia wanted to remain a great power whose interests would be taken seriously by the West. In the 1990s and 2000s, Russia was dismayed by its declining status, relative power and global influence. The West could afford to disrespect a waning superpower that was struggling through a destabilizing post-Communist transition. Marten’s constructivist theory argues that NATO’s territorial expansion never served as a direct military threat to Russia. Instead, a weakened Russia and its people were strongly averse to accepting Russia’s diminished role in a Western-dominated liberal democratic world order.
Marten also points out that many Russian foreign policy and military experts understood that NATO enlargement never actually posed a threat to Russia’s security. Furthermore, expanding NATO would abate the alliance’s military strength’s value and worthiness (Marten 2020, Appel and Taw 2021). Countries with weaker military powers and vulnerable economies would not add, or potentially even deplete an existing military alliance’s resources. From a constructivist point of view, Russia’s concerns about NATO arise from the alliance’s global influence, status and soft power, rather than the threat of hard power and military capabilities. Marten would contend that Putin's apprehension about NATO's military infrastructure’s advancement toward Russian borders is invalid and unjustified. Instead, Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine originated from Putin’s desire to challenge and attack the status-quo of symbolic Western liberal order and status. The invasion of Ukraine demonstrated to the West that Putin was still eager to maintain his sphere of influence and remain relevant in international order, similar to his 2007 Munich speech about the threat of a unipolar American-dominated global order.

Elias Götz (2016) identifies Russia’s relationship with NATO through a realist lens that identifies state interactions through the role of national interest and power in global politics. Similar to Marten’s argument, Götz believes Russia’s weakened position in the 1990s and 2000s, through the country’s post-Communist transition crisis, weakened the Kremlin’s ability to challenge NATO’s enlargement (Götz 2016, Appel and Taw 2021). Though Russia hoped to block former Soviet states from joining NATO, it was simply incapable of doing so militarily and was in no position to prevent countries that once belonged to the Soviet sphere of influence from joining NATO. However, thanks to Russia’s economic revival in the mid 2000’s, as a result of the country’s growing material capabilities, high oil and gas prices, Putin was incentivized to expand Russia’s geopolitical influence in its near abroad and pursued increasingly assertive
foreign policies in the former Soviet states (Götz 2016). This can be evidenced by Russia’s shift from soft to hard power, such as the military invasion of Crimea in 2014, a brazen response to NATO’s supposed “eastward enlargement” towards Russian borders. However, Götz identifies a shortcoming when analyzing Russia’s view of NATO from a geopolitical lens. Russia’s neighbor, China, has overtaken Russia in terms of economic strength and has demonstrated that it is a global superpower with strong military capabilities. China is by far a larger threat to Russia’s power and status, having expanded its political influence in Central Asia and the Caspian area, directly competing with Russia’s trading and net exports. However, Russia has elected to focus its attention on NATO and the United States. It has even developed comparably cordial relations with China. Götz argues that Russia has been selective with its definition of the “near abroad” and “external pressures.” From a solely geopolitical perspective, Russia has instead focused on its Western counterparts rather than an increasingly powerful and competitive China. Götz asserts that Russia should be less concerned with keeping Ukraine out of NATO and more with China’s growing military superpower adjacent to Russia’s borders.

A counterargument to Götz’s perspective, however, is that NATO and Russia are politically polarized and ideologically divided. NATO countries pride themselves on freedom and democracy, while Russia and China share similar political systems where power is concentrated in an authoritarian government. Therefore, Putin is not as worried about China if the two superpowers share similar ideologies. As a result, Götz’s geopolitics argument, while compelling, does not fully explain Putin’s attitude and anger towards NATO, especially symbolically and ideologically.

Andrew Wolff (2015) views NATO enlargement as a geopolitical threat to Russia as well. However, he emphasizes NATO and Russia’s deep and fundamental disagreement in worldviews
that led to Putin feeling threatened and deciding to invade Ukraine. Wolff argues that Putin interprets the world in relative power calculations, national sovereignty and security (Wolff 2015). In contrast, the West has a liberal worldview. NATO enlargement can provide stability for all of Europe and increase overall alliance security in the West. However, from Russia’s perspective, NATO is an outdated military bloc and its encroachment and expansion serve as a direct threat to Russian security while limiting Russia’s status and region of privileged interests.

At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin said, “I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe” (Wolf 2015). Instead, it “represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust.” In addition, the Russian government still allegedly views the situation in Ukraine through a lens of Western betrayal, creeping NATO encroachment and disrespect for security concerns.

**The 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit and Arguments Supporting Putin**

In 2008 during the Bucharest Summit, Ukraine and Georgia were denied a Membership Action Plan (“MAP”) in NATO because they failed to meet the alliance’s democratic and political standards (NATO 2008). However, the two countries were promised membership into NATO in the future (Manutscharjan, 2008), but were not given a rigid timeline. The indecisive outcome of the Summit was ambiguous and only added to the two countries’ security vulnerabilities. While many countries, including the United States, advocated for the two countries to join NATO, France and Germany were especially reluctant, warning that NATO’s further expansion would drastically affect the “balance of power” between Russia and the West (Appel and Taw 2021). NATO’s decision to even consider allowing Ukraine and Georgia to join its alliance angered Putin, who believed the two ex-Soviet republics were shifting towards
Western integration and away from Russia’s influence (Wolff 2015). Moreover, the “half step membership” plan that delayed Ukraine and Georgia’s membership demonstrated a lack of consensus among NATO countries on the future direction of the alliance and its enlargement plans. Putin's decision to invade Georgia in August of 2008 and Crimea in 2014 signaled to the West his willingness and demonstration through hard power to prevent further NATO expansion. The invasion of Crimea, Wolff (2015) believes, was therefore completely rational in strictly geopolitical terms, based on the unsettling outcome of the Bucharest Summit in 2008. Although Wolff wrote on the dangers of NATO enlargement in 2015 before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he warned that it was not in NATO’s interest for Ukraine to become another “frozen conflict,” fall into perpetual strife or be completely dominated by Russia (Wolff 2015). He argued that the best option was for Ukraine to remain a buffer zone between the West and Russia, which also meant that NATO ultimately should not grant Ukraine membership. He did, however, argue that if Russia were to invade Ukraine and formally annex the Donbass region, NATO should allow the “Western” part of Ukraine to join the alliance since it would be vulnerable to further Russian aggression (Wolff 2015). Since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Wolff would likely support his argument that Ukraine should join NATO for its safety and security, protecting itself from Russia.

Furthermore, John Mearsheimer defends Russia’s actions to invade Crimea and Ukraine from a realist perspective. Mearsheimer (2014) famously argues that in “Geopolitics 101: great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory.” He believes NATO’s actions, especially its inconclusive decisions from the 2008 Bucharest Summit, propelled Russia into using hard power to limit the West’s influence near its borders. In a 2022 interview with the New Yorker, Mearsheimer argued, Putin “made it unequivocally clear at the time that [Russia]
viewed this as an existential threat, and they drew a line in the sand” (Chotiner 2022). In addition, Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008 should have dispelled any remaining doubts about Putin’s determination to prevent Georgia and Ukraine from joining NATO. Mearsheimer also argues that the timing of the Russian President’s “coercive” efforts in Ukraine and his assertion of foreign policy interests was very logical (Mearsheimer 2014). In other words, preventing former Soviet states such as Ukraine from integrating with the West was the natural outcome for Russia and fit the behavior of great powers. Instead, Ukraine should have closed off its relations with the West to “accommodate the Russians” (Chotiner 2022). Mearsheimer compares the actions of Ukraine and Georgia joining NATO to if China had assembled a global military alliance with only Canada and Mexico. The United States, excluded, would surely feel provoked and threatened by China due to security implications. There would be no country in the Western hemisphere, especially the US, that would allow a distant, great superpower to construct military infrastructure near its borders. Mearsheimer therefore argues that Russia is simply defending itself from a foreign military alliance like NATO, attempting to situate itself outside its borders. He defends Russia’s position as responding to a security threat that Putin’s actions were easy to comprehend, in this case invading Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Had there been no delayed decision in 2008 to integrate Ukraine into NATO, Mearsheimer argues that there “would be no war in Ukraine” today (Chotiner 2022).

**Analysis of Putin’s NATO Justification to Invade Ukraine**

A common agreement between academic scholars on NATO’s relationship with Russia is that Russia was weak in the 1990s and could not afford to prevent or act against NATO’s eastward expansion into former Soviet states and countries in the Warsaw Pact. However, due to Russia’s growing power and capabilities, Moscow was able to stand up against the West’s liberal
order and NATO’s military alliance. The scholars I analyzed diverge on whether Russia views NATO as a symbolic, geopolitical or military threat. Marten asserts that Russia does not view NATO as militarily threatening but rather as a symbolic threat and obstruction to Russia’s policies, identity and plans. If this were the case, Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 would be interpreted as standing up to the West’s status and influence. This breaks with Putin’s claim that military infrastructure threatened Russia’s borders. Realists including Wolff and Mearsheimer, on the other hand, argue that NATO remains a geopolitical threat to Russia. They believe the Bucharest Summit in 2008, which provided a noncommittal invitation to Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, laid the groundwork for Putin to annex Crimea in 2014. No one can be too sure how Putin would have reacted if NATO formally invited Georgia and Ukraine into the alliance with a set timeline. However, NATO’s inconclusive decision on Ukraine was a lose-lose situation for both sides. Not only did NATO stop short of providing Georgia and Ukraine any military protection or security assurance, but it also provided Putin an excuse to invade Crimea. From Putin’s perspective, Russia demonstrated to the West that it should be taken seriously. Regardless of whether he viewed NATO as a direct military threat to Russia, Putin leveraged the outcomes of the Bucharest Summit to invade Crimea and conceal his expansionist goals.

One can only speculate whether NATO’s eastward expansion represented a real threat to Putin, or simply an exaggeration to justify his full-scale invasion. Mearsheimer would argue that Putin was clearly provoked by the outcomes of the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008. This thesis, however, argues that Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine was motivated by his imperialist goals, and therefore used NATO as a justification for the attack on Ukraine. Retaking Sevastopol, Russia’s “naval crown” (Stent 2019, p.188), surely influenced Putin to invade Crimea to fortify
Russia’s naval presence and the Black Sea Fleet. Politically, Khrushchev’s transfer of Crimea from Russian to Ukrainian jurisdiction in 1954 was declared illegitimate by the Russian parliament in 1992 (Stent 2019, p.189). Russia long sought to reestablish Crimea back into Russia by scheduling “independence referendums.” Putin’s invasion in 2014 was simply a continuation of Russia’s efforts to annex and reclaim an important lost territory. Nonetheless, whether NATO represents a true military threat to Russia is unknown to anyone but Putin. It is very reasonable for any leader of a country such as Putin to sense danger from an emerging military alliance whose purpose and future vision are relatively unknown. Geopolitically, great powers are bound to sense potential threats near their home territory, even if the threat may not be clear or specific. Putin saw the fall of the USSR as a great loss and catastrophe, and his goals for Russia to regain a superpower status seem to have been hindered by the West. Having Russia’s borders encircled and contained by NATO only decreased his country’s sphere of influence and superpower status. In addition, Mearsheimer argues that Ukraine should have been “wise” and accommodated the Russians to prevent an invasion. However, Ukraine’s submissive and defensive actions would only play to the Kremlin’s liking of becoming a puppet state to Russia. As evidenced by Russia’s surprising decision to invade Ukraine, Putin was not afraid to use hard power to intimidate and invade ex-Soviet republics who sought to integrate further with the West.

There is, however, no logical reason or justification for Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Despite Putin’s accusations that NATO sought to expand eastwards toward Russia’s borders, no significant advancements were made by NATO in Ukraine’s membership process after 2008, and the alliance never established a timeline for Ukraine’s entry after the Bucharest Summit (NATO 2023). In addition, Ukraine withdrew its application to join NATO
and pursued a non-alignment policy from 2010 to 2014 due to then-President Yanukovych’s pro-Russian foreign policy stance (NATO 2023). Therefore, there would have been no reason for Putin to fear an eastward expansion of NATO into further former soviet republics based on past events. Only until Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 did President Zelenskyy formally reiterate Ukraine’s “request for NATO membership” (NATO 2023b). Putin’s justification of NATO, therefore, did not have to do with the alliance’s military threat or eastward expansion toward Russia. Instead, Putin was in pursuit of his expansionist goals and viewed NATO as an obstacle to achieving his ambitions.
Chapter Three: Putin’s Rhetorical Use of the Past

Putin hoped to cultivate memories of the past and invoked rhetoric such as “denazification” and “Russophobia” to justify his invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. His reference to the Great Patriotic War portrayed the Kyiv government as “neo-Nazis” and “Russophobes” who wanted to integrate further with the West (Putin 2014, 2022). As scholars argue, Putin attempted to conceal his expansionist goal of annexing Ukraine by using historical references and claims to protect Ukraine from neo-Nazis. This chapter first discusses how Putin applied the Great Patriotic War, “denazification” and “Russophobia" to the invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, followed by a scholarly analysis of Putin’s use of memory politics to justify Putin’s special military operation.

**Putin’s Denazification Rhetoric**

In both Putin’s speeches in 2014 and 2022, Putin cited the need to protect the Ukrainian people from far-right nationalists, “Russophobes” and “neo-Nazis” (Putin 2014), whom he associated with NATO and the West. Putin’s rhetoric attempted to garner domestic support, revive Soviet-era discourse from the Great Patriotic War and justify his attack on Ukraine (Iliyasov 2022). He therefore was entitled to “demilitarize” Ukraine, as if he was saving the world from neo-Nazis. During World War II, many Ukrainians’ antipathy toward Soviet rule, such as nationalist leaders who initially allied with the Nazis, fueled Putin’s narrative about a fascist and neo-Nazi government in Ukraine (Stent 2019, 182). In a separate February 2022 speech, Putin claimed that Ukraine suffered from a rapid development of right-wing nationalism, which translated into a strong neo-Nazi identity (Putin 2022b). These “radicalists” were allegedly involved in escalating the Maidan Revolution in 2014 and supported by the US Embassy which “provided $1 million a day” to fuel the Maidan protests (Putin 2022b). Putin
therefore associated the Ukrainian neo-Nazis with the United States and an anti-Russian project
instigated by the West. Furthermore, Putin characterized the Ukrainian Nazis as those who held
ethnic Ukrainian identity and refused to accept they were “Little Russians” (Kuzio 2023, 31).

**Putin’s Reference of the Great Patriotic War**

Once again referencing the past to support his claims to protect Ukraine, Putin promoted
the Soviet victory of 1945 over Nazi Germany to demonstrate how Russia ought to be proactive
against its enemies and protect itself from the West. In his 2014 speech, Putin referenced the
1940s when the USSR was not ready for its “most urgent and obvious preparations it had to
make to defend itself from an imminent attack” (Putin 2014). Nazi Germany invaded an
unprepared Soviet Union, and it was too late for the USSR to defend itself from fascism. Putin
emphasized the Great Patriotic War to assure Russians that he would not make the same mistake,
this time against NATO (Putin 2022). He therefore cited NATO’s eastward expansion as a
“hostile anti-Russia” sentiment that became increasingly dangerous and attempted to contain
Russia, “with obvious geopolitical dividends.” Having provided evidence of NATO’s
overexertion and influence near Russia’s borders, Putin justified the annexation of the Donbass
region as an obligation to defend and protect the people’s republics from the illegitimate Kyiv
regime, supported by NATO forces. Putin’s comparison of Ukrainian neo-nationalists to Hitler
and Nazi Germany was intentionally specific. He claimed that Ukrainian nationalists were taking
hostage and killing innocent people, including Russians, leaving no further option but to carry
out his invasion, protect freedom and defend Russia from external attacks. In Putin’s mind,
NATO was not only a military alliance but sought to “gain a military foothold of the Ukrainian
territory” - a “tool of US foreign policy.” He therefore justified his invasion of Ukraine not as a
war but rather as a “special military operation,” to reiterate that he was not looking to annex
Ukraine for imperial purposes (Putin 2022). Instead, Putin claimed he was coerced into a “life and death” situation and forced to “demilitarize” the Ukrainian people. The Great Patriotic War was therefore an extension of Putin’s justification to invade Ukraine as he was entitled to protect Ukrainians from neo-Nazis and had to reunify the territory with Russia.

Putin aimed to secure support for the invasion of Ukraine by invoking memories of Nazi Germany during the Great Patriotic War and drawing parallels between neo-Nazis and the fascist Ukrainian government. Timothy Snyder, a professor at Yale, argues that Putin’s denazification rhetoric was his attempt to justify Russia’s war crimes in Ukraine and merely an act of “colonial rhetoric” (Snyder 2023). Taras Kuzio, a political scientist at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, also believes the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 was clearly a war driven by Putin’s expansionist ambitions (Kuzio 2023, p.31). However, the “denazification” justification did not garner as much Russian support as Putin once hoped for. The Kremlin soon realized that most Russians were unable to associate the notion of “denazification” with the 2022 invasion and could not understand how Putin justified the invasion of Ukraine as saving the world from neo-Nazis (Zygar 2023). For example, Putin denounced Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a Nazi, even though Zelenskyy is Jewish. Putin’s failed narrative of the Ukrainian government and early denazification rhetoric raises serious doubts about whether Putin sought to protect Ukraine from neo-Nazis, or if he was merely in pursuit of expanding Russia into Ukraine.

**Putin’s “Russophobia” Rhetoric: Invoking Anti-Russian Sentiment**

Furthermore, Putin depicted the neo-Nazis and far-right nationalists as “Russophobes” (Putin 2022b). Putin’s concept of “Russophobia” was the notion that the world detested anyone “somehow linked to Russia” (Snyder 2023). Russophobia is viewed by academic scholars as
“Moscow’s dissemination of disinformation and misinformation” to portray Russia as the victim in a proxy war against the West (Snyder 2023), although Putin initiated the Ukrainian war. Putin characterized “Russophobes” as NATO forces or supporters of pro-Western integration (Kuzio 2023). He alludes to how neo-Nazis represent anti-Russian sentiment, under the “protection and control” of Western propagandists. Therefore, Ukraine must no longer isolate itself further from Russia. Ukrainian political scientist, Taras Kuzio, believes that the 2014 annexation of Crimea differed from the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine in terms of Putin’s rhetoric of denazification and his perception of an aggressively expanding “Russophobia” presence in Ukraine (Kuzio 2023). While the 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine were similarly rooted in territorial expansion, Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022 demonstrated Russia’s fear that Ukraine was drifting away from Russia’s sphere of influence and trending towards Western integration. This idea aligns with Putin’s claim that Ukraine was governed by neo-Nazis and steering towards increased anti-Russian sentiment. In addition, Kuzio argues that Russia’s soft power and influence were waning in the “near abroad.” Meanwhile, Ukraine continued to distance itself from Russian influence and oriented more toward the West, particularly after the Euromaidan Revolution and the disintegration of pro-Russian parties such as the Opposition Bloc (Kuzio 2023). Putin invoked the notion of anti-Russian sentiment as a justification to invade Ukraine by freeing the Ukrainian people from the NATO and influence of “Russophobia.” However, as scholars argue, Putin’s reference to the Great Patriotic War, as well as “denazification” and “Russophobia” rhetoric were simply a means for Putin to disguise his true ambitions to seize Ukrainian land.
Fourth Chapter: Russian world concept

In May of 2022, a few months after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian parliamentary deputies voted in majority to ban pro-Russian parties. Ukraine’s judge of the Constitutional Court, Olha Sovhyry, explained, “Finally, we will stop tolerating in our political sphere the "russkiy mir," which brings so much destruction in Ukraine" (Klitina 2022). Sovhyry’s reference to "russkiy mir," which translates to “Russian world,” is Russia’s idea of reconnecting the Russian diaspora and the millions living abroad who share the same language, religion and culture. Similar to Putin’s use of memory politics and “denazification” rhetoric to justify his invasion of Ukraine, Putin claimed that he was “protecting” the diaspora when he invaded Crimea to save the Ukrainians from neo-Nazis and radical nationalists. However, “protection” was ambiguously defined. Instead, it really meant exerting hard power and reclaiming former Soviet states such as Ukraine. This chapter examines how Putin articulated “russkiy mir” in three iterations and used the Russian world diaspora as a justification to politically reunify Russian “compatriots” and pursue his expansionist goals.

This chapter is split into three sections. The first section examines Putin’s concept of “russkiy mir” and its relevance to the invasion by reviewing his speech, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” addressed before the full-scale invasion in July of 2022. The section then discusses scholarly arguments on Putin’s reading of Russia’s shared history with Ukraine. The next section examines Putin’s use of “russkiy mir” and his evolving interpretations of the Russian world concept to justify Putin’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. The chapter concludes with an analysis of inconsistencies within Putin’s “russkiy mir” concept and how Putin used the Russian world concept to pursue his expansionist goals of invading Ukraine.
Putin’s Address, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”

In his July 2022 speech, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” Putin stated that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians were descendants of Ancient Rus and that they share a historical legacy (Putin 2021). Putin asserted that Ukraine and Russia’s strained relations arose from a culmination of several historical mistakes and unfortunate geopolitical developments. In his address, Putin examined Ukraine’s history - from the 9th century until 2022 - and argued that Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians were “bound together by one language… Old Russian,” shared an Orthodox faith, and were spiritually affined through the blessing of “St. Vladimir… the Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev” (Putin 2021). Putin elaborated on Russia’s shared history with Ukraine to convey his message that Ukraine and Russia had to reintegrate. He warned that because Ukraine “never had stable traditions of real statehood” throughout its history, he had to protect Ukrainian citizens and ensure it did not fall to an illegitimate government. Under the guidance of Putin, Ukraine and Russia had to rekindle their relationship, reunite “millions of our families,” and become “one people” (Putin 2021). At the time Putin addressed this speech, he claimed that he was still open to dialogue with the Ukrainian government and “ready to discuss the most complex issues.” He concluded his address declaring that “it [was] up to [Ukraine’s] citizens to decide” on their future, without any indication of planning a full-scale invasion into Ukraine seven months later. Nevertheless, Putin’s infamous and brazen speech demonstrated how he was beginning to shape his narrative and willing to convince himself and the Russian people that Ukrainian and Russian reintegration into Russia was necessary and even inevitable. Putin’s address would now be infamously known, in retrospect, as the precursor to the invasion of Ukraine. Hence, he presented the perspective
that Russia and Ukraine were inherently inseparable, foreshadowing the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

**Scholarly Responses to “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”**

Following Putin’s July 2021 speech, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” journalists and historians were quick to “fact-check” Putin’s reading of Ukrainian history. Putin’s claim that Ukraine never had stable statehood and that Russia, Belarus and Ukraine were always bound together were quickly debunked. Instead, Putin’s version of Ukrainian history was labeled as imperialist and undoubtedly a matter of justifying the invasion of Russia’s neighbor. His claims about shared Russian-Ukrainian identity, language, religion, and being “one people” were historically inaccurate (Wilson 2021). First, Putin argued that Ukraine belonged to the same country as Russia for much of its modern history and shared cultural ties (Wilson 2021), however, this assertion is not factual. For a considerable period, Ukraine strove for self-rule and freedom from Russia, aiming to safeguard its national identity and sovereignty from colonialism and imperialism. Moreover, Russia never had a substantial presence in Ukrainian territories before the 19th century (Düben 2020). Ukrainians and Russians, in fact, lived in separate states for a longer period than in one (Wilson 2021). The south-western territories of Rus’, including Kyiv, were conquered by the Poland-Lithuania empire in the early 14th century and were formally ruled for around 400 years, leaving a deep “cultural imprint" on the Kyiv region (Düben 2020). Moreover, Putin’s tone during his speech falsely portrayed Ukraine as heavily reliant on Russia throughout its history (Wilson 2021). Rather, Russia’s role in Ukraine throughout history was a time characterized by suppression and attempted persecution of the ethnic Ukrainian people. The first Soviet census in 1926 revealed that ethnic Ukrainians made up most eastern Ukraine territories. By the 1930s however, Joseph Stalin’s Holodomor
deliberately targeted and eradicated millions of ethnic Ukrainians (Stent 2017, 181).

Linguistically, the Ukrainian language was relatively isolated from the Russian language due to the Poland-Lithuania colonization (Düben 2020), contrary to Putin’s claim that the three countries in Ancient Rus were long bounded by Old Church Slavonic - the common lingua franca. In addition, the Ukrainian language has major influences from Polish and Turkic culture as well (Wilson 2021).

Like most historians and scholars, Andrew Wilson argues that the “Western” lands - territories within modern-day Ukraine - have “changed enormously” (Wilson 2021). Therefore, Putin was intentionally selective with his interpretation of Ukrainian history and read Ukraine’s history from a purely pro-Russian perspective. Putin’s claims about Crimea, for example, were “a textbook case of settler colonialism” (Wilson 2021). Wilson argues that a majority of Crimeans may be ethnic Russians and therefore Russia claims the territory as its own, but Russian history-writing deliberately excluded the indigenous “Crimean Tatars” and local people who made up a large part of Crimea before 1783. Wilson concludes that Putin’s calumniatory argument refuted any possibility of future Ukrainian statehood and autonomy, and “nowhere in his writings on the subject [did he] allow for Ukrainian subjectivity - for the possibility that Ukrainians might have their own opinion” about their identity (Wilson 2021).

While one may insist that Putin’s address advanced an etho-nationalist agenda since his main justifications revolved around a common heritage and language of the Eastern Slavs, Marlene Laurelle argues otherwise. She believes Putin’s speech centered around the “russkii” rhetoric, which encapsulated Putin’s inclination to revive Russia’s imperialist past through the reunification of Russian lands (Laurelle 2016). Furthermore, she argues that Putin’s overarching goal was to prevent Ukraine from moving further away from Russia’s sphere of influence and
integrating into the European world, similar to his NATO justification for the invasion. This suggests that Putin was more concerned about NATO and the West’s soft power and influence, rather than allegedly “protecting” Russian territories and its compatriots.

**The Origins of "Russkiy mir"

Expanding on Laurelle’s argument that the Russian world concept is a means for Putin to justify the political reunification of Russian lands through his interpretation of history, Mikhail Suslov writes about the origins of the “russkiy mir” and Russian world concept, as well as the concept’s evolving interpretations in three iterations (Suslov 2018, 330). Over the past twenty years, "russkiy mir" shifted its conceptual meaning from the cultural and linguistic aspects of the Russian diaspora to focusing on Russia’s sphere of influence, and finally to recollecting “lost” Russian territories. The trajectory of "russkiy mir" transformed so drastically that the first and third iterations of the concept have “diametrically opposite meanings” (Suslov 2018, 333). Suslov’s analysis of "russkiy mir" explains Putin’s articulation and justification of the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, as well as the “russki” rhetoric to pursue his own political and expansionist goals.

**The Russian Diaspora: The First Dimension of "russkiy mir"

The concept of the Russian world first began in the 1990s when “russkiy mir” meant the Russian diaspora, related to globalization and Russians living abroad. Russians abroad were known to be “adventurous” and enterprising people who were brave enough to leave their homeland in search of better opportunities. Therefore, the Russian archipelago - a metaphor for the Russian diaspora and outside communities - was supposed to exert influence on continental Russia. In other words, Russians living abroad would bring their ideas, education and knowledge back to their motherland. The concept of "russkiy mir" had, according to Suslov, no connection
with Russia extending its influence into external communities; in fact, he argues that it was the opposite. The original concept of the Russian world focused on the cultural and linguistic pillars of the diaspora community. The Russian language was a significant part of one’s identity and structured a Russian speaker’s “values, mental stereotypes, lifestyles and practices” (Suslov 2018, 334). In other words, someone who spoke Russian would also think, feel and exude Russian, even if they no longer live within Russia’s borders. As Suslov writes, the first stage of the "russkiy mir" diaspora was defined simply as a community bonded by the Russian language and culture extending beyond Russian borders. The original “russkiy mir” concept was unrelated to pursuing territorial gains or power.

**Increasing Sphere of Influence: The Second Dimension of "russkiy mir"**

Suslov identifies the second stage of the Russian world concept as transitioning towards Russian power in the near abroad. Around the year 2000, the concept of the Russian world reached the Presidential Administration’s apparatus thanks to the intellectual ideas of Vladislav Surkov, the “gray cardinal” of Russian politics and ex-puppet of President Putin (Windrem 2016). In 2001, the Russian world concept was first acknowledged by Putin in a speech focusing on Russian identity. In a contemporary world, territory or borders no longer determine people’s identity, but their culture, values and language. While Putin’s assertion may seem akin to the original interpretation of the Russian world concept, Putin shifted his focus from Russian presence abroad to Russian influence abroad, a distinct contrast in interpretation that would now concern Russia’s expanding sphere of influence. The idea of the Russian world was compared to a solar system, in which the outside communities and Russians abroad would revolve “around its only [center] of gravity - the Russian Federation” (Suslov 2018), demonstrating continental Russia’s utmost importance in spreading Russian ideals and tradition. Another analogy of the
new meaning of the Russian world involved a metaphor for octopus tentacles: The sovereign state, Russia, influenced neighboring sovereign states with the help of its diasporal “tentacles.” These tentacles ought to be well structured, organized and strongly attached to the body of the home country, the Russian Federation. The metaphor was a dangerous portrayal of the Russian world concept because the Russian archipelago was now influenced by continental Russia, in contrast to the first iteration of the Russian world. Putin demonstrated in the second iteration that he used “russkiy mir” as a justification to reassert Russian influence over its neighboring countries.

“Russkiy mir” was formally established by the Russian Foreign Ministry in 2008 to reconnect Russians abroad with their true homeland and create a linguistic community in part of the country’s foreign cultural policy - to nurture a sense of identity and belonging (Pieper 2020). However, "russkiy mir" also revealed the Russian government’s dissection and interpretation of the Russian world concept. The true end goal for the Russian government was to gain geopolitical leverage and power. Moreover, the Russian world concept now shifted its focus to national security and soft power, addressing the geopolitical enemy’s intentions to disrupt the Russian world. The idea of the “sovereign democracy” concept signaled to the rest of the world that Russia was determined to protect its diaspora, counter the decadent West, and ensure a multipolar world. Conceptually, an activist of the Russian diaspora by the name of Vladimir Illiashevich voiced the idea of “mir” meaning both “world” and “peace.” The wordplay of “mir” would signify the Russian world (“Русский мир”) as a cultural identity through means of community, peace and coexisting with other “worlds” (Pieper 2020), but also signified that the Kremlin defended its argument that it was advocating in the peace of the Russian near abroad and protecting the diaspora from global threats. The Russian world concept’s focus on soft power
and expanding sphere of influence would enable Russia to use "russkiy mir" as justification for invading another country by supposedly “protecting” the Russian diaspora.

**2008 Georgian Aggression: Through the Lens of "russkiy mir"

In 2008, the Kremlin defended its actions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia as needing to defend “sootechestvenniki” - compatriots - or ethnic Russians abroad (Pieper 2020). These actions were characterized as a “rescue mission” of Russian speakers and an operation to prevent a fascist Georgian government from taking over. While Russia may have viewed the Georgian aggression as an opportunity to seize and redraw new borders to pursue its foreign policy goals, Russia’s UN ambassador, Churkin, defended his country’s actions through the UN Article 51 Charter (Pieper 2020). Churkin stated that Russia was simply exercising its inherent right to self-defense, outlining that it was his constitutional responsibility to “protect the lives and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they may be” (Pieper 2020). In response to Western sanctions and punishments after the Georgian aggression, the Russian government countered that the decadent West also overlooked human rights policies. Churkin, himself, was steadfast in defending the military intervention in Georgia by comparing the situation to the “precedent” NATO set with the alliance’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999 to protect ethnic Albanians. The Russian government was merely preventing a larger genocide from breaking out and responded by saving Russian compatriots and minorities abroad. The second stage of "russkiy mir" was therefore a very perilous transition from the original concept of Russian diaspora. The new interpretation by the Russian government not only demonstrated Russia’s increased sphere of interest and influence that was hardwired into the Russian world imagery, but the stance also increased its conservative and anti-Western position, to display to the world that “Russia writ large” would have a significant presence in international order.
Reclaiming Lost Territories: The Third Dimension of "russkiy mir"

The third and final stage of the Russian world concept is Putin and the Russian government’s current interpretation of "russkiy mir." According to Zavtra, a Russian patriotic newspaper, the third iteration of the Russian world concept is analogous to a “magnificent cathedral”: the various “side-chapels” of the cathedral were once separated in the past, but they will all reconvene again (Suslov 2018). Crimea was included as one of the “side-chapels” of the Russian world, with “Novorossiya” - a term used during Tsarist imperial times to emphasize southeast Ukraine’s common heritage with Russia - as the other (Pieper 2020). The third iteration of the Russian world concept now became Putin’s rationale to annex, invade and recollect Russian lands. The interpretation of "russkiy mir" differed immensely from the original concept that the “Russian world” concept was once a diaspora “of de-territorialized Russian speakers” (Suslov 2018). Instead, "russkiy mir" experienced a total reversal interpretation, shifting towards a purely irredentist stance. The Russian government was supposedly concerned that Russians abroad were culturally, linguistically and politically threatened. However, it was also during this time throughout the mid-2000s that Putin understood that the presence of diaspora populations in former Soviet republics was to remain a foreign policy priority (Pieper 2020).

2014 Crimea Annexation: Through the Lens of "russkiy mir"

In the 2014 Crimea annexation, the Russian world concept was used to assert that the people of Crimea were essentially the same as “us,” alluding to the Russians (Suslov 2018). Similar to the 2008 Georgian war, Russia’s argument focused on “emotive elements” of diaspora conceptualizations such as language, culture and history, but also the threat of fascism and fighting a genocide against an illegitimate government (Pieper 2020). Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine was rationalized as a “protective reactionary measure” and duty to fight the neo-Nazis.
who were limiting the rights of Russians abroad. Russia alleged that right-wing, nationalist forces in Kyiv were suppressing Russian speakers and compatriots in Ukraine. NATO, in response, claimed that Russia violated the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which outlined the “independence of sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine” and refrained from “the threat and use of force against the territorial integrity and political independence of Ukraine” (Stent 2019, 187). The Russian government, ignoring the treaty’s codes, once again brought up the invasion of Kosovo about past Western violations of state sovereignty and exceptionalist mindset by breaching its own rule of law (Pieper 2020). The repeated references to Kosovo by the Russian government to justify their invasion of Ukraine demonstrate how Putin had seemingly run out of rationales to frame the war as an operation against the West. Instead, Putin was seeking to expand Russian territory and influence into sovereign Ukraine.

Inconsistencies within "ruskiy mir" and the Russian world concept

The Russian world concept, however, seems to focus strictly on Crimea, eastern Ukraine and Novorossiya. If "ruskiy mir" were to truly protect all compatriots and Russian speakers abroad, why did Russia not “rescue” or invade Belarus, Kazakhstan and other former Soviet republics also defined within the realm of the Russian world? His claims to “protect” the Russian people only applied to a select few territories but not the others. Putin’s flawed claims revealed that "ruskiy mir" rhetoric was only used to justify his use of hard power, to revive Russia’s imperialist past and invade “lost” territories (Laurelle 2016). As Laurelle identifies, Russia was not truly concerned about protecting its Russian diaspora and compatriots abroad. Instead, Putin wanted to “penalize Ukraine for not respecting the rules of the game, not to reconstitute a divided Russian nation” (Laurelle 2015). From the Kremlin’s perspective, the Maidan Revolution and Ukraine’s pro-Western integration in the lead-up to the invasion of Crimea were
a warning for Putin to prevent a divided Russian “cultural body” (Laurelle 2015). In addition, Putin claimed that Belarusians were also Russian people. But, so long as the Lukashenko regime plays according to Moscow’s rules and the country does not stray from Putin’s sphere of influence, Russia will not invade Belarus. This proves that Putin’s "russkiy mir" concept is not only flawed but poses an imperialist threat to former Soviet republics that may wish to integrate themselves further with the West.

The Russian world concept comes at a time when Putin envisions the “rebirth” of Russia’s “civilizational roots” and “lost” territories. Since the Russian world concept evolved from merely cultural diaspora to outlandishly irredentist, the Russian government viewed "russkiy mir" as an opportunity to expand the “Russian world” to Russian people, the state, lost lands, culture and values. In addition, the development of the concept “Holy Russia” has now been used to describe Russia’s civilizational identity and territories - consisting of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and Kazakhstan - that should stand together with regard to other civilizational entities (Suslov 2018, 345). The Russian government transformed the Russian world concept to seek new ways to rationalize Putin’s imperialist and expansionist goals. The idea of "russkiy mir" should still be alarming and frightening to nearby countries, particularly former Soviet republics moving away from Russia’s influence.

**Concluding Discussion of the Russian world Concept**

Throughout the three dimensions of the Russian world concept, Suslov demonstrated that Russia recognized and used the semantic ambiguity of "russkiy mir" to its advantage. Russia created its interpretations of the Russian world as a means to justify the protection of Russians abroad through hard power and military intervention (Suslov 2018). The rhetoric, once a terminology that simply meant the Russian community, shifted to an irredentist and aggressive
policy to expand the Russian sphere of influence and reclaim what the Kremlin believes were “lost” Russian territories and land. The deliberately vague interpretation of Russian “people” allowed the Russian government to expand its interpretation of who it was entitled to protect, ranging from Russian speakers and compatriots abroad to territories that once shared a Russian presence or heritage. In other words, the idea of the Russian world evolved with three iterations. The Russian foreign ministry’s formal implementation of "russkiy mir" to nurture a sense of identity and belonging was merely a means for Putin to achieve his expansionist goals. The “russkiy mir” concept proved that Putin was not concerned about NATO’s military threat. Instead, he viewed NATO’s influence as an obstacle to pursuing his imperialist goals and desire to expand his “near abroad” influence.

This raises the question of whether more former Soviet republics ought to seek NATO membership to deter future Russian aggression, as seen from the Ukrainian war. As Putin demonstrated in his speech, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” his claims of who belonged to the Russian world do not have to be historically accurate. Putin’s actions and decisions were unpredictable and even irrational. This is the most frightening part. Scholars like Düben, Wilson, or Laurelle can debunk Putin’s territorial claims of Crimea or Ukraine, but what is preventing Putin from declaring the other “lost territories” as his?
Fifth Chapter: Implications of the 2022 Ukrainian Invasion

This thesis argues that Putin's alleged justifications for the invasion were used to conceal his expansionist ambitions and expand Russia’s influence in the “near abroad.” Regardless of how legitimate Putin’s justifications were, the outcome of the war resulted in a foreign policy disaster for Russia. First, Putin’s reference to the Great Patriotic War and “Russophobia” rhetoric failed to garner Russian support and legitimize the invasion. Not only were most Russians unable to understand “denazification” in the context of the war (Zygar 2023), but Putin likely destroyed lingering pro-Russian sentiment in Ukraine, particularly the more sympathetic pro-Russian populations in the Donbass region and Crimea. Next, the evolving iterations of the “russkiy mir” concept revealed Putin’s desire to grow Russia’s status and influence in the post-Soviet sphere. Although the war is still ongoing, NATO has already expanded eastwards through Finland and Sweden’s request to join the alliance. Finally, Putin’s invasion inadvertently created a stronger NATO military alliance he once hoped to weaken after invading Ukraine.

NATO Membership in Ukraine: A Possibility After the 2022 Invasion?

This thesis demonstrated that Putin’s ambitions were purely expansionist and that his justifications to invade Ukraine do not have to be rational. Regardless of whether Putin truly sought to “protect” the Russian diaspora from the West, “neo-Nazis” or “Russophobes,” this section argues that with the help of NATO, Ukraine should prioritize the deterrence of future Russian aggression. Russia’s failed invasion should urge Ukraine to join NATO as soon as possible to be guaranteed effective security and protection. As Kurt Volker, an ex-ambassador to NATO, summarized, “grey ones are green lights” for Russian aggression (Economist 2023). The West must not fail to act on security promises again and should see clearly on a direct and clear accession to NATO for Ukraine. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, former Secretary General of NATO,
also believes that having Ukraine join NATO would demonstrate that Russia cannot prevent NATO enlargement. This can, in turn, deter Russian aggression in Ukraine and prevent a future Russian-Ukrainian war. NATO must not make the same mistake again by delaying Ukraine’s membership status. Rather, it should be clear about Ukraine’s membership instead of hesitating about its status. Another ambiguous decision by NATO on Ukraine’s accession may prompt Putin to invade Ukraine again.

The main cause of concern, however, for inviting Ukraine into NATO would arise from Article 5’s security assurances, stating that an attack against one is an attack against all (NATO 2023b). As evidenced during Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, NATO did not directly supply Ukraine and Georgia with any ground troops during the invasions, in order to contain and prevent a wider war with Russia. Instead, countries within the alliance such as the United States have supplied artillery and firearms to support Ukraine’s defense and counteroffensive against Russia. The risk of granting Ukraine a Membership Action Plan (MAP) would possibly lead to a direct war between Russia and NATO if Putin were to invade Ukraine in the future. There has been discussion as to whether Ukraine would join NATO without Article 5’s protections and guarantees. G7 countries have stated that, if Russia were to invade Ukraine again, its allies would offer a “swift and sustained security alliance” and modern military equipment to Ukraine (Economist 2023). However, how are such assurances different from the West’s support of Ukraine now, without security and Article 5 guarantees? If the West is truly willing to provide weaponry and a “security alliance,” then Ukraine must push to join NATO to be protected from future Russian invasions. In sum, Putin’s full-scale invasion not only failed immensely but backfired. His country now must face a stronger NATO alliance that is
willing to provide unprecedented levels of support to Ukraine and ensure that Putin fails to achieve his expansionist goals.

**The End of “Finlandization”**

As a result of the war, Finland and Sweden requested to join NATO shortly after the invasion, significantly altering NATO’s sphere of influence (NATO 2015a). Sweden and Finland have long been neutral countries that demonstrated little interest in joining NATO. However, after Putin’s increasingly aggressive foreign policy plans, such as the invasion of Crimea as well as Russian airspace and coastal water violations in the two countries, Sweden and Finland began exploring membership options (Appel and Taw 2021). The 2022 invasion of Ukraine clinched it. For Finland and Sweden, the move to file for NATO membership serves as protection against a possible military intervention or invasion by Russia. It has likely enraged Putin even further that the alliance is expanding eastwards in the Baltic Sea and now along Russia’s border. Russia will now directly border a new NATO country thanks to Finland’s shared 800-mile border with Russia (Mellen, Moriarty and Ledur 2023). Sweden and Finland serve as vital strategic locations for NATO’s provision of security for the Baltic states. Since any land routes to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania could be cut off by the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, access to the Finnish and Swedish coastline ensures NATO’s capabilities in defending the Baltic nations (Wolff 2015). With added fortification of NATO’s defenses in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic, Putin must be all the more careful if his army chooses to violate airspaces and waters belonging to Finland and Sweden. With the protection of Article 5 in place, an attack on Sweden and Finland could theoretically escalate into a full conflict between NATO and Russia.

Putin invaded Ukraine to push NATO away from his borders and attempt to reclaim a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Instead, the alliance has grown stronger and closer with
the accession of Finland into the alliance. As for whether all members within NATO will approve Ukraine’s membership, the invasion has likely secured both the Ukrainian people and the government’s confidence in integrating fully with the West. Ukraine will now hope to erase its status as a vulnerable “buffer state” between Russia and the West and become a full member of NATO.
Sixth Chapter: Conclusion

According to Edwin Bacon, a professor at Birkbeck, University of London, paying “close attention to the stories that its political actors tell about themselves and their system” helps “reveal self-conceptualizations” and “highlight factors that matter within a political system” (Bacon 2015, 230). In Russia’s situation, Putin’s justifications for invading Ukraine focused on NATO’s military threat to Russia, the denazification of Ukraine from “Russophobes” and “neo-Nazis,” as well as the protection of the Russian diaspora through “russkiy mir.” However, as I argue, Putin’s true motivations for the full-scale invasion in 2022 were to reestablish Russia’s sphere of influence near its borders and prevent Western influence in post-Soviet states.

This paper argues that Putin’s justifications centered around his goal to expand Russia’s sphere of influence and annex Ukraine. The academic community should take note of this war’s implications in order to prepare for Putin’s next gambit and avert future wars. Nonetheless, one should question whether the West could have done more to deter a Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. What if NATO had fast-tracked Ukraine and provided it with security assurances? Would Putin still have invaded Ukraine? How would Ukraine’s membership in NATO benefit countries within the alliance? The past cannot be changed, but further research can explore how Ukraine can deter future Russian aggression, regardless of Putin’s ambitions or justifications.
Bibliography


Laruelle, Marlene. 2015. “Russia as a Divided Nation, from Compatriots to Crimea: A
Contribution to the Discussion on Nationalism and Foreign Policy.” Problems of

Laruelle, Marlene. 2016. “Misinterpreting Nationalism: Why Russkii is Not a Sign of
Ethnonationalism.” PONARS Eurasia, Policy Memo No. 416, January 27.

and the West in the 1990s.” European Journal of International Security 2 (2): 135–61. DOI:
https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2017.16.


Mearsheimer, John. 2014. “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions
that Provoked Putin.” Foreign Affairs 93 (5): 77–89.


