

Review Article

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Beyond Geopolitics: Ideational Drivers of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ideational dimensions of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, such as the symbolic character of Crimea, Russian strategic culture, nationalism and identity, propaganda, and the function of misconceptions and illusions in shaping opinion and action. Although material and geopolitical factors are no doubt significant in the conflict, the ideational dimensions provide us with vital insight into the motivations of Russia's assertive policies towards Ukraine. The symbolic meaning of Crimea in the Russian identity, its strategic culture, and the influence of state-sponsored narratives' and propaganda are analyzed in considerable detail. In addition, the article analyzes the misperceptions and illusions which create and perpetuate the conflict, which propel both the Russian policymakers and public opinion. By synthesizing these ideational variables with the broader geopolitical context, the article offers a comprehensive understanding of the complex factors that led to and sustain the war.

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Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine conflict, which escalated dramatically in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and saw full-scale warfare in 2022, has been widely studied from various perspectives, including political, economic, and military. However, the ideational dimensions which involve identity, culture, narratives, and historical perception are often under-explored, despite their crucial role in shaping state behavior and international relations. This article seeks to bridge that gap by focusing on the symbolic significance of Crimea, the nature of Russian strategic culture, and the role of nationalism and propaganda in influencing Russian foreign policy.

As an instance, the annexation of Crimea has significant symbolic significance for Russia's sense of national identity and its history; it is more than just a physical conquest. Russian strategic culture, marked by a persistent sense of encirclement and a strong commitment to territorial integrity, further shapes the Kremlin's approach to Ukraine. Nationalism and the use of propaganda serve to bolster these ideas, uniting the Russian population around a shared vision of restoring Russia's status as a great power. multaneously, misunderstandings and false perceptions both within the country and globally have obscured the comprehension of the conflict, resulting in errors in judgment and extended hostilities. This article seeks to provide a deeper insight into the Russia-Ukraine war by emphasizing these ideational elements, showing how cultural and symbolic factors are intertwined with the geopolitical and security issues that fuel the conflict.

The Symbolic Significance of Crimea

Crimea stands as a symbol of Russian imperial heritage and national pride. Since its annexation by Catherine the Great in the late 18th century, the peninsula has held strategic and cultural importance for Russia. This symbolism was underscored in President Vladimir Putin's 2014 speech, in which he invoked Crimea's spiritual and historical ties to Russia: "Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized... [which] predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus" [1].

The annexation of Crimea and support for separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine reflect a narrative that, when Russia's core interests are perceived to be under threat, even the principles of international law may be subordinated. Despite presenting itself as a defender of global legal norms, Russia violated the foundational principles of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). This behavior aligns with Morgenthau's classical realism, which argues that states, regardless of their moral posturing, ultimately act in pursuit of power and national interest [2].

Russian Strategic Culture: Historical Narratives and Perceptions

Strategic culture plays a pivotal role in shaping how states perceive security, the use of force, and the nature of threats. As notes, each state develops its own "cognitive map" through which national security is understood and enacted. Russia's strategic culture is deeply influenced by its historical experiences, perceptions of vulnerability, and the aspiration to be recognized as a global power.

One of the core pillars of this strategic mindset is the belief in Russia's inherent exposure to external threats identify four key narrative strands that define this culture: the challenge of defending vast and porous borders, a history of foreign invasions, lessons drawn from past geopolitical conflicts, and the belief that internal instability is often the result of foreign interference [3].

Historical experiences ranging from the Napoleonic Wars and the Crimean War to World War II and the Cold War have shaped a persistent sense of geopolitical siege. Events like the Crimean War (1853–1856), where Russia faced a Western alliance, reinforced a worldview in which European powers are often seen as duplicitous adversaries. Modern interpretations of this history contribute to the framing of NATO's expansion as an existential threat.

Russia's strategic culture also emphasizes territorial expansion as a form of defense. The famous quote attributed to Catherine the Great "I have no way to defend my borders but to extend them" epitomizes this doctrine. The quest for strategic depth and the creation of buffer zones in regions such as Eastern Europe and Central Asia remain central to Moscow's policy agenda.

The Kremlin also links internal dissent with foreign intervention, often framing political uprisings like the Euromaidan as "color revolutions" orchestrated by the West to undermine Russian influence in the post-Soviet space. Russian officials, including Nikolai Patrushev, have pointed to revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan as part of a Western strategy to erode Russia's geopolitical standing [3]. The longstanding perception of the West as a hostile and morally corrupt force was articulated most famously by George F. Kennan in his 1946 "Long Telegram," where he wrote:

"They have always feared foreign penetration, feared direct contact between Western world and their own... and they have learned to seek security only in a patient but deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power."

National Identity and Competing Narratives

Nationalism and identity are potent ideational forces in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. In Ukraine, various identity projects have emerged over time, each shaping the nation's self-perception and its relationship with Russia. As outlined, three competing identity frameworks have defined Ukraine's post-Soviet trajectory [4].

- **Pan-Slavic Identity** – This vision emphasized cultural and religious unity among Slavic nations, proposing a shared destiny between Ukraine and Russia.
- **Little Russian Identity** – Grounded in a shared Orthodox Christian faith and linguistic heritage, this project positioned Ukraine as a subordinate extension of Russian civilization.
- **Ukrainian Proper Identity** – This more recent and assertive framework promotes a unique Ukrainian ethno-cultural identity, rooted in distinct traditions, language, and a desire for sovereignty.

The third identity framework gained momentum in the post-Soviet era, particularly in response to perceived Russian imperialism. The revival of historical grievances and the repression endured during Soviet rule catalyzed a surge in nationalist sentiment, reinforcing the demand for autonomy and distancing from Russian influence.

Language politics also became a flashpoint, with debates over whether Russian or Ukrainian should dominate public life. These disputes reflected deeper societal rifts and were often portrayed

as emblematic of broader struggles between Eastern and Western allegiances.

In contrast, Russian nationalism remains deeply intertwined with imperial legacy and a strong sense of exceptionalism. While earlier forms of Russian nationalism were imperial and inclusive of multiple ethnicities, recent years have witnessed the rise of ethnonationalism, which emphasizes ethnic purity, cultural homogeneity, and often carries xenophobic undertones.

This ethnonationalist shift was evident during the events of the "Russian Spring," a term that encompassed the annexation of Crimea and the military campaign in Donbas. A range of nationalist organizations, including the Russian Imperial Movement and the National Bolsheviks, actively supported these interventions [5].

In his 2014 speech to the Federal Assembly, President Putin invoked the concept of the *russkii narod* an ethnic term distinguishing ethnic Russians from citizens of the Russian Federation (*rossiiskii*). He lamented the breakup of the Soviet Union as a tragedy that left millions of ethnic Russians outside of Russia's borders, portraying them as a divided nation in need of reunification. This narrative of ethnic solidarity continues to fuel justification for intervention in Ukraine and other post-Soviet states.

Deconstructing Russian Colonial Perceptions of Ukraine: Identity, Power, and Religion

Efforts to construct a distinct Ukrainian identity can be traced back to the 1840s, when certain segments of the educated "Little Russians" began advocating for cultural differentiation from the imperial Russian narrative. As noted by the growing educational divide between literate Ukrainians and the predominantly uneducated rural population—derogatorily labeled as *khokhols* started to narrow [6]. These progressive voices were often pejoratively referred to as *Mazepintsy*, a reference to Ivan Mazepa, the historical figure condemned for aligning with Sweden against Tsarist Russia. The slur *khokhol* became widespread, symbolizing an effort to deny Ukrainians their nationhood by casting them as primitive and subordinate.

Such treatment reflects the colonial dynamic between "Great Russians" and "Little Russians," where language, stereotypes, and folklore were employed to maintain imperial dominance. Derisive Russian proverbs portrayed Ukrainians as indolent and ignorant, cultivating a psychological framework of inferiority and compliance. According to Riabchuk, these tactics aimed to reinforce the perception that Ukrainians were not a distinct people but merely a subset of Russians "almost the same people" thus delegitimizing any resistance to assimilation.

Literature from the Tsarist era also echoed these colonial attitudes. For instance, Prince Ivan Dolgoruky's characterization of Ukrainians reveals an overtly racialized and dehumanizing portrayal, comparing the Ukrainian peasant to a slave-like figure, indifferent to his own subjugation and comparable to African slaves in the colonies as cited in [7]. This type of cultural imperialism, as Oksamytna argues, extended beyond territorial conquest it was about instilling cultural supremacy by suppressing Ukrainian language and identity, while simultaneously promoting pro-Russian narratives.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, scholars have increasingly conceptualized Russia not as a modern state, but as a colonial power willing to engage in imperial wars for the sake of reasserting global status [6]. A key element in this worldview

is the notion of Ukrainians as “younger brothers,” a patronizing belief that justifies intervention or punishment when Ukrainians act “out of line.” Riabchuk compares this relationship to the dynamic between Robinson Crusoe and Friday either as a “good” subordinate molded into near-equality or as a “bad” rebel under Western influence.

Russia’s geopolitical behavior is rooted in its desire to maintain global stature. Possessing veto power at the UN Security Council serves as symbolic validation of its superpower status. However, its authority has been overlooked during major crises such as the Kosovo and Iraq conflicts, prompting Russia to question the legitimacy of international law. President Putin has frequently expressed that the disintegration of the USSR was a catastrophe, and has framed NATO’s eastern expansion as a profound betrayal. His rhetoric frames the gifting of Crimea to Ukraine by Khrushchev as illegitimate, furthering his goal of reestablishing Russia’s imperial identity [1]. The loss of Soviet-era influence triggered a shift in Russian national identity from empire to nation-state, a transformation Putin and others have sought to reverse through mythmaking and revisionist narratives [8].

Religion and Empire: Orthodoxy as a Tool of Power

The entanglement of religion with Russian national identity dates back to Tsar Nicholas I, who famously defined the empire’s foundation through the triad of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality” [9]. Crimea, where the Prince of Kyiv Rus’ Vladimir was baptized into Christianity, remains symbolically crucial in this narrative, marking the religious and civilizational beginning of Russia as an empire.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, however, has long challenged Moscow’s religious monopoly. As the Russian Empire and later the USSR collapsed, Ukrainian religious institutions evolved to reflect national aspirations. Movements like the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate emerged as manifestations of Ukraine’s desire for religious and political sovereignty. Nevertheless, the Russian Orthodox Church has consistently resisted this independence, viewing the Fener Greek Patriarchate and Ukraine’s push for autonomy as Western-aligned threats to its influence [10].

The situation worsened after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The UOC KP’s refusal to register under Russian law was met with systemic intimidation. This alliance between the Russian military and the Orthodox Church has become increasingly visible. Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, has openly supported the invasion, framing it as a divine mission to protect Russian-speaking populations from genocide. He even sanctified the weapons used in the war. Since Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, the Church has played a pivotal role in promoting traditionalist and anti-Western values, positioning Russia as the global guardian of conservative morality.

In Orthodox-majority societies, religion often plays a more significant role than the state in shaping national identity. According to a PEW Research Center study, 70% of people in Orthodox countries and 57% in Catholic-majority nations—view religious affiliation as central to national belonging. This deep-rooted connection has allowed the Russian Orthodox Church to become a cultural and ideological pillar of modern Russian conservatism.

Political Orthodoxy

Political Orthodoxy refers to the fusion of political ideologies

with Orthodox Christianity. As argues, such a fusion is evident in Ukraine, where the Orthodox Church plays a significant role in shaping national identity, political discourse, and even international relations. Wanner further explains that the politicization of Orthodoxy can lead to the formation of distinct political orthodoxies ideological frameworks that reconcile religious values with political ambitions and power structures [11].

A striking example is the political slogan “Freedom Is Our Religion” introduced by then-president Petro Poroshenko, under whose administration the first independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine was established. According to, this slogan carries deep religious and political connotations. It reflects the ideals that inspired the Maidan movement, blending notions of religious devotion with political liberation. By equating freedom with religion, the slogan encourages unity and reinforces the societal value of independence. Moreover, it serves to secularize religion appropriating religious rhetoric and symbolism to communicate political goals. It aims to garner public support around two central ideas: self-determination and national freedom, reinforcing Ukraine’s image as a sovereign nation with a distinct identity.

However, Ukraine’s pursuit of religious and political autonomy has drawn significant hostility from Russia. According to the 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ukraine, the Russian Federation and its proxies have systematically violated the rights of religious minorities since the 2014 annexation of Crimea. These violations escalated following the full-scale invasion in February 2022. Evangelical Christians, Roman and Greek Catholics, and non-Orthodox communities faced repression, including disappearances of religious leaders, illegal detentions, destruction and confiscation of religious property, and physical abuse [12].

Propaganda and Narratives

In justifying its invasion of Ukraine, the Russian leadership has consistently employed propaganda and historical narratives. In a speech prior to the 2022 invasion, President Vladimir Putin stated:

“The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine...” [1].

This framing relies heavily on invoking the memory of World War II—known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War. Putin often emphasizes the USSR’s sacrifices during that war and casts current geopolitical events as a continuation of that legacy. For example, he declared:

“Your fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers to allow today’s neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine” [1,15].

These narratives seek to legitimize Russian aggression while demonizing Ukraine’s leadership repeatedly described by Russian officials as a “junta” of “drug addicts and neo-Nazis.” The Federal Security Service (FSB) further proposed staging propaganda videos featuring World War II veterans calling on Russia to “end fascism in Ukraine” [12].

Russia also accuses Ukrainian authorities of committing genocide in Donbas, shelling civilians, and violating human rights [15]. These accusations aim to frame Russia as a protector of oppressed populations, despite the international consensus to the contrary.

Anti-Western Narratives

Anti-Western rhetoric has long been a staple of Russian foreign policy. The Russian Foreign Ministry's 2013 strategy emphasized the need for shaping global perceptions, countering Western information threats, and promoting Russia's worldview [14].

Snigyr (2023) Outlines Four Key Sub-Narratives that Support Russia's Strategic Messaging:

- **Denial of European Sovereignty**
- **Conflict of Values**
- **Russia as a Non-Liberal Leader**
- **Russia as a Victim of the West**

These narratives depict the liberal West as a hegemonic force resisting the rise of alternative global orders. They also help the Russian government justify its foreign interventions and maintain domestic support. According to anti-Western discourse allows Russia to portray its actions as defensive, rather than aggressive [3].

President Putin often criticizes Western military interventions and accuses the U.S. of hypocrisy

"[Americans] criticize Russia's military deployments abroad, which are far smaller in scale compared to theirs" as cited [13].

Putin also argues that the West, particularly the U.S., seeks to preserve a neo-colonial global order through economic and technological dominance. In signing treaties to annex territories like Donetsk and Luhansk, he stated that the West exploits the dollar's supremacy and international financial institutions to sustain global inequality [12].

Russian media reinforces these views. For example, Rossiya 1 broadcast claims that the U.S. and the U.K. aim to sabotage relations between Russia and Germany, and that Eastern Ukraine, like Serbia before it, is targeted by the West to undermine the Orthodox world as cited [15].

Identify three Dominant Narratives Promoted by the kremlin:

- **Western Interference** -The West is blamed for global instability, with Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine cited as examples.
- **Western Dominance** – Russia calls for a multipolar world and supports institutions like BRICS and G20 to counterbalance U.S. influence.
- **Russia–EU Pragmatism** – Despite political tensions, Russia emphasizes ongoing economic ties with the EU, promoting the idea of a shared "humanitarian space from Lisbon to Vladivostok" as cited.

Fundamentally, Russian narratives frame the Ukraine conflict as a **clash of values** between the liberal-democratic West and a "traditional" Russia. These traditional values, according to Russian officials, are rooted in Christian morality and cultural heritage. This spiritual positioning allows the Kremlin to justify its actions as not only political, but also civilizational [16].

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine conflict, as examined in this article, demonstrates the importance of engaging with ideational dimensions alongside material and geopolitical considerations. Despite the significance of traditional realist frameworks which emphasize power dynamics, territorial disputes, and strategic calculations, a deeper understanding of this war requires attention to the symbolic, cultural, and identity-based factors that do not only shape state behavior but also public perception [17-18].

The annexation of Crimea is taken as an instance to this ideational complexity. Far from being a purely strategic move, Crimea is considered to be a site of profound historical and cultural significance for Russia. It is closely linked to narratives of imperial heritage, Slavic unity, and national destiny. These symbolic narratives do not only provide justifications to Russia's actions in the eyes of its leadership but have also mobilize domestic support and frame the annexation as a legitimate act in order to restore the historical order [19].

Russia's strategic culture which has been shaped by a long-standing perception of vulnerability further contextualizes its actions. The historical memory of repeated invasions has contributed to a foreign policy that puts priority on strategic depth as well as defensive buffers. From this perspective, intervention in Ukraine should be understood as a preventive measure based on a culturally specific perception of state survival [20].

Nationalism has also been instrumental in shaping and justifying Russia's actions. The state has cultivated a narrative of belonging and exclusion through the notion of a "Russian world," and the protection of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. State-run media have promoted these ideas and to portray the confrontation as a moral cause against Western encroachment and corrupting cultural influence [21]. Such ideational tools have not only influenced public sentiments, but they have also reinforced the political legitimacy of the regime's foreign other equally significant dimensions are the misperceptions that have also played a key role in forming the trajectory of the conflict [22]. The resilience of Ukrainian national identity and their capacity for resistance have been underestimated by Russia authorities. Western policymakers as well have failed to appreciate Russia's commitment to ideational factors and thus assumed that economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation would act as a deterrent to further aggression [23]. Thus, it can be concluded that material power alone cannot fully account for the behavior of states in conflict. Cultural narratives, collective memory, and symbolic factors have a substantial influence on political decisions and shaping the international order [24]. Therefore, peacebuilding and diplomacy should engage with the narratives and identities along with conventional tools of negotiation and deterrence. It is essential to recognize the symbolic foundations of state behavior to achieve more effective dialogues, greater empathy between adversaries, and ultimately, more durable pathways to peace [25].

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