

At War with the West: Russian Realism and the Conflict in Ukraine

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“[W]e again have to choose a historical path, as we did in 1917 and 1991...
The choice we have taken is made easier by the fact that the “collective West”
has declared a total hybrid war against us. It is hard to forecast how long this
will last.

But it is clear that its consequences will be felt by everyone without
exception.”

Sergei Lavrov (2022)

Introduction

Realist thinking in International Relations stresses the importance of preserving
state sovereignty, national security, international stability, and great power status. In
the world of Westphalia-founded sovereign states, realism is a system of ideas upon

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which nations base their unity and survival even as they engage in complex international and global transactions. In a Russia that, over the last century, has gone from autocracy to communism, liberalism, and back to semi-autocratic ideas, realism has served to navigate the state through an increasingly unstable international environment and has remained an important part of the country's national identity. Understanding where Russian *realists* stand with respect to the war in Ukraine is essential for understanding Russia's future relations with the outside world, both western and non-western.

In this paper, I present several arguments about Russian realism. First, most realist-minded experts and scholars support the Kremlin by viewing the war as a global confrontation with the West rather than merely a regional conflict. While NATO avoids being perceived as in direct military conflict with Russia, Russian *realists* assess the potential of such escalation as relatively high. Second, Russian *realists* are largely committed to the idea of preserving state sovereignty and security in the face of the West's pressures rather than building a new empire at the expense of the Ukrainian ethnicity and statehood, let alone other states and nationalities. Building an empire is not in their system of values if it undermines rather than increases the state security in the international system. Third, these priorities reflect an understanding of the conflict's causes, which Russian *realists* assess as rooted in contemporary, post-Cold War international political disagreements, and not some old imperial legacies. Fourth, Russian *realists* remain a diverse group defending different strategic and tactical priorities with respect to the war in Ukraine. Some of them advocate for decisive victory and escalation of the war, while others argue for restraint and search for compromise to end the conflict.

I have selected realism for closer examination viewing *realists* as a sufficiently representative and influential group within the Russian foreign policy community for such attention. Although not all members of the country's foreign policy community qualify as *realists*, most of them share a realist worldview. This is because alternative worldviews have remained less developed in the post-communist period while the head of the Russian state, President Vladimir Putin, is a committed realist who has greatly influenced the national discourse. The basis for my analysis is a sample of publications and expert views in leading policy journals, media programs, websites,

and social media that have become available during the first four months of the war in Ukraine. I have read them closely to identify key arguments, classify viewpoints, and establish meanings of foreign policy actions as presented by various groups within the Russian IR community.

This paper is organized into three sections. The first section describes Russian realist thinking about Ukraine by identifying three different positions within Russian foreign policy establishments. The following section analyzes the positions and arguments of those favoring the completion of the *special military operation* (SMO) and its goals. In particular, I discuss Putin's goals, the views of those who support the official goals and tactics, and those who have called to escalate the war to accomplish the stated goals of the military operation. The final section considers arguments of a *restraint coalition* that has advocated a cease-fire and settlement for reasons of preserving Russia's security and sovereignty. Members of the restraint coalition or *moderates* have diverged from the war coalition in the analysis of the causes of the war, Russia's goals, and means. The conclusion summarizes my findings and suggests some implications for policymaking.

Russian Realism and Ukraine

Ukraine in Russian Strategic Thinking

Ukraine is critically important to Russia's identity and security. From a strategic perspective, Ukraine's neutrality and non-membership in Western military organizations is the ultimate necessity and the last stand the Kremlin is prepared to take in defense of its perceived security.² Long geopolitical borders and a sizable landmass separating the Russian heartland from European states have served as principal guarantees of Russia's security from potential attacks by these states. Russia has fought multiple wars with Europeans and continues to be influenced by this historical experience. Just as some in the West³ find it essential to separate Ukraine from Russia's

² Andrei P Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand: The Sources of Russia's Ukraine Policy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, No. 4 (2015).

³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "A Geostrategy for Eurasia," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October (1997).

influence to curtail the Kremlin's expansionist ambitions, Russian *realists* do not feel secure if Ukraine becomes a member of Western political and military institutions.

The second dimension of Ukraine's importance to Russia concerns values. For three and half centuries, Russia and Ukraine were parts of a single imperial state and fought jointly against foreign enemies, including Poles, French, and Germans. The two nations also share religion, Slavic ethnicity, and a similar language. To Russian *realists* accustomed to thinking in terms of national security considerations, these common characteristics are essential for preserving the two nations' domestic unity and a joint perception of security threats.

Following the Soviet dissolution and Ukraine's separation from Russia, many Russian *realists* had difficulties accepting the outcome. Still, neither the realist-minded Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov during the 1990s nor Vladimir Putin, who became President in 2000, challenged the right of Ukrainians to be independent. At least until the 2014 crisis, the mood in Moscow was that it was still possible to persuade Kyiv not to seek the development of military ties with the West. This is what separates Russian *realists* from *imperial nationalists* who have never accepted the Soviet disintegration and Ukraine's independence on the grounds of cultural essentialism aspiring for political and cultural reunification. In their perspective, the two similar peoples were one and had to reside within one state.⁴

Putin also never challenged the formal independence of Ukraine until 2014, even though he could not accept its drift toward the West. He was skeptical of Kyiv's ability to build a functional state, and even he believed in the "historic unity" of Russians and Ukrainians.⁵ Although he once called the Soviet breakup "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century," his biographer reminds us that Putin also said: "Anyone who does not regret [its] destruction has no heart; anyone who wants to see it

⁴ Imperialist views on the Soviet breakup are frequently expressed by Russian communists. An example of a recent statement that denies Ukraine the right to independence, see Timofei Sergeitsev, "Chto Rossiya dolzhna sdelat' s Ukrayinoi," *RIA Novosti*, 3 April 2022. <https://ria.ru/20220403/ukraina-1781469605.html>

⁵ Vladimir Putin, "Ob istorishekom edinstve russkikh i ukraintsev," Moscow, Kremlin, 12 July 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

recreated has no brain.”⁶ Putin’s views reflect the beliefs of a realist preoccupied with the national security of his own state. While believing in the two nations’ cultural unity, Putin had no initial plans to exploit it for irredentist politics.

The view of Putin as a realist and politically flexible politician free of strong ideological commitments is shared by some observers⁷ but not others.⁸ Arguments about the imperial and expansionist nature of the Russian state are revived each time Russia-Western relations enter a deep crisis.⁹ Such arguments often do not differentiate between legitimate security interests, common cultural roots, imperial aspirations, and suppression of the rights of individual nationalities, presenting all of them as betraying empire-colony relations. While there is no shortage of imperialists in Russia denying Ukraine the right to independence, *realists* are not members of the group.

Schools of Russian Thought

Russian *realists* are a large and diverse group.¹⁰ While sharing similar commitments to the security of the state and a general vision of state goals, they frequently disagree on how such goals should be achieved and which issues should be prioritized. The issue of Ukraine illustrates disagreements among Russian *realists*.

The most influential group of Russian *realists* are those who consider Western states as the principal threat to Russia’s security and adopt a relatively broad definition

⁶ Philip Short, “After six months of bloody and terrible war, what exactly does Putin want from Ukraine?” *Guardian*, 22 August 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/aug/22/six-months-war-putin-ukraine-russia-nato-energy-prices>

⁷ John Mearsheimer, “The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis,” *The National Interest*, 23 June 2022. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/causes-and-consequences-ukraine-crisis-203182>; Marlene Laruelle, “The intellectual origins of Putin’s invasion,” *UnHerd*, 16 March 2022. <https://unherd.com/2022/03/the-brains-behind-the-russian-invasion/>

⁸ Jane Burbank, “The Grand Theory Driving Putin to War,” *New York Times*, 22 March 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/22/opinion/russia-ukraine-putin-eurasianism.html>; Steven Erlanger, “Putin’s War on Ukraine Is About Ethnicity and Empire,” *New York Times*, 16 March 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/16/world/europe/putin-war-ukraine-recolonization.html>; Timothy Snyder, “The War in Ukraine Is a Colonial War,” *The New Yorker*, 28 April 2022. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war>

⁹ Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Assessing Cultural and Regime-Based Explanations of Russia’s Foreign Policy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, No. 4 (2012).

¹⁰ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russian Realism* (London: Routledge, 2022).

of great power. In their assessment, as a great power, Russia must possess the global capacity to balance the West's political and military aspirations in the world. Even though such a policy is expensive and requires important domestic sacrifices, *global balancers* view it as a necessity for national survival and the preservation of sovereignty from Western encroachment and global ambitions.

Balancers view military actions such as those against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 as justified on the grounds of preserving Russia's security, independence, and great power status. They assess the annexation of Crimea and the support for Donbas in 2014 as a strategic necessity presenting these actions as a defense against the aggressive anti-Russian policies by the Western-supported Kyiv. Following the Euro-Maidan Revolution, such policies included statements about Ukrainian plans not to extend the basing lease for the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea, join NATO, and limit Russian cultural and linguistic influence in the country. Before 2014, Balancers hoped that Ukraine would eventually join the Russia-initiated Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) rather than Western economic and security organizations. They view the EAEU as an essential geopolitical project for containing US global power in partnership with China and other non-Western powers.

The second group does not view the West as the most important threat to Russia's security, advocating for mutual cooperation against common threats. Historically, such threats included revisionist states, terrorism, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and others. Westernizers tend to favor the establishment of a Russia-West security partnership in Europe, thereby removing the sensitive issue of Ukraine from the list of most important disagreements. In particular, analysts in this group have recommended strengthening dialogue with France and Germany to improve understanding over the issue of Ukraine.

In the past, scholars in this group argued for the establishment of strong relations with Ukraine while being sensitive to its political and cultural differences from Russia. For example, Dmitry Trenin, in his writings,¹¹ has repeatedly emphasized such differences and warned of the dangers of the cultural-imperial perception of Ukraine in

¹¹ Dmitry Trenin, "Ponyat' Ukrainu," *SVOP*, 7 November 2017 [Дмитрий Тренин: Понять Украину | Совет по внешней и оборонной политике \(svop.ru\)](https://svop.ru/); "Sosedstvo ili bratstvo," *Moscow Carnegie Center*, 5 October 2021. <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/85479>

Russia. Trenin later supported Putin's decision to launch a military operation,¹² but for reasons of Russian security and sovereignty in the face of US and NATO pressure.

The final group of Russian *realists* emphasizes the importance of Ukraine in the context of establishing Russia as a great Eurasian power. To this group, Russia's security interests are principally different from those of Europe but do not have to collide because such interests are largely in a different region. To avoid a collision with Europe, Russia must draw a clear area of cultural and geopolitical interests while separating it from the area of mutual neutrality between Russia and Europe. Not wishing to restore the Soviet Union, *Eurasianists* nevertheless believe in Russia's distinct geopolitical and civilizational identity. According to the group's leading authority Vadim Tsymbursky, Russia's European policy should be centered on preserving a buffer zone with Europe and creating the necessary space for rebuilding Russia's "internal Eurasia."¹³ If Europe violates the desired neutrality, then Russia should still focus on Eurasian affairs and protect its interests without resorting to the annexation of Ukraine and other states within the designated buffer zone.

Putin and the War Coalition

The *war coalition* in Russia was formed on the basis of supporting Putin and his formulation of the country's goals and conduct of the war in Ukraine. Putin's political flexibility and the ambiguity of the Kremlin's message allow for multiple interpretations. At least two groups within the coalition can be identified. These groups differ in their analysis of the war's goals and tactics.

¹² Dmitry Trenin, "Переиздание» Российской Федерации," *Россия в глобальной политике* 20, No. 2 (2022). <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/pereizdanie-rossijskoj-federaczii/>

¹³ Vadim Tsymbursky, *Ostrov Rossiya* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2007).

Putin's War Goals

In his public justification of the SMO in Ukraine, Putin formulated¹⁴ two main goals: removal of a military threat presented by Kyiv's army (demilitarization) and dismantlement of the nationalist, anti-Russian regime (de-Nazification). More broadly, Putin continued to challenge the US-centered international order that in the perception of the Kremlin refused to recognize Russia's legitimate interests and cultural influence in Europe. Putin's decision to use force in Ukraine followed the response from the United States and NATO to Russia's demands for security, including the non-expansion of the alliance and the removal of Western military infrastructure from Ukraine.

By ordering an offensive military operation, Putin acted in the assertive realist spirit of *global balancers*. The latter view Russia's influence in Ukraine as essential for defending national interests and containing the West's power. In his justification of the operation and subsequent public statements, Putin made a case for a preemptive war against the expansionist West in the interest of Russia's national defence. In his assessment, Russia has had to attack first lest it is attacked by the Western nations using Ukrainian territory.

Putin first revealed his preemptive realist philosophy in a speech given in 2015 at the Annual meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club,¹⁵ in which he stated his preference to strike first "if the fight is inevitable." Putin styled himself in the mode of Peter the Great, who did not hesitate to act assertively with respect to powerful European states such as Sweden. Putin has limited respect for other Russian tsars who either lost the Crimean War (Nicholas I) or conducted a largely defensive foreign policy in the western direction (Alexander II and Alexander III).¹⁶

Putin's realist approach to foreign policy should not be confused with imperialism. If anything, it is reminiscent of American "offensive" realism associated

¹⁴ Vladimir Putin, Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoi Federatsiyi. Moscow, Kremlin, 24 February 2022. <https://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

¹⁵ Vladimir Putin, Speech at the Plenary Session of the 12th Annual Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club. Moscow: Kremlin, 23 October 2015. <https://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-meets-with-members-of-the-valdai-discussion-club-transcript-of-the-final-plenary-sess/>.

¹⁶ Andrei Zorin, "Why Putin Needs Peter the Great," *Russia Matters*, 23 June 2022. <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/why-putin-needs-peter-great>

with the aggressive promotion of national interests and military interventions in foreign policy.¹⁷ Some American *realists* supported the use of force and regime change in Iraq and elsewhere for the purpose of enhancing power and establishing friendly governments rather than long-term occupation and colonization.

Putin's initial idea with respect to Ukraine was also to establish a friendly regime in Kyiv¹⁸ rather than occupy or annex the country's territories. With this goal in mind, Putin did not deploy a sufficiently large military force to ensure a long-term occupation. Seizing and keeping territories beyond Crimea was not in the original plans and likely emerged in response to the failure to remove the Ukrainian government from power. On 25 February 2022, Putin called for the "patriotic" Ukrainian military to take matters into their own hands and overthrow Volodymyr Zelensky.¹⁹

Putin's subsequent actions have prompted many to call him an *imperialist* and *occupier* who has always harbored plans to partition Ukraine. In April, the Kremlin moved to capture Ukrainian lands in the east and south. On 22 April 2022, Russian major general Rustam Minnekaev announced that Russia was entering the second phase of the SMO, aiming to establish control over the Donbas and a land corridor all the way to the breakaway territory of Transdniestria in Moldova.²⁰ In September 2022, Russia organized referenda in the captured territories and proclaimed them to be a part of the country. Simultaneously, the Kremlin announced a mobilization of 300,000 troops for fighting in Ukraine.²¹ The Kremlin pledged to defend new territories by any available means, which provoked widespread fears of the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons.

Available data indicate that occupation emerged as a military tactic in response to Putin's inability to execute his Kyiv-centered plan. Russia moved to concentrate on

¹⁷ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

¹⁸ Robert Dalsjö, Michael Jonsson, & Johan Norberg, "A Brutal Examination: Russian Military Capability in Light of the Ukraine War," *Survival* 64, No. 3 (2022): pp. 8-9.

¹⁹ "Putin Calls for Ukraine Army to Overthrow Zelensky," *AFP*, 25 February 2022.

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/25/putin-calls-for-ukraine-army-to-overthrow-zelensky-a76598>

²⁰ "Russia To Seek Full Control of Donbas, Southern Ukraine – Russian General," *AFP*, 22 April 2022.

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/04/22/russia-to-seek-full-control-of-donbas-southern-ukraine-russian-general-a77463>

²¹ Out of 25 million available, according to Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.

seizing lands from Ukraine in the east and south, viewing them as a strategic buffer zone, a way to weaken Kyiv's military resolve, and/or a lever in future political negotiations. When Kyiv launched a successful counter-offensive in southern Kharkiv's area, Moscow responded by organizing referenda and announcing partial military mobilization. Although a long-term occupation may become a reality, the occupation was not referenced in the Kremlin's previous statements or original justification of the war. Putin has become an imperialist by default. In his mind, the occupation is the necessity to protect the perceived security interests of Russia from potential encroachment by hostile Western powers.

Putin's Supporters: Stay the Course

Putin's supporters are part of an extensive network within the foreign policy community that includes politicians, media, and think tanks with ties to the Kremlin. Local governors such as the Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov, and the authorities of the Russian Orthodox Church have also advanced their support for the goals of the SMO.

With respect to the causes of the SMO in Ukraine, members of these networks are united in stressing structural factors such as Russia-Western disagreements on NATO's expansion and growing military presence in Central and Eastern Europe. In their perception, the war has become inevitable because the West refused to consider Russia's security concerns in Ukraine and larger Europe. They also believe that the West has deprived Kyiv of any autonomy in relations with Moscow and failed to ensure that Ukrainian authorities implement the Minsk accords.

For example, in the words of State Duma Deputy and the Head of the Institute of the Commonwealth of Independent States Konstantin Zatulin, "unfortunately, the war has been inevitable" because of fundamental differences between the "multinational" Russia and the nationalist Ukraine, "which has taken the path of betraying common roots and sliding towards the ideals of Bandera."²² In the assessment of the Honorary Chair of Russia's Council of Foreign and Defense Policy, Sergei Karaganov, the war was

²² Konstantin Zatulin, "Vogne broda net," *Rossiia v global'noi politike*, 15 March 2022. <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/v-ogne-broda-net/>

made inevitable following the West's revealed readiness to admit Ukraine into NATO.²³ Such is also the view of Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who said that the "collective West" has "declared a total hybrid war against us" and that "we did everything in our power to avoid a direct conflict."²⁴ In his assessment, Western nations have used Ukraine "as an instrument to contain the peaceful development of the Russian Federation in the context of their course to perpetuate a unipolar world order."

At least in the first phase of the SMO until the second half of April 2022, Putin's supporters have defended his stated goals in the war, which, in their assessment, required the removal of Zelensky from power. In the view of Karaganov, Ukrainian elites are overly corrupt and dependent on the West. If Ukraine is to become a friendly state, it needs "a state-building elite," which Kyiv did not have "during the last thirty years."²⁵

Both Zatulin and Karaganov predict that Ukraine will be partitioned with pro-Russian Ukraine being fully "de-Nazified" and free of Western military infrastructure.²⁶ They view such developments as requiring major sacrifice on the part of Russia yet ultimately contributing to the weakening of the global position of the West relative to that of non-Western powers such as China, India, Russia, and others. One expert described the main goal of Russia as that of provoking the greatest "international storm" for the purpose of the final destruction of the West-centered world order.²⁷

With respect to political and military tactics, this group supports Putin by not favoring an escalation of the SMO and demonstrating confidence in Russia's ability to fulfill the initially stated goals. Having such confidence, members of the group have opposed negotiations with Kyiv. In their assessment, any negotiations will only delay the SMO by allowing the Ukrainian army to regroup and obtain additional supplies of

²³ Sergei Karaganov, "Russia cannot afford to lose, so we need a kind of a victory," *New Statesman*, 2 April 2022. <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2022/04/russia-cannot-afford-to-lose-so-we-need-a-kind-of-a-victory-sergey-karaganov-on-what-putin-wants>

²⁴ Sergei Lavrov, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the 30th Assembly of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, Moscow, 14 May 2022. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1813377/.

²⁵ Karaganov, "Russia cannot afford to lose."

²⁶ Zatulin, "V ogne broad net"; Karaganov, "Russia cannot afford to lose."

²⁷ Dmitry Yefremenko, "Miroportyadok Z," *Rossiia v global'noi politike* 20, 3 (2022). <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/miroportyadok-z/>

Western weapons. Russia's officials engaged in negotiations with the Ukrainian side in Belarus and Istanbul in March and early April, respectively. In April, the Head of the Russian delegation, Vladimir Medinsky, announced a possible compromise and a ceasefire. The compromise was to be based on Russia's withdrawal of troops from Ukraine and guarantees of its territorial integrity, except for Crimea and the Donbas region, in exchange for Kyiv's pledge of neutrality. However, the deal collapsed following the discovery of war crimes and mass graves in Bucha. Putin's supporters have concluded that Ukrainian authorities reconsidered the deal and staged developments in Bucha to derail the compromise.²⁸

This group remained loyal to Putin following his decision about partial military mobilization in response to Ukraine's counter-offensive in September 2022. In Zatulin's words, in Russia, "there is now an understanding that since we have already taken up arms, we must move towards victory at a slow pace in order to eventually complete the special operation as quickly as possible, which requires significantly different forces."²⁹

Military Radicals: Escalate the War

A more radical group within and outside the Kremlin has advocated for the escalation of the war and the conflict with the West to achieve a rapid and decisive victory. Parts of the military and security services favor the escalation. Many of them, while being initially loyal to Putin, have become impatient as Russia failed to reach its initially stated military objectives. For instance, in September 2022, the head of the paramilitary organization, Wagner Group Yevgeny Prigozhin, former commander of the Donbas military Igor' Strelkov, and Ramzan Kadyrov responded to Kyiv's counter-offensive by calling on Putin to use more powerful weapons and mobilizing more powerful forces for fighting in Ukraine. Various media and foreign policy experts also promote their views by articulating the radical perspective. Such views have often found support in Russian social media, including *Telegram* and *V kontakte*.

²⁸ Karaganov, "Russia cannot afford to lose."

²⁹ Natatya Prikhod'ko, "V Kiyeve priznayut riski yadernykh udarov," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 21 September 2022. https://www.ng.ru/cis/2022-09-21/5_8545_ukraine.html

Radicals agree with the more loyal supporters of Putin that the war in Ukraine has become inevitable due to the policies advanced by the West. However, they have drawn more extreme conclusions from the conflict between Russia and the West, arguing for Russia's comprehensive military, political, and economic mobilization to win. In the words of the President of the Institute of National Strategy Mikhail Remizov, "even the minimalist conception of the goals and motives of the war ... implies the maximalist criteria for victory."³⁰ He, therefore, argued for "mobilization in the broad sense of the word" as "necessary" and "inevitable" due to the "totality of the war." By such mobilization, the expert meant new methods of military mobilization, as well as a gradual establishment of a new model of state governance and management of strategic industries with the objective of building an autarchic economy invulnerable to any external pressures.

Most *radicals* have advocated for the goal of regime change in Kyiv as a long-term solution to the Ukraine problem and Russia's preparation for a future confrontation with NATO over the Baltics, the Balkans, and other strategically important territories.³¹ Director of the Eurasian Communication Center Aleksei Pil'ko argued in his Telegram channel for posing objectives beyond those limited to control over the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine. In his view, Russia must establish control over the entire Ukrainian territory to prevent a future occupation of Ukraine by NATO troops and guerilla warfare against Russia waged by pro-Western Kyiv.³²

Radicals are often even more critical of negotiations with Ukraine than Putin's *loyalists*. They have been against ceding any captured territories to the Nazis in Kyiv, having attacked Medinsky's efforts in Istanbul as a betrayal of Russia. In their view, the proposed compromise would be similar to the ceasefire that followed the end of the Russia-Chechnya war in 1996.³³ Many Russian experts view the settlement with Chechnya, known as the Khasavyurt agreement, as a failure and even a betrayal of national interests. According to them, any compromise or a "semi-victory" equals a

³⁰ Mikhail Remizov, "O krizise osnovaniy," *Rossiia v global'noi politike*, 25 May 2022.

<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/o-krizise-osnovanij/>

³¹ Aleksei Pil'ko, Telegram, <https://t.me/pintofmind>, 14 February 2022; Aleksei Fenenko, "Krusheniye "liniyi Gofmana." *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 3 March 2022. https://www.ng.ru/kartblansh/2022-03-03/3_8385_kb.html

³² Pil'ko, Telegram, <https://t.me/pintofmind>, 14 February 2022.

³³ Pil'ko, Telegram, <https://t.me/pintofmind>, 31 March 2022.

“non-victory” or defeat with far-reaching domestic and international consequences for the country. The cited evidence of a national betrayal by Medinsky’s team in Istanbul is the omission of “de-Nazification” from the negotiated compromise.³⁴

In order to escalate the war, this group proposes using all other available means short of nuclear weapons including a mass mobilization, cutting gas supplies to Europe, employing cyber warfare, deploying troops and weapons in close proximity to the United States, and even hitting American military bases across the world.³⁵ The group supported Putin’s announced partial military mobilization in September 2022 but viewed it as insufficient to accomplish the posed objectives of the war. They expected a general mobilization, a declaration of war, and internal repressions.³⁶

The Moderates

The Russian *moderates* do not favor the scenario of continuing the war and are in search of an acceptable compromise to end the SMO. The group is largely made of those critical of *global balancers* and their reasoning about the causes of war and Ukraine and Russia’s objectives in it.

Causes of the War

Members of the moderate group do not accept that the war in Ukraine was inevitable. Although they share the above-described analysis that the West refused to seriously consider the political-security interests and cultural influence of Russia in Ukraine, they argue for a possible compromise on the basis of diplomacy. Several weeks before the beginning of the SMO, the former head of the Moscow Carnegie Center, Dmitry Trenin, expressed a commonly held view that the West was prepared to discuss

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Sergei Mardan, Telegram, <https://t.me/mardanaka>, 12 July 2022.

³⁶ Fred Weir, “More troops, more annexations: Putin announces new Ukraine plans,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 September 2022. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2022/0921/More-troops-more-annexations-Putin-announces-new-Ukraine-plans>

selected parts of Russia's security proposals.³⁷ While acknowledging the role of a structural conflict between Russia and the West, he nevertheless suggested that a military confrontation was not in the cards. He further warned that the possibility of using force in Ukraine would bring "a colossal risk for Russia." Finally, Trenin speculated that in case of failed diplomatic discussions, Russia was likely to protect its interests in Europe by deploying new weapons systems in new territories.³⁸

Other experts also indicated that the use of force in the way it has been applied was neither inevitable nor rational. As Ivan Timofeyev wrote, experts believed that a full-fledged armed conflict with Ukraine would never happen because, in their assessment, the damage from the conflict would greatly outweigh any possible benefits.³⁹ The Director of the Russian Council of International Affairs, Andrei Kortunov, publicly revealed his shock over Putin's decision to invade Ukraine.⁴⁰ He predicted that Russia would now face times that are "darker and more dangerous" than the Cold War with a long pause in high-level dialogue, a costly arms race, isolation of Russia from Western technological and energy markets, and an exacerbated struggle for the hearts and minds of the non-Western world.⁴¹

Experts in this group do not think that the West is solely responsible for the structural conflict with Russia. As the Director of the *PublicO* site, Boris Mezhujev wrote on his Facebook page, following the Euro-Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, Russia lost the initiative and failed to present Ukrainians with a culturally attractive alternative to the West.⁴² Therefore, while the West failed to be respectful of Russia's interests and values in Europe and Ukraine, Russia's responsibility is that of failing to demonstrate the desirability of such interests and values. In the expert's view, the Kremlin should act

³⁷ Dmitry Trenin, "Oba stsenariya predpolagayut opredelennuyu tsenu," *Kommersant*, 25 January 2022. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5181967>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ivan Timofeyev, "Why Experts Believed an Armed Conflict with Ukraine Would Never Happen," *Russian Council on International Affairs*, 4 March 2022. <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/why-experts-believed-an-armed-conflict-with-ukraine-would-never-happen/>

⁴⁰ Dominic Waghorn, "Ukraine invasion: Kremlin policy adviser reveals his shock over Vladimir Putin's decision to invade," *Sky News*, 2 March 2022. <https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-invasion-kremlin-policy-adviser-reveals-his-shock-over-vladimir-putins-decision-to-invade-12555163>

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Boris Mezhujev, "Спустя восемь лет после Евромайдана," 16 January 2022. [Борис Межуев | Facebook](#)

in Eurasia strictly within those areas where Russia remains the source of cultural attraction including South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Donbass. He assesses it as a strategic error to go beyond these territories thereby becoming the main enemy of the West.⁴³

Russia's Goals

The *moderates* define Russia's goals in Ukraine and Europe in a less ambitious way than the war coalition. They favor Ukrainian military neutrality and the protection of the Donbass from Kyiv's potential attack while arguing for the establishment of pragmatic ties with the outside world, including European nations.

Those experts favoring the preservation of Russia-European relations argue against viewing the war in Ukraine as a direct derivative of the conflict with the West. President of the Russian Council of International Affairs, Igor' Ivanov recognized the future prospect of a prolonged period of living in a politically divided Europe with no opportunity to revive the continent's unity.⁴⁴ While writing for a French publication, he nevertheless called for Russia and France not to allow the split of the continent by building foundations for mutual cooperation. In his view, such cooperation is possible on the basis of resolving "concrete problems where our interests objectively coincide." In the same spirit, Kortunov warned Russia against acting as a spoiler in international politics by breaking the existing rules, which in his view, may lead to overstraining Russia's resources and becoming a power of secondary status in world affairs.⁴⁵

While describing Russia's goals in global affairs, Trenin also stressed the importance of being pragmatic and non-expansionist. In his assessment, the key to success is not in building a new world order or annexing new territories. Unlike others within the group, he believes that through Ukraine, Russia is locked in an existential

⁴³ Boris Mezhujev, "Невыученные уроки Вадима Цымбурского," 2 March 2022. [Борис Межуев | Facebook](#)

⁴⁴ Igor' Ivanov, "Франция и Россия в новом миропорядке," *Russian Council on International Affairs*, 30 May 2022. <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/frantsiya-i-rossiya-v-novom-miroporyadke/>

⁴⁵ Andrei Kortunov, "Реставрация, реформация, революция? Сценарии мироустройства после российско-украинского конфликта," *The Russian Council of International Affairs*, 29 April 2022. <https://russiancouncil.ru/activity/workingpapers/restavratsiya-reformatsiya-revoljutsiya-stsenarii-miroustroystva-posle-rossiysko-ukrainskogo-konflik/>

hybrid war with the West.⁴⁶ Because of limited resources, Russia can only survive as a great power if it avoids a direct confrontation with the stronger and invests in constructing strong relations with non-Western countries such as China, India, and others in Asia and the Middle Eastern region. In the meantime, the world order is likely to be constructed by other players including those more powerful than Russia.⁴⁷

Political and Military Means

Finally, members of the moderate group argue that Russia's limited objectives require the search for a compromise and negotiations with Kyiv rather than escalation of the SMO. Some of them advocate for bilateral negotiations while others favor the involvement of mediators including France and Germany.⁴⁸ In both cases, they insist on viewing Zelensky as a legitimate authority and irreplaceable party in a dialogue, not as an agency-free marionette of the West.⁴⁹

Supporters of this perspective viewed the talks in Belarus and Istanbul as helpful developments. They have assessed as acceptable the formula of a compromise proposed by Medinsky in Istanbul, which included Kyiv's military neutrality, Russia's withdrawal of troops, and security guarantees of Ukraine's territorial integrity.⁵⁰ Crimea and Donbass were to be excluded from the deal with the prospect of future separate negotiations regarding their status. Following the collapse of the talks in April, members of the restraint group have grown frustrated and suggested that negotiations would only resume after the end of the Donbass battle.⁵¹ However, given the relative

⁴⁶ Dmitry Trenin, "Кто мы, где мы, за что мы – и почему," *Russia in Global Affairs*, 11 April 2022.

<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/kto-my-gde-my/>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Sergei Stankevich, "Эксперты сомневаются в возможности «заморозить» специальную военную операцию," *PublicO*, 30 June 2022. <https://publico.ru/mezhdunarodnye-otnosheniya/eksperty-somnevayutsya-v-vozmozhnosti-zamorozit-speczialnuyu-voennuyu-operaciyu/>

⁴⁹ Andrei Kortunov, "Линии расхождения: что переговоры с Украиной говорят о состоянии российского общества," *The Russian Council of International Affairs*, April 2022.

<https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/linii-raskhozhdeniya-cto-peregovory-s-ukrainoy-govoryat-o-sostoyanii-rossiyskogo-obshchestva/>

⁵⁰ Stankevich, "Эксперты сомневаются."

⁵¹ Boris Mezhuhev, "Почему переговоры между Россией и Украиной в тупике, 12 May 2022.

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parity of Russia’s and Ukraine’s overall military capabilities, they assumed the possibility of a prolonged conflict. They predicted an eventual cease-fire without a formal settlement and establishment of a demilitarized zone in the manner of ending the Korean War in 1953.⁵²

Table 1.1: Russian Realists and the War in Ukraine: A Summary

	<i>Loyalists</i>	<i>Radicals</i>	<i>Moderates</i>
<i>Causes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West & Kyiv • Inevitable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West & Kyiv • Inevitable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West, Kyiv, & Russia • Preventable
<i>Russia’s Goals</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demilitarization • Denazification • Collapse of Western order 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demilitarization • Denazification • Pro-Russian Ukraine • Collapse of Western order 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neutrality of Kyiv • Security of Donbass
<i>Russia’s Means</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited War • Partition of Ukraine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilization • Regime Change in Kyiv 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited War • Diplomatic Settlement

Table 1.1 summarizes views by Russian *realists* on the war in Ukraine.

Conclusion

As the dominant group in the foreign policy community, Russian *realists* demonstrate both continuity and change in their assessment of the war in Ukraine. While largely holding the West and Kyiv responsible for the overall crisis in relations with Russia, *realists* disagree in their views of the causes of the war, Russia's goals, and the means for accomplishing them.

With respect to the causes and goals of Russia, the biggest divide is between Putin's *loyalists* and *radicals* on the one hand and *moderates* on the other. While the former tends to blame the West and Ukraine for the crisis and advocate relatively expansive foreign policy goals for Russia, the latter offers a more balanced analysis. In particular, *moderates* suggest that Russia should have continued diplomatic negotiations with Western powers after 24 February and should pursue diplomacy as the only legitimate way to end the war.

There is also a considerable divide within the war coalition regarding methods to end the crisis. While both *loyalists* and *radicals* oppose negotiations, they differ in their proposed magnitude of means of political, economic, and military coercion with respect to Ukraine and the Western states. *Radicals* go especially far by frequently advocating mass mobilization, declaration of a full-scale war on Ukraine, and cutting all energy supplies for both Ukraine and Western European consumers.

The identified diversity within Russian realism suggests some opportunities for the West to influence the country's political discourse. Such opportunities, however, can only be exploited if Western nations rethink their approach, according to which Russia's capabilities must be degraded or defeated on the battlefield. Alongside the Kremlin's militarist thinking, this approach has already contributed to the enormous devastation in Ukraine and will continue to delay prospects for a peaceful settlement between Moscow and Kyiv while threatening an escalation of the war into a direct Russia-NATO conflict. With the growing destabilization of international economic, energy, and food markets underway, this approach will continue to embolden Russian military *radicals* by pushing the international system toward its fundamental disruption and a large-scale wider war.