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Danielle Makio[1]

[1]Universidade Estadual Paulista "Julio de Mesquita Filho", Sao Paulo, Brazil - University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Island (daniellemakio@gmail.com)

ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0002-5142-7368

Alexandre Fuccille[2]

[2]Universidade Estadual Paulista "Julio de Mesquita Filho", Sao Paulo, Brazil (fuccille@gmail.com)

ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0002-6779-3311

Article

The 2014 Russian Invasion of Crimea: Identity and Geopolitics

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Abstract

The following paper aims to unveil the reasons behind the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Based on the hypothesis that Moscow's decision was the result of the combination of strategic and ideational drivers, the study demonstrates how President Vladimir Putin's political project has: (i) deepened Russia's rivalry towards the West, strengthening the threat posed by NATO's expansion; (ii) and highlighted the role of memory in the state's identity, putting Ukraine in a privileged position in the Kremlin's political agenda.

Keywords: Russia; Ukraine; Crimea; Identity; Geopolitics.

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Introduction

On November 2013 Kyiv was taken by Euromaidan protesters criticizing the suspension of the signature of an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU). Despite the government's active initiative to advance the conclusion of the agreement, Viktor Yanukovych (2010-2014) abruptly abandoned talks. Given his pro-Russian political orientation, it was speculated that the decision came from Moscow, which led protesters to ask for a closer relationship with the EU to the detriment of deepening the already existing dependence on Russia. Adherence to the movement grew until it was co-opted by different sectors of society, including ultranationalist Ukrainian groups (Bebler 2015). In February 2014, the crowd started demanding the resignation of the president, who announced his departure from office in the same month.

Shortly after the president's outset, unidentified Russian troops took over Crimea, a region mostly inhabited by ethnically

Russian communities. There was no impediment on the part of the peninsula's authorities and population, who feared the consequences of the president's resignation and the protagonism of ultranationalist sectors in the national politics. Thus, a plebiscite was held in which 97.47% Crimeans declared support for the annexation of the territory to the Russian Federation, a fact that was immediately recognized by the Kremlin (Bebler 2015). The Euromaidan also incited separatism in the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, in the Donbas region, which has worsened due to the 2022 war.

At first glance, the annexation seems to have built an unfavorable scenario to Russia, which, due to severe sanctions, suffered, among other negative outcomes, a loss of approximately 8% of the gross domestic product (Mirovalev 2021). Furthermore, the country was ousted from the G-8, which then reassumed its original configuration from the 1970s. If we consider the fact that, despite such a context, the Kremlin never reversed the annexation and even reignited its expansionist intentions in Ukraine, the events of 2014 seem to have paid off somehow. Thus, in this paper, seeking to unveil the reasons behind Russian attitudes in 2014, and to shed light on possible drivers of the 2022 war, we ask ourselves: *what justifies Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014*?

We argue that the event analyzed herein resulted from the overlap of two main factors. The first concerns Moscow's material interests in Crimea and Ukraine. We believe that the search for economic and military advantages was underlying the option for annexation. Such benefits are not only related to the resources available in the regions in question, but also to their geographic position amid a Western expansion towards Eurasia, mainly represented by the expansion of the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The second is related to the proximity of identity between Russia, Ukraine and Crimea and its role in Moscow's nationalist project. In this sense, we argue that all three share fundamental characteristics of the political ideology that currently supports the Kremlin's identity formation amid its great power policy project, thus making the peninsula an easily attachable region and a desirable territory under the Federation's ideological discourse.

Through an analytical historical approach supported by official discourses, press releases and media content analysis, we will demonstrate how Putin's great power policy both creates and is created by a project of nationalism sustained by an idea of exceptionalism that, at the same time (i) forges the ideological and material need to resume Crimea to Russian territory; and (ii) sets the ideational basis for legitimizing annexation. Thus, this paper will be divided in three main sections. The first discusses the theoretical structure of Russia's current nationalism and exceptionalism. The second demonstrates how the Kremlin's nationalist identity created the ideational basis on which annexation was built and supported. Finally, the third section sheds light on the role of material interests on Moscow's strategy towards Crimea and Ukraine.

Contemporary Russian Nationalism

"It should be noted that Ukraine actually never had stable traditions of real statehood" (Kremlin 2022). Vladimir Putin's claim made in the context of the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian war alludes to the secular shared history of both countries and suggests its instrumentalization as a political tool of the Kremlin. The president's speech, however, echoes Muscovite behavior that precedes the current conflict. Putin's revisionist strategy is not recent and has been largely justified by his great power policy. Especially since the return to the presidency in 2012, he has been engendering an identity reformulation project that relies heavily on an affective appeal to memories of grandiose events that marked Russia's history (Danilova 2015; Kangaspuro 2022; Lassila 2022; McGlynn 2023), though memory politics were made a matter of state interest from 2005 onwards (Wijermars 2019). The formula seems simple and boils down to promoting a particular historiography that highlights:

a. How powerful and important Russia once was and still is. In this sense, (re)memorizations about the victorious Great Patriotic War, the relevance of the Orthodox Church, which fought against the Islamic expansion, among other triumphant and relevant events stand out. This strategy highlights exceptional particularities of the country and uses them to justify its right to greatness (Haskins 2022). This concept, that we call "Russian exceptionalism", sets the necessary discursive foundation that legitimizes the political formulation of the Russian state, supporting the search for its interests and corroborating its decision-making. Following the contributions of Katalin Miklóssy (2022), Mariëlle Wijermars (2022) and Markku Kangaspuro (2022), Russian exceptionalism, in this sense, can be understood as the idea that Russia holds unique civilizational and ideological characteristics that have made the state predestined to greatness. Consequently, it is because of this exceptionalism that Russia holds the messianic mission to share its superior political and ideological structure with others, especially those in need for salvation (McGlynn 2023).
b. The proximity of the Russo-Slavic peoples, who are now scattered across different states, but who were once united. This point is important because it evokes a sense of unity among individuals who, at the limit, may privilege a notion of belonging to Russia over a feeling of belonging to the country they inhabit. Thus, it becomes more feasible to accept and/or legitimize Russian actions that are dedicated to ethnic reunification, whether perpetrated through de facto territorial dominations, or continued support for separatist enclaves.

Putin's strategy is evident in his efforts directed to (re)formulate the basic school curriculum in Russia. Great attention has been paid to the teaching of history and of national values and traditions in the daily lives of students:

> Friends, we must acknowledge that schools' influence on shaping children and adolescents has grown weaker in recent years […] Schools must regain their absolute value. This means renewing educational content, while of course maintaining our

> traditions and advantages, such as our fundamental mathematical education, without forgetting the enormous significance of high-quality education in the Russian language, history, literature, the foundations of secular ethics and traditional religions. These subjects have a special role: they form a personality, an individual (Kremlin 2014).

Changes in the educational system, especially those that are related to the teaching of history, have a strong influence on society's consensus regarding the understanding of the state's formation and development, a matter that is susceptible to distortions depending on the position occupied by those who write it. In this context, history, whether its academic formulation or its spread through mediatic means, can be understood as an arena of dispute. Since a narrative is a social and intersubjective object that allows us to access the world, the support of a specific narrative legitimizes or deligitimizes values, actors and decisions. As a historic narrative is systematically reproduced, it becomes hegemonic, making it more likely for the protagonists to legitimize their own interests among society (Çapan 2017). Such a historiographical production process reflects the celebration of specific memories and affections, that is, the reproduction of history through a particular perspective, highlighting the events and the peoples considered most relevant by those who concentrate the power of discursive formation (McGlynn 2023; Rahman 2015). History, thus, when made the subject of politics, is defined by the overlap of deliberate projects of remembering and forgetting (Ringmar 1996). In the Russian case, such an instrument, which has been more heavily used since 2012, is of utmost importance as it lays the ground for the legitimacy of Russian exceptionalism, which is the moral core of Putin's plans (McGlynn 2023; Miklóssy 2022).

Another interesting point in the Kremlin's politics is the increase in state control over the country's media. In 2014, Russia, after an escalation in state intervention on communication vehicles, found itself in the 148th position on a scale that considers levels of media freedom in 180 countries[1]. In 2023, the state's position dropped to 163 ("World press freedom index 2014." 2023). Considering the importance of popularizing norms and ideas for creating consensus and legitimating state actions (Cox 1996), media control and historical revisionism, combined, suggest that there is a systematic attempt by the Kremlin to promote its visions and intentions regarding Russia. Thus, the idea of Russian exceptionalism and, therefore, of the country's right to a distinct place in world politics and to a messianic role, is primarily instituted by the amalgamation of civic education and the media (Sanina 2022). In this context, the Kremlin's regime is able not only to spread its revisionist version of history, but to make it become the mainstream local understanding of Russia. The remembrance and continuous celebration of prestigious, victorious episodes are presented in such a way that they mobilize affections and memories that promote a sense of patriotic pride that corroborates Putin's political project.

[1] In the 2011/2012 index, the country was in position 142 out of 179. The drop in the years 2013/2014 and 2023 suggests a progressive increase in state control over the media, a context that adds to the attacks on reporters and journalists that have been occurring in greater numbers since 2011, as denounced in a document presented by Reporters Without Borders to the UN Human Rights Council (2023).

The Great Patriotic War is, in this sense, an indispensable example. Since 2012, it has been progressively revived with national parades and propaganda on TV aimed at reigniting social pride for the country's achievements. The comeback of big public parades, such as the ones promoted by the Immortal Regiment, is a massive example of how memorization processes and affection connections are relevant for the normalization of Russian exceptionalism not as an academic concept or regime propaganda, but as a feeling present and performed in people's everyday lives (Danilova 2015; Haskins 2022). Moscow has also been guarantying uncontested legitimacy for its project through the institutionalization of state organizations and laws that rule over the historiographic scientific-literary production and transmission. In this sense, it is interesting to highlight the (re)establishment of the Russian Historic Society and the Russian Military Historical Society; the institution of United Russia's Historical Memory project and its attempts to control historiographic content, as in the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History; and the new laws made under Article 354 that, among others, prohibit diverging narratives regarding the annexation of the Baltic states (McGlynn 2023). These are some of the many exiting examples of how the state has been progressively gaining absolute control over the spread of historical narrative to guarantee the uncontested legitimacy of its ideational discourse.

Finally, to understand Russia's contemporary nationalism and its reflections on the 2014 Crimea events, we must consider the growth of conservatism, mostly represented by a close alliance between state and the Orthodox Church. The rapprochement between Putin and Patriarch Kirill has brought to light an overvaluation of important markers of Russianness, that is, of political-ideological characteristics that traditionally define Russian identity and state organization. Among these factors, Orthodoxy and conservatism become especially central to Moscow's identity since 2012 (McGlynn 2023; Miklóssy 2022; Sanina 2022). Conservatism, in this sense, can be understood as a search for stability created from an amalgamation of two distinct "conservatisms": the religious one, aligned with the dogmas of the Orthodox Church and essentially defined by the valuing of the traditional family and the rejection of expressions of liberal "distortions celebrated" by the West; and the Soviet, which rejects liberalism in its economic and ideological form, meaning the defense of state control over economy and the confrontation with Western social progressivism (Agadjanian 2017).

By bringing together two apparently antagonistic perspectives, religious faith and Soviet atheism, Russian conservatism holds a common element in both universes: anti-Westernism. Both, to a certain extent, allude to the "moral distortion" of the West while granting Russia a place of evaluative superiority and differentiation. There is, therefore, a reinforcement of the idea of Russian exceptionalism, since the country is presented as a fortress that resists the ideational depravity of the West. The latter is, therefore, crystallized as the antagonistic Other to the Russian Self, a rivalry that worsens if we consider the context of political-military expansion of institutions such as the EU and NATO, which has been growing closer to Moscow's Near Abroad. In this context, if Russia is to reestablish itself as a respected and central power in world politics, it must demonstrate its capacity to overcome its main external threat: the West and its liberalism.

Ukraine and Russian Nationalism

In its nationalist quest for a prominent place in international politics, the Kremlin has used many processes of (re)memorization with doses of historical revisionism to crystallize the markers of the country's Russianness and exceptionalism. Thus, the constant celebration of great myths and past events is a recurring theme of the government in speeches, declarations, academic and literary productions, among others. Therefore, there are some states that are placed in special positions in Moscow's narrative as they occupy an important place in the history of Russian state-building. Among these, Ukraine is especially important as it shares the same founding myth as Russia's: the Kyivan Rus. According to Russian historiography, it was a socio-political formation of Slavic tribes that, united by common ancestry, organized as a proto-nation-state in which important cities such as Moscow and Novgorod were created, and which would come to be considered the birthplace of the Russian Empire (Neumann 2003). When analyzing the process of formation and development of this "Slavic state" more deeply, however, some consensuses begin to crumble.

If the Russians use the idea of the common state formation to argue that, together with the Ukrainians, they are equal parts of the same people, in Kyiv a different version runs. According to the most widely accepted historiography in Ukraine, Kyivan Rus marks the origin of the Ukrainian state (Kuzio 2001), dismantling Putin's argument of ethno-social unity between both nations. Indeed, for centuries Ukraine's territory was divided between different kingdoms: Russia controlled the Eastern and Southern parts of the country for a long period of time; while Poland, Lithuania, and other Western kingdoms held sway over Western and Central of Ukraine for centuries. The current Ukrainian territory was unified during the Soviet period and would only exist as an independent state from the 1990s onwards.

This historical resumption of the facts allows for two different interpretations. First, we have the Russian version, according to which Ukraine shares the same founding myth as Russia and therefore shares very similar memories and traditions. Moscow also claims that Ukraine only exists as a sovereign state thanks to Russia, which is justified, above all, by the successful territorial unification carried out by the USSR. Therefore, Kyiv should recognize its brotherhood with Moscow and value everything Russia has done for it. Another version of the facts, however, leads to opposite conclusions. According to the official Ukrainian version, the country's territory was divided for so long that it is impossible to suggest that its people can fully identify with Russian society just because they share the myth of Kyivan Rus and a few other episodes. Thus, it is also not feasible to affirm that, in view of so many struggles to extricate itself from foreign domains, Ukraine could be considered part of the Russian state and not a country whose history and identity are independent of Moscow. According to Kyiv, it is thanks to the Cossack initiative[2] that Ukraine

[2] Reference to the Hetmanate, a Cossack state that existed between 1648 and 1764 in part of the current territory of Ukraine. It was a political formation which sought to defend Ukrainians against Polish religious extremism that threatened the survival of the Orthodox faith in territories occupied by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

appears as an agent of international law. In this context, the subordination to Moscow, celebrated in the Treaty of Pereyaslav[3] (1654), cannot be understood as the unification of both.

By declaring its independence in 1991, Ukraine ended years of external domination and was finally able to start building a country and nation of its own. Since then, presidents have strived to consolidate a national identity, overcome the challenges posed by the political division of the country and westernize. Although the interruption of relations with Russia has never been a clear goal in Kyiv's agenda, establishing a more equitable interaction with its neighbor, allowing less assertiveness on the part of Moscow, has (Kuzio 2001). The 2000s, however, inaugurated a new period marked by growing westernization, as seen in the Orange Revolution (2004), and Ukraine's ascending criticism regarding Moscow's nationalistic policy and renewed interest on its Near Abroad (Kubicek 2008).

Contemporary Ukraine

According to Ukraine's last census, from 2001, ethnic Ukrainians are approximately 77.8% of the country's population, while ethnic Russians account for 17.3% (Constantin 2022). There is, however, a very evident discrepancy in the concentration of these peoples throughout the territory, as the Russian minority is mainly located in eastern and southern areas. This division also translates into a clear political and cultural split. Where ethnic Ukrainians predominate, there is a larger presence of Western European religions, stronger search for political autonomy and greater rejection of Russian influence (Adam 2008). Conversely, in other places the Orthodox Church affiliated with the Patriarchate of Moscow and pro-Russian narratives are more common (Constantin 2022).

Even though Kyiv seeks to define a genuinely Ukrainian history and, thus, distance the country from Russia in terms of state and ethnic unity awareness, Ukraine is an indispensable actor in the Kremlin's political discourse. Always portrayed as a kind of extension of the Russian state, the Ukrainian nation is the protagonist of events such as (i) the Kyivan Rus; (ii) the victory over the Mongols and Muscovite expansion into territories formerly dominated by the Golden Horde (Neumann 2003); and (iii) Russian/Soviet superiority over Nazism (Kangaspuro 2022; Malinova 2017). Together, these milestones speak not only of the birth of Slavism and its great symbols, but also of Russia's greatness and strength, fundamental elements to the country's notion of exceptionality. From the Kremlin's point of view, therefore, indispensable memories are shared by both states regardless of Kyiv's official position, which justifies the connections between both places and corroborates Russia's resentment towards its neighbor.

> But the fact is that the situation in Ukraine today is completely different because it involves a forced change of identity. And the most despicable thing is that the

[3] Agreement in which the Hetmanate submits to Moscow under the condition that it would have special autonomy. The treaty was broken by Peter I (1682 – 1725) in 1708 (Kubicek 2008).

> Russians in Ukraine are being forced not only to deny their roots, generations of their ancestors but also to believe that Russia is their enemy. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the path of forced assimilation, the formation of an ethnically pure Ukrainian state, aggressive towards Russia, is comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us (Putin 2021).
>
> I would like to emphasize again that Ukraine is not just a neighboring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space (Kremlin 2022).

Another important divergence is the role of the West. If Russia has progressively deepened a notion of rivalry and distance from the great Western powers, Ukraine has demonstrated the opposite: it seeks to establish relations with the latter and to integrate blocs such as NATO and the EU. Finally, it is important to highlight the process of Ukrainization that has been systematically promoted by Kyiv, which, despite having essentially Russian-speaking strongholds and being predominantly Orthodox, has an ethnic Ukrainian majority and seeks to increase the use of the local language. This ethnolinguistic scenario can be seen not only as a reflection of the local identity itself, but also as a result of public policies to encourage the adoption of the Ukrainian language and national traditions to the detriment of the use of the Russian language and the protection of expressions from ethnically Russian cultures (Arel 2018).

The Unique Crimea

At the time of Kyivan Rus, Crimea was dominated by several peoples, including the Mongols, who controlled the region from the 15th to the 18th century and established the Crimean Khanate. Despite the city of Sevastopol having ancient connections with Russia, which already controlled it at the end of the 17th century, the Russians would only annex the entire site in 1783. At the time, however, the population was mostly formed by Turkmens. Given forced Russification policies, the locals soon developed a feeling of aversion to the Muscovite rule, which was maintained even during the establishment of the autonomous Crimean SSR in the 20th century. The Politburo believed that, given Ukraine's political division and the anti-Russian sentiments that still dominated the peninsula, it needed to maintain tighter control over the region and avoid joining it with Ukrainian territory, already fueled with nationalist feelings. The political opinion of the local population led Crimea to cooperate with the Nazis in Operation Barbarossa during World War II as an attempt to overcome Soviet power. With the victory of the Red Army, Stalin deported local inhabitants and began a series of repopulation policies, which reordered the ethnic composition and political orientation of the region (Kubicek 2008).

Thus, the region gained new ethnic, linguistic, cultural and political traits. Given Stalin's actions, according to the 2001 census, ethnic Russians accounted for approximately 58.3% of the peninsula's population. Furthermore, at the time, 97% of the inhabitants used Russian as their

main language. This was corroborated by the local media and education system, which, despite Kyiv's Ukrainization efforts, continued to mainly adopt the Russian language (Knott 2015). Orthodoxy was also consolidated on the peninsula, being followed by 42.7% of the population (Constantin 2022).

Social transformations were followed by political changes in Crimea, whose population began identifying with Soviet rule. The integration of the peninsula to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954, an event regretted by Putin[4], corroborated the political division of the Ukrainian Republic by inserting a new region whose identity was not aligned with that seen in other portions of the republic. With Ukrainian independence in 1991, Crimea was granted some autonomy, which allowed pro-Russian separatist forces to organize and gain strength. In 1994, Yuriy Meshkov, leader of the movement, was elected head of the peninsula. In this context, a failed separatist attempt was followed by a period of increased concentration of power in the hands of an ethnically Russian elite (Kuzio 2014). Thus, a systematic reduction in the presence of non-Russian ethnic groups in administrative and economic positions took place, which strengthened the segregation between Crimea and Kyiv.

In 1997, 70% of Russia's population supported a possible annexation of the city of Sevastopol (Kuzio 2014). Contradicting Kyiv's historical narratives on the Ukrainian-Russian relations, Crimea aligned to Moscow's discourse and started arguing that both share an ancestral bond and that, therefore, are naturally part of the same nation. Sevastopol, in this context, was a defining element of such a statement. As stated by Boris Nemtsov, governor of Nizhny Novgorod from 1991 to 1997, the city was conquered and maintained with Russian blood in distant times, hence Russia's kinship towards it. However, beyond being home to the mythological land of the Black Sea Fleet, Crimea is central to the conception of Russian exceptionalism because of its relevance to Orthodoxy, an indispensable marker of Russianness (Kuzio 2014). The peninsula is the place where Prince Volodymyr adopted Orthodoxy, which "predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus" (Kremlin 2014). In Putin's words:

> Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptised. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus […] This is also Sevastopol– a legendary city with an outstanding history, a fortress that serves as the birthplace of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Crimea is Balaklava and Kerch, Malakhov Kurgan and Sapun Ridge. Each one of these places is dear to our hearts, symbolising Russian military glory and outstanding valour (Kremlin 2014).

[4] "[…] Crimean Region of the RSFSR was given to the Ukrainian SSR in gross violation of legal norms that were in force at the time" (Putin 2021).

Hence Russia's ideational interest in Crimea and the numerous disagreements between Moscow and Kyiv regarding the peninsula. On the one hand, as an attempt to guarantee its territorial integrity, Ukraine has granted, not without reservations, special status to the peninsula[5], a gesture that can be interpreted as a way to appease possible Russian reactions and discourage separatist feelings among the locals. Such a decision, however, was followed by the progressive tightening of national Ukrainization policies[6], which caused disagreements with Russia, which perceived such measures as an aggression against Russophone minorities in the country. On the other hand, reacting to this scenario, Moscow started encouraging separatist forces in Crimea to protect its presence there (Kuzio 2014). The Kremlin's approximation towards the peninsula was especially fruitful in 1994 when the region started developing a particular identity that was ideologically much closer to Moscow. Once Meshkov left his position, however, the number of seats in the Crimean parliament occupied by parties loyal to Kyiv grew. The new regional political representation did not lose sight of the importance of maintaining Crimea's autonomy, however, the transformations in Congress were not followed by great changes in popular opinion: locals continued to identify much more with Russia than with Kyiv (Kuzio 2014).

Crimean nationalism remained latent in the population until the years leading up to the election of Viktor Yanukovych in 2010. To secure an advantage in the elections, the politician launched a broad project on the peninsula. The goal was to mobilize the ethnically Russian and pro-Russian population that inhabited the region and had not had their political demands contemplated by the government for years. Thus, through a complex combination of media instruments, political agreements, and other tools, the then candidate (re)mobilized political sectors of Crimean society that had had their protagonism reduced. At the time of Yanukovych's victory, thus, the spirits of the inhabitants of the peninsula were no longer the same. With the beginning of the new government and the adoption of a reconciliatory posture towards Russia, the political scenario of Crimea went through a profound change. Likewise, in Moscow, the cult of Russian exceptionalism and its expressions was reinforced in the peninsula and the desire for union with the Russian Federation grew (Kuzio 2014; Malinova 2017). The region's identity became more aligned with the Kremlin's discourse on Russian exceptionalism and started to progressively distance itself from the Ukrainian identity (Matsuzato 2016). The years of demobilization of separatist groups, thus, can be understood as an accelerator of the events of 2014. The repression, in this sense, could have catapulted Crimea to organize a referendum[7] to guarantee that new retaliations would not be imposed by Kyiv.

[5] In 1991, a referendum was held on Crimeans' opinion regarding the creation of an autonomous republic belonging to Ukraine. Over 93% of voters agreed to build a republic along the lines of the Crimean SSR, hence the concession of relative autonomy to the region (Wilson Center 2016).

[6] Among these we can list the national policies to encourage the adoption of Ukrainian instead of Russian as the official language and other measures that sought to limit influence of the Crimean government in the country's political decisions.

[7] Some people question the result of the referendum. Regardless of the veracity of the numbers, it is important to consider the action of years of political propaganda added to the dissatisfaction of a good part of the local inhabitants in regards to the increasingly assertive Ukrainization policies.

As Ukraine, Crimea shares important memories with Russia. In the case of the peninsula, historical milestones stand out, such as (i) the baptism of Prince Volodomyr and the adoption of Orthodoxy; (ii) the victory in the 19th century Crimean War[8]; and (iii) the creation of the Black Sea Fleet by Peter, the Great. Together, these events represent the superiority of the tsarist period. By locating the largest detachment of the Russian Navy in the port of Sevastopol, Moscow began the mythology of the city, which is referred to by Russians as the "city of glory" to date (Plokhy 2000). In fact, shortly before annexation, mirroring what had occurred in Russian cities, public events of remembrance began to be promoted, such as commemorations of dates connected to the Great Patriotic War, which caused great commotion. Immediately after the annexation, these events grew even further on the peninsula, as well as the number of monuments in honor of the great Russian heroes, the historical proximity of the peoples of the Russian Federation and Crimea, among other examples (Malinova 2017). This indicates that the deepening of memory policies and affection mobilization extrapolated the Russian context and was also directed elsewhere.

Geopolitics 101: Ukraine, Crimea and Russia's Interests

According to Andrei Tsygankov (2010), geopolitics and economy were not matters of particular interest among the Russian government during the first years of the 1990s. The author claims that the Westernizer formula that guided Moscow's first years after the decline of the USSR led the country to adopt liberal projects to the detriment of the development of proper Russian concepts and goals regarding its security and economic projects. This scenario started changing after Primakov assumed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was completely abandoned by Putin, who introduced an agenda progressively more centered in both military and economic modernization/development and more aware of external threats and weaknesses. The author suggests that the failure of the Western model in Russia not only proved the previous strategy insufficient for restructuring the state in economic, military and political terms, it also led to the strengthening of ideas that claimed that Moscow should follow its own civilizational path. Hence the progressive development of Russian exceptionalism as a fundamental concept of the Kremlin's political orientation.

Exceptionalism, however, as well as other ideational and discursive characteristics of a state's identity, may not and should not be considered regardless of its practical implications. National identity, as argued by authors such as David Campbell (1992) and Lene Hansen (2006), is, ideologically speaking, a construction that informs how political agendas as formed, how a state behaves, and which will be the national interests to be sought by a political regime. Thus, identity, beyond subjectivity, has materiality. Hence, to fully understand the reasons behind a country's foreign

[8] The war between Russia and Great Britain was triggered by Moscow's expansionism. Nicholas I (1825-1855), after declaring himself protector of the Orthodox Church, began an expansion towards territories considered sacred to his faith, namely Sevastopol (Neumann 2003).

policy agenda one must look at its discursive basis and its material goals as both are intertwined in a feedback loop. In this sense, to better answer the central question of this paper, it is necessary to not only care for the discursive, affective and memorial traits of Russian nationalism, but also to consider which material elements were considered by the Kremlin.

The creation of a great power project has two equally relevant sides: (i) the discursive one, which legitimizes the state's actions and polarizes its behavior, leading it towards a specific agenda; and (ii) the material one, the maximization of power that is the desired material result of the aforementioned political project. For a state to truly become a great power it must see itself as one and, also, be considered by others as such. Thus, beyond legitimizing its projects and ideas, it must hold the resources that will prove the materiality of the state's discourse, hence the need to introduce few geopolitical and economic aspects that lie behind the Kremlin's decision-making logic. In this sense, Mearsheimer (2014) argues that:

> Ukraine serves as a buffer state of enormous strategic importance to Russia. No Russian leader would tolerate a military alliance that was Moscow's mortal enemy until recently moving into Ukraine. Nor would any Russian leader stand idly by while the West helped install a government there that was determined to integrate Ukraine into the West […] This is Geopolitics 101: great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory (Mearsheimer 2014, 5-6).

Mearsheimer's statement about the reasons behind the annexation of Crimea is related to the influence of the region for Russia's security. This realist author makes use of geopolitics as a determining factor in Putin's decision-making. Anticipating this interpretation, Zbigniew Brzezinski (1994) had already declared that if Moscow regained control over Ukraine, Russia would again become a powerful imperial state. According to the strategist, the possession of Ukraine is fundamental for the Kremlin's great power policy due to the resources and geographical position of the country. Other authors and politicians[9] agree with similar approaches. Although there are variations between what is argued by each of them, they all converge on one point: the Russian invasion of Crimea from 2014 echoes the Kremlin's geopolitical and economic interests.

In this sense, we will analyze three main indicators, the first being related to the level of economic interdependence. Russia is the main supplier of hydrocarbons for the entire post-Soviet space, whose need for such products is high due to the region's industrial plant and residential structure, both highly dependent on gas and oil (Adam 2008). Besides, Russian energy commodities are also of utmost importance for the European market, who, until 2014, used to import great shares of Moscow's gas production (US Energy Information Administration 2014). Hence the relevance of such commodities to Russia and to the world economy. The Kremlin understands the importance of its market share on the global energy field and usually instrumentalizes its resources

[9] Daniel Treisman (2016), Elias Götz (2015) and Richard E. Ericson and Lester A. Zeager (2015).

as a political instrument, threatening to cut distribution or increase prices as a way of pressuring countries to accept demands from the Red Square. The maintenance of such status, thus, is of utmost importance for the achievement of Moscow's goals as it guarantees the necessary income for its modernization and gives it leverage when negotiating with other states, granting Russia a position of worldwide relevance.

There is, ergo, an essentially asymmetrical economic interdependence between Russia and its Near Abroad, largely defined by the hydrocarbon market. Therefore, we believe that the *presence of Russian pipelines* in foreign territory positively influences Putin's interest in these countries, since they present greater porosity to Moscow's coercive mechanisms. Furthermore, the presence of Russian distributive infrastructure also reveals codependency between local and Russian economies, in addition to predicting a clear interest on the part of Moscow linked to the control and maintenance of its facilities.

Another indicator relates to *geographic location*, with which we hope to assess the geopolitical/security relevance of Ukraine and Crimea to Russia. Thus, we will consider the presence of important resources, such as military bases, access to strategic terrain or any other economic and/or military advantage arising from local geographic characteristics. Finally, considering the words of Mearsheimer (2014), it is necessary to assess the degree of threat posed by Western expansion in terms of security. In this sense, our third indicator, the *existence of borders with EU and/or NATO member countries*, hopes to measure the extent to which Ukrainian and Crimean territories are vulnerable to Western attacks and how they could potentially represent a greater threat to Russia should they fall into the sphere of Western control and influence. We will restrict the analysis to the EU and NATO because these are the two great poles of the West's power projection in Moscow's regional concert.

Ukraine: Economy and Western Threat

Two central aspects of Ukraine must be considered when analyzing the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The first concerns its economy and its importance for Russia's main activity: the export of hydrocarbons. It is through Ukrainian territory that four large gas pipelines go through, linking Russian production to its greatest buyer: the EU. At the time, approximately 60% of Russian gas and 30% of oil went through the Ukrainian pipeline network to reach the European market (US Energy Information Administration 2014). For Russia, exports to Europe corresponded to 80% of the total volume of gas exported by the country, a percentage that remained reasonably stable until 2022 ("Russian gas exports to Europe fall 15% in May from April, Reuters calculations show." 2023). Of this infrastructure, the following pipes are especially relevant: Soyuz-Brotherhood, connecting Russia to Central Asia and Europe; Bratstvo, largest pipeline reaching the EU; Trans-Balkan, responsible for transporting gas to Turkey and the Balkans; and a branch of the Druzhba, which takes oil to Bosnia, Hungary and others. Ukraine also has railways that are used for transporting

hydrocarbons, although the amount carried by trains is marginal (Trenin 2011). Thus, Ukraine is crucial for maintaining Russia's main economic activity.

The interdependence between Moscow and Kyiv's economies has yet another layer. The presence of extensive lines of Russian pipelines in Ukraine generates an important advantage for the former: low taxes for the right of use. Even though the infrastructure belongs to Russia, it is located in foreign territory, which implies the need to pay taxes that grant the holder the right to operate its facilities. In this context, payments made to Moscow are usually extremely low given the Kremlin's capacity to use its privileged position as exporter to pressure Kyiv to obtain advantages in prices (Chyong 2014). According to Adam (2008) this Russian negotiation power would be compromised by a possible Ukrainian accession to the EU. Thus, we have another element that influences Russian opposition to a West-Ukraine rapprochement. Furthermore, it is estimated that, in 2014, approximately 60% of the energy consumed by Ukrainians came from Russian gas (Chyong 2014). Therefore, a mutual dependence is configured in terms of energy: on the one hand, Moscow depends on the infrastructure that passes through Ukraine, on the other, the latter depends on Russian exports. Despite the observed codependency, we cannot fail to emphasize the asymmetry of the economic relations established between both countries since, without Russia, Kyiv would collapse[10].

Another characteristic that influences the importance of Ukraine to the Kremlin is its location and its role as a "buffer state", a region that separates and protects Russia from external enemies. Ukraine is located on the fringes of the EU and is surrounded by countries that are part of NATO. There is even the sharing of borders with Poland, Hungary and Romania, all members of both blocs. The Ukrainian territory thus represents a gateway to the Russian zone of influence, hence its importance from a strategic point of view. According to Dmitri Trenin (2011), the sense of security coming from states and buffer zones is psychologically important, which becomes even more relevant in a scenario of Western expansionism.

The geographic location of Ukraine, however, has yet another element that deserves attention: the border with the Black Sea, responsible for connecting Moscow to the Mediterranean through warm waters. Russia also has lands bathed by the Black Sea, which could reduce, to some extent, this advantage of Ukraine's territory. However, Romania and Turkey, NATO members, have vast domain over these waters, which increases the relevance of the Southern Ukrainian coast as it would grant Russia a greater military presence in a region largely dominated by the Western bloc. Furthermore, it is estimated that there is a large hydrocarbon reserve in the Black Sea, from which around 58.56 billion cubic meters of natural gas could be produced (Kobolev 2023). Therefore, greater presence there would mean greater potential for extractive activity and greater capacity to face enemy fleets.

[10] There are efforts on the part of Russia and Ukraine aimed at reducing this dependence. On the Russian side, the Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 projects stand out.

Crimea: Security and Strategy

Unlike Ukraine, Crimea does not have Russian pipelines crossing its territory, which, comparatively speaking, reduces its relevance to the Kremlin in terms of economic importance. Despite this limitation, however, there are some peculiarities of the peninsula market that can be pointed out as important characteristics for our analysis. In this sense, we highlight the weight of tourism for the local economy, an activity that, on the eve of annexation, represented approximately 50% of the regional GDP. Of the millions of tourists who used to visit Crimea annually, a popular summer destination since the Soviet period, approximately one third came from Russia ("Tourist season heading for the rocks." 2014). In addition, given its geographical location, it also has an important port activity. Until 2014, 25% of Russian exports transported by sea passed through local ports (Davydov 2014).

Since the economy is a secondary factor in the strategic relevance of the peninsula for Russia, we can suggest that its material interest in Crimea is mainly geopolitical. In this context, the port of Sevastopol is key to understanding Moscow's concerns.

> It is the only port really able to accommodate and provide the respective logistics for the complete Russian Black Sea fleet […] In addition, Novorossiysk is a small base without protective bays. Depending on the wind, the ships that dock there can be damaged by the waves. With its many bays, Sevastopol is quite different (Höppner 2014).

Considering the Western expansion and the broad Turkish and Romanian coastline bathed by the Black Sea, the presence of the port in question, where the largest detachment of the Russian Navy resides, Mommsen's argument becomes even more relevant. Furthermore, as Igor Davydov (2014) argues, Moscow has made billionaire investments for the construction and modernization of its military base in Sevastopol. A possible relocation of this entire structure would not only be financially burdensome, but also geographically disadvantageous. Furthermore, Crimea has territory close to Russia's border. The countries are separated by the Kerch Strait, which connects the Black and Azov Seas. Such proximity could be exploited by the Kremlin to physically connect the peninsula to the Russian Federation[11]. Possession of Crimea also entitles Russia to claim ownership over waters in both the Black and Azov Seas, an active dispute since 2014 that, if concluded in favor of Moscow, would give Russia a larger presence in the region.

Conclusion

> Memory politics have shaped and driven the current violence in Ukraine in important and complex ways. The ideological justification for Russian aggression against the

[11] In 2018 the territories were connected by the Crimean Bridge, which allows road traffic between Russia and the peninsula.

> fledgling Ukrainian state has been based heavily on claims about the memory of the past, and the current war in Ukraine is routinely imagined, narrated, and justified as a continuation of World War II [...] In the current Russian–Ukrainian conflict, we are witnessing the emergence and in some cases the cultivation of what amounts to a new temporality in which elements of past and present are fused together, and linear historical time collapses (Malinova 2017, 5).

Malinova (2017) argues that the use of memory as a political weapon grew from the eve of the conflict to the years following the annexation of Crimea. In this regard, it is important to highlight the Kremlin's efforts in regards to scientific production and the restructuring of national education. In this context, versions of history that give exaggerated importance to specific events are evidenced. This is the case, for example, of the Great Patriotic War, which is reinforced as a cultural foundation of Slavism. In addition to the education system, these memories, and others, are also celebrated and re-enacted in other ways. National holidays, popular festivals, media propaganda and the construction of monuments are some of the instruments used by the Kremlin to reinforce the relevance of these episodes and what they represent: Russian superiority. There is, therefore, a clear approximation between these selected memories, the notion of Russian exceptionalism and the legitimation of the right to intervene in other states. The affections related to the memory politics promoted by the Kremlin, thus, are central elements for the construction of a feeling of belonging and guardianship by Russia. The morality of the intervention is, thus, connected to the past and its persistence.

In this sense, Crimea matters for the strong presence of the peninsula in the imaginary and official historiography of Russia; and for its ethnolinguistic composition, highly influenced by elements of Russianness. Given such identity similarity towards Moscow and its relevance to the political discourse that underpins Russia's behavior, the annexation becomes a justifiable option. Moreover, the strategic advantages offered by the peninsula are twofold: privileged access to the Black Sea and the port of Sevastopol. The first gives Russia strategic terrain to face NATO in the Black Sea. In addition, Crimea is in a region that has a very advantageous geographic formation in terms of navigation and port structure construction, which makes it even more interesting when we think about the positioning of troops and weapons.

More than Crimea, however, Ukraine is indispensable in shaping today's Russian identity and defining its agenda, which makes the country essential to Putin's great power policy. When Crimea was annexed, there was a reasonably high risk that the pro-Western and anti-Russian movements that took over Kyiv in 2014 would spread to other regions of the country. When Putin declared the annexation, Kyiv's nationalist sentiment still had its strength contained in areas of western and central Ukraine, but with the ousting of Yanukovych the apparent risk of losing ground in the rest of the state grew. A chessboard was set up where, on the one hand, there was the danger of non-containment of Ukrainian nationalism, a fact whose risk was strengthened by the experiences of the 2004 revolution and the Euromaidan. On the other hand, there were the

costs involved in annexation, which, though high, would come with the certainty that Crimea would remain part of the Russian world. A stronghold of Russia in the midst of the discursively and strategically important Ukraine.

It is within Putin's political project, motivated by Russian exceptionalism, that the annexation of Crimea became possible. The peninsula, in addition to conferring geopolitical advantages that are also part of Russia's interest in its quest to become a great power, occupies a central place in this discourse of nation and state. As part of Ukraine, Crimea constitutes Moscow's brother nation, with whom Russians share histories, memories, affections. It is a region that is part of an indispensable land for Putin's Russia. In this context, the peninsula also has its own singularities that are of great interest to the Kremlin not only for its resources, but also for its identity. Crimean Russianness brings it closer to Russia, and its location, southern Ukraine, strengthens this proximity. The fear generated towards Western expansion over its zone of interest, and over its own state, ergo, was the necessary trigger for Putin to calculate his action based on the legion's political scenario. The annexation, therefore, takes place as a reaction to a clear and significant threat and is configured from the interweaving of the Kremlin's interests, the degree of Russianness of each territory and the strategic relevance of each region. The external environment is determinant in Russian timing of decision-making. The chosen form of reaction, on the other hand, is the result of ideational matters that are confused between Russia's past, present and future.

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