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## **Beyond the Black Box: Why Offensive Realism Falls Short in Explaining Russia's War Against Ukraine**

DOI: [10.58183/pjps.02022026](https://doi.org/10.58183/pjps.02022026)

### **Abstract**

Offensive realism explains state behavior by treating states as unitary “black boxes” responding to systemic power pressures. This article argues that such structural logic cannot account for Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Based on a structured comparison of Russian responses to several NATO-related developments in the post-Cold War period, the study shows that Moscow did not react uniformly to comparable external developments. NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe (1999–2004), the NATO accession of Finland and Sweden (2022–2023), and U.S./NATO-linked cooperation with Central Asian states (2002–2022) generated limited or conditional Russian opposition. By contrast, developments involving Ukraine resulted in a full-scale war in 2022. I argue that this divergence is best explained by ideational content inside the Russian state, specifically the imperial–civilizational doctrine of “Russkiy Mir,” which frames Ukraine as indispensable to the historical and cultural unity of the “triumphant Russian people.” The central research question guiding this work is: Why did Russia respond militarily to Ukraine but not to other NATO-

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related developments? Addressing this question requires integrating both structural pressures and ideational influences to fully understand Russian foreign policy behavior.

**Keywords**

offensive realism, Russian foreign policy, black boxes, Ukraine, NATO expansion

## Introduction

**O**ffensive realism is often used to interpret Russia's foreign policy toward NATO and its neighbors, especially the claim that NATO's eastward enlargement created a security dilemma that made coercion toward Ukraine predictable. This theory is based on a simple structural mechanism: in an anarchic system, great powers resist rival alliances approaching their borders.

**H**owever, an open question remains. Russia responded to different NATO-related developments with markedly different levels of coercion. Moscow protested NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe (1999–2004) yet maintained various forms of engagement with NATO. Russia also reacted relatively cautiously to the NATO accession of Finland and Sweden (2022–2023). Meanwhile, Russia escalated against Ukraine from 2014 and launched a full-scale invasion in 2022.

**I**f NATO expansion near Russia's borders is the primary driver of Russian aggression, why does Ukraine appear as an outlier? This variation in Russian responses challenges the expectation, central to offensive realism, that states react uniformly to comparable structural threats. The central research question guiding this article is therefore: Why did Russia respond with major military force against Ukraine but not to other NATO-related developments near its borders?

**T**he objective of this study is twofold. First, it assesses whether offensive realism can account for the observed variation in Russian responses to NATO-related stimuli. Second, it seeks to explain Ukraine's outlier status by identifying an ideational mechanism operating within the Russian state that shapes threat perception and legitimizes the use of force.

To answer it, the article pursues four objectives: 1. Derive explicit expectations from offensive realism regarding Russian reactions to NATO-related stimuli. 2. Compare these expectations against Russia's observed responses across a structured set of cases. 3. Identify and trace an ideational mechanism that can explain Ukraine's outlier status. 4. Specify scope conditions under which the "black box" assumption of structural realism is likely to fail.

### State of Research and Literature Review

The article mainly addresses the argumentation outlined in Professor John J. Mearsheimer's essays "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin"<sup>1</sup> and "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War" (originally delivered as a lecture at the Robert Schuman Centre of the European University Institute in Florence).<sup>2</sup>

There are already several academic works that explicitly provide a critical analysis of Realism, such as "Offensive Ideas: Structural Realism, Classical Realism and Putin's War on Ukraine" by Harald Edinger<sup>3</sup> or "Realism after Ukraine: A Critique of Geopolitical Reason from Monroe to Mearsheimer" by Matthew Specter.<sup>4</sup> However, these articles do not take into account developments since 2022, including the accession of Finland to NATO, as well as numerous statements by Russian politicians about the actual intention of this invasion.

To date, there has been no comparative study of Russia's sometimes paradoxical reactions to various NATO-related developments. The new contribution to the academic debate is that this article summarizes the Kremlin's ambivalent response to various NATO-related activities, such as NATO's first eastward expansion, US military exercises in Central Asia, and Sweden and Finland's accession to the alliance. None of these aspects have yet been considered in critical debates on offensive realism's interpretation of the war. A growing number of scholars have examined the ideological and historical foundations of contemporary Russian imperial thought, including the concept of "Russkiy Mir." Among the most comprehensive historical analyses is the work of Serhii Plokhy, "Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation."<sup>5</sup> Equally significant are the contributions of Taras Kuzio, who has extensively examined Russian nationalism and post-Soviet identity politics in works such as "Putin's War Against Ukraine: Revolution, Nationalism, and Crime"<sup>6</sup> and "Russian Nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian War."<sup>7</sup>

1. J.J. Mearsheimer, *Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin*, "Foreign Affairs", 2014, Vol. 93, No. 5, pp. 77–89.

2. J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War*, "Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development", 2022, No. 21, pp. 12–27.

3. H. Edinger, *Offensive Ideas: Structural Realism, Classical Realism and Putin's War on Ukraine*, "International Affairs", 2022, Vol. 98, Issue 6, pp. 1873–1893, DOI: [10.1093/ia/iiaac217](https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaac217).

4. M. Specter, *Realism after Ukraine: A Critique of Geopolitical Reason from Monroe to Mearsheimer*, "Analyse & Kritik", 2022, Vol. 44, Issue 2, pp. 243–267, DOI: [10.1515/aug-2022-2033](https://doi.org/10.1515/aug-2022-2033).

5. S. Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation*, Basic Books 2017.

6. T. Kuzio, *Putin's War Against Ukraine: Revolution, Nationalism, and Crime*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform : published in association with the Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Toronto 2017.

7. T. Kuzio, *Russian Nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian War*, Routledge 2022.

Furthermore, this article does not seek to resolve the question of whether NATO's eastward enlargement resulted from a broken promise made during the negotiations surrounding the Two Plus Four Agreement. The issue of whether Russia was deceived by NATO's enlargement has already been extensively discussed in the academic literature. In this context, reference should be made to the work "Not One Inch, Unless It Is from Lisbon to Vladivostok" by Carl Mirra.<sup>8</sup>

## Methodology

The article uses a theory-guided qualitative research strategy based on structured, focused comparison across cases to test whether offensive realism's expectations fit observed variation.

The study applies a most-similar systems design: cases share the structural feature central to offensive realism (NATO or U.S.-linked military and security alignment in Russia's near region), while differing in Russia's response level.

The selected cases include:

- NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe (1999–2004);
- NATO accession of Finland and Sweden (2022–2023);
- U.S./NATO-linked military cooperation with Central Asian states (2002–2022);
- Ukraine's Western alignment and NATO aspirations (2002–2022).

The analysis relies on two categories of empirical material:

- Primary sources (official and institutional) include presidential speeches and transcripts (the Kremlin and the official presidential website), Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements and published proposals, and public interviews by senior officials or institutional statements.
- Secondary sources (scholarly and analytical) include peer-reviewed work and established policy research on (a) NATO–Russia relations, (b) realism and alliance politics, and (c) "Russkiy Mir" and Russian ideational projects.

8. C. Mirra, *Not One Inch, Unless It Is from Lisbon to Vladivostok: NATO-Russia Mythmaking and a Reimagined Kyivan Rus*, "Journal of Applied History", 2022, Vol. 4, Issue 1-2, pp. 126–148, DOI: [10.1163/25895893-bja10026](https://doi.org/10.1163/25895893-bja10026).

**Empirical  
Analysis**

This article does not claim that ideology alone explains the war, nor that material pressures are irrelevant. It claims that offensive realism explains part of the story but fails to account for case-specific escalation dynamics. It cannot explain why Ukraine triggers maximal coercion while other structurally similar cases do not.

**Offensive Realism and Its Black Box Assumption**

The theory of Offensive Realism, coined and developed by Professor John J. Mearsheimer, argues that states seek to maximize power and influence to enhance their security in an anarchic world. The best way for a state to ensure its survival is to become the most powerful state. In simple terms, a more powerful state is more secure than a weaker one. Offensive Realists believe that the anarchic nature of the international system compels states to continuously pursue greater power, with the ultimate aim of becoming a global hegemon.<sup>9</sup> Since all states inherently maintain some offensive capabilities, the possibility of a sudden attack can never be entirely ruled out. Consequently, Offensive Realism leaves little room for strategies of reassurance. Instead, it argues that the best way for a state to survive in an anarchic system is to exploit other states and gain power at their expense.<sup>10</sup>

This perspective relies on what can be called a structural black box model of the state: internal factors such as ideology are treated as irrelevant to explaining foreign policy. All states are assumed to behave similarly when exposed to the same systemic pressures.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, geostrategic interests are separated from ideological considerations, as all states are expected to act according to the same geostrategic logic.

However, this article argues that not all black boxes are identical. In Russia's case, domestic ideology – particularly the concept of “Russkiy Mir” – fills the black box with specific cultural and historical narratives that shape its foreign policy. The state's external behavior is therefore driven not merely by systemic constraints but by enduring ideas, beliefs, and identity-based myths.

As Matthew Specter writes “neorealists portray a deterministic world in which a figure like Putin had nearly no choice but to implement the dictates of the national interest geopolitically naturalized and understood.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this critique of Offensive Realism is even acknowledged by Mearsheimer in his book “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics.” He explains: “The theory pays little

9. S.E. Lobell, *Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism*, in: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, ed. N. Roy, Oxford University Press 2017, DOI: [10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.304](https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.304).

10. E.B. Montgomery, *Breaking out of the Security Dilemma: Realism, Reassurance, and the Problem of Uncertainty*, “International Security”, 2006, Vol. 31, No. 2, p. 155.

11. J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W.W. Norton 2001, pp. 10–11.

12. M. Specter, *Realism after Ukraine...*, op. cit., p. 245.



attention to individuals or domestic political considerations such as ideology. It tends to treat states like black boxes or billiard balls. For example, it does not matter for the theory whether Germany in 1905 was led by Bismarck, Kaiser Wilhelm, or Adolf Hitler, or whether Germany was democratic or autocratic. What matters for the theory is how much relative power Germany possessed at the time. These omitted factors, however, occasionally dominate a state's decision-making process; under these circumstances, offensive realism is not going to perform as well. In short, there is a price to pay for simplifying reality.<sup>13</sup> This price to pay for simplifying reality entails the risk of failing to fully account for the causal origins of certain wars, a problem the following analysis seeks to address.

### Offensive Realism Applied to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Mearsheimer applies his theory of Offensive Realism to the Russo-Ukrainian War in two essays: "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin"<sup>14</sup> and "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War" (originally delivered as a lecture at the Robert Schuman Centre of the European University Institute in Florence).<sup>15</sup> Mearsheimer argues that Russia has seen the possible NATO membership of Ukraine as an existential threat and that the United States therefore knowingly provoked this war.<sup>16</sup> According to him, the "taproot of the crisis is the American-led effort to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's borders. That strategy has three prongs: integrating Ukraine into the EU, turning Ukraine into a pro-Western liberal democracy, and most importantly, incorporating Ukraine into NATO."<sup>17</sup>

While Russia has repeatedly and explicitly agreed to Ukraine's possible accession to the EU in recent years, it has rejected Ukraine's possible accession to NATO and has repeatedly cited this as a decisive reason for the invasion.<sup>18</sup>

The following article aims to question the validity of this argument and to show whether the rejection of NATO's eastward expansion might function as a justificatory narrative. For this reason, the article examines the validity of realist explanatory approaches in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The strict application of the black box concept, without analyzing the underlying implications of the Russian ideology of "Russkiy Mir," proves to be a fundamental weakness of the theory of realism. The outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine cannot be attributed solely to security concerns.

13. J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of...*, op. cit., pp. 10–11.

14. J.J. Mearsheimer, *Why the Ukraine Crisis...*, op. cit., pp. 77–89.

15. J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Causes and Consequences...*, op. cit., pp. 12–27.

16. J.J. Mearsheimer, *Why the Ukraine Crisis...*, op. cit., p. 77.

17. J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Causes and Consequences...*, op. cit., pp. 12–27.

18. C. Körömi, *Russia: Ukraine Has a 'Sovereign Right' to Join EU — but Not NATO*, Politico 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/dmitri-peskov-kremlin-ukraine-sovereign-right-join-eu-not-nato/>, (access 02.02.2026); J. Krupa, *Putin Claims He Never Opposed EU Membership for Ukraine but Draws Line at Nato — as It Happened*, The Guardian 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2025/sep/02/russia-ukraine-war-putin-china-visit-europe-live-news-updates>, (access 02.02.2026).

## Russia's Inconsistent Behavior Toward NATO

Offensive realism predicts that great powers oppose the military encroachment of rival alliances, regardless of context. If NATO enlargement poses an existential threat, Russian behavior should be consistent across cases. Empirical evidence contradicts this expectation.

As early as 1993, Mearsheimer stated in his article: "Political will aside, extending NATO's security umbrella into the heart of the old Soviet Union is not wise. It is sure to enrage the Russians and cause them to act belligerently."<sup>19</sup> Defensive Realist Kenneth Waltz argued in a similar manner, stating that NATO expansion "weakens those Russians most inclined towards liberal democracy and a market economy." As explained by him, "Any country finds it difficult to understand how another country feels. Americans should, however, be able to imagine what their fears would be if they had lost the Cold War and Russia expanded the WTO into the Americas, all the while claiming that it was acting for the sake of stability in Central America with no threat to the United States implied. Adept statesmen keep their countries' potential adversaries divided. The Clinton administration seemed to delight in bringing them together."<sup>20</sup>

In his essay "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," Mearsheimer provides a more detailed explanation and claims that the "taproot of the trouble is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West. [...] As the Cold War came to a close, Soviet leaders preferred that U.S. forces remain in Europe and NATO stay intact, an arrangement they thought would keep a reunified Germany pacified. But they and their Russian successors did not want NATO to grow any larger and assumed that Western diplomats understood their concerns. The Clinton administration evidently thought otherwise, and in the mid-1990s, it began pushing for NATO to expand."<sup>21</sup> Thus, Neorealists assume that NATO enlargement would inevitably provoke Russian hostility, not because of any particular Russian ideology, but because the structural logic of great-power politics would compel Moscow to resist the Alliance's eastward advance. Throughout the years, up until the mid-2000s, the Russian leadership repeatedly stated that the Eastern European states had the right to join NATO. While the accession was observed with suspicion, there were no accusations regarding a supposed promise of non-expansion of the military alliance.

19. J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent*, "Foreign Affairs", 1993, Vol. 72, No. 3, p. 57.

20. K.N. Waltz, *NATO Expansion: A Realist's View*, "Contemporary Security Policy", 2000, Vol. 21, Issue 2, pp. 30–31, DOI: [10.1080/13523260008404253](https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260008404253).

21. J.J. Mearsheimer, *Why the Ukraine Crisis...*, op. cit., pp. 77–78.

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal from February 2002, Vladimir Putin declared that the Baltic states have the right to join the military alliance: "Every country has the right to choose the way it ensures its security. This holds for the Baltic states as well."<sup>22</sup> Admittedly, he emphasized in the same interview that a large part of the Russian population might feel less secure because "it would bring the military bloc's infrastructure closer to our borders."<sup>23</sup> In June of the same year, Putin remarked that NATO's expansion to include the Baltic states was "not a tragedy," provided that no new military infrastructure was established.<sup>24</sup> In April 2004, Putin once again confirmed that "Russia has no concerns about the expansion of NATO from the standpoint of ensuring security." However, Russia would "organize its military policies accordingly in connection with NATO nearing its borders." Nevertheless, the Russian president assured that any issue could be resolved within the framework of the Russia-NATO Council.<sup>25</sup> To sum up, Russia publicly accepted NATO enlargement under specific conditions.

These statements corresponded closely to the commitments enshrined in the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act, in which the Alliance promised to refrain from permanently stationing "substantial combat forces" on the territories of its new members.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, NATO increased its military presence in the eastern part of the Alliance only after 2014, in direct response to Russia's actions in Ukraine.<sup>27</sup>

In the same Founding Act, both sides assured "respect for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all states and their inherent right to choose the means to ensure their own security, the inviolability of borders and peoples' right of self-determination as enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act and other OSCE documents."<sup>28</sup> In this context, the Helsinki Final Act makes it clear that this also includes the right "to be or not to be a party to bilateral or multilateral treaties including the right to be or not to be a party to treaties of alliance."<sup>29</sup> The Russian Federation has thus formally recognized the right of states, including former Soviet republics, to join NATO if they so choose. In addition, several statements can be found in which the Russian leadership explicitly granted Ukraine the right to join NATO.

This position was reiterated in multiple official statements. In May 2002, Putin declared: "Ukraine has its own relations with NATO; there is the Ukraine-NATO Council. At the end of the day the decision is to be taken by NATO and Ukraine. It is a matter for those two partners."<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in January 2005, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated in an interview with the German newspaper

22. *Interview with the Wall Street Journal*, President of Russia 2002, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21498>, (access 02.02.2026).

23. *Ibidem*.

24. K. Marten, *Reconsidering NATO Expansion: A Counterfactual Analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s*, "European Journal of International Security", 2018, Vol. 3, Issue 2, p. 137, DOI: [10.1017/eis.2017.16](https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2017.16).

25. *Russia Has No Concerns about the Expansion of NATO from the Standpoint of Ensuring Security, but Russia Will Organize Its Military Policies Accordingly in Connection with NATO Nearing Its Borders*, President Vladimir Putin Announced after Talks with the Federal Chancellor of Germany Gerhard Schroeder, President of Russia 2004, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/30679>, (access 02.02.2026).

26. Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation Signed in Paris, France, 1997, [https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official\\_texts\\_25468.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm), (access 02.02.2026).

27. *Strengthening NATO's eastern flank*, North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2025, [https://www.nato.int/cps/cn/natohq/topics\\_136388.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/cn/natohq/topics_136388.htm), (access 02.02.2026).

Handelsblatt that Ukraine and Georgia should make their own choices concerning joining the EU and NATO. According to him, Russia would respect their respective choices.<sup>31</sup>

Although the Russian Federation has verbally agreed to eastward enlargement on several occasions, it took an increasingly critical stance, particularly from 2007 onwards. In the run-up to the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in December 2021, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Rabkov called for the military alliance “to pack up its stuff and withdraw to the lines of 1997.”<sup>32</sup> On December 17, 2021, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published its proposal for an “Agreement on measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.” In this document, a reference is made to the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 with a call to “not deploy military forces and weaponry on the territory of any of the other States in Europe in addition to the forces stationed on that territory as of 27 May 1997.”<sup>33</sup> In the demands listed by Russia, the right of states to join NATO was explicitly denied: “All Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization commit themselves to refrain from any further enlargement of NATO, including the accession of Ukraine as well as other States.”<sup>34</sup>

Russia's ambivalent reaction to the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO raises questions about whether the country is genuinely concerned about the alliance's expansion or if the invasion of Ukraine stems from other underlying motives. In June 2022, Vladimir Putin expressed: “We don't have problems with Sweden and Finland like we do with Ukraine. We don't have territorial differences. If Finland and Sweden wish to, they can join. That's up to them. They can join whatever they want.”<sup>35</sup> However, he warned “if military contingents and military infrastructure were deployed there, we would be obliged to respond symmetrically.”<sup>36</sup> This contrast highlights a key puzzle: why has Finland's accession to NATO – despite its extensive shared border with Russia and its proximity to Saint Petersburg – failed to provoke a reaction comparable to Russia's response to Ukraine's Western alignment?

An additional factor that further weakens the offensive realist explanation is Russia's nuclear deterrent. As a nuclear superpower possessing the world's largest nuclear arsenal, the Russian Federation enjoys a secure second-strike capability that guarantees its existential survival even under conditions of conventional military inferiority. From a structural realist perspective, nuclear weapons dramatically reduce the likelihood that a state faces an existential threat from conventional encroachment. In general, according to Neorealists, the existence of nuclear weapons contributes

28. Founding Act on Mutual Relations..., op. cit.

29. *Conference On Security And Co-Operation In Europe: Final Act*, 1975, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/c/39501.pdf>, (access 02.02.2026).

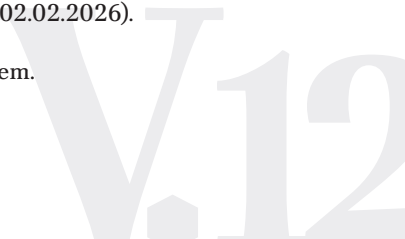
30. *Press Statement and Answers to Questions at a Joint News Conference with Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma*, President of Russia 2002, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21598>, (access 02.02.2026).

31. *Lavrov: Russia Won't Interfere In Ukraine, Georgia*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2005, <https://www.rferl.org/amp/1056670.html>, (access 02.02.2026).

32. R. Goncharenko, A. Savitsk, *Russia-West Talks at an Impasse*, Deutsche Welle 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/what-next-as-russia-west-talks-over-ukraine-fail-to-ease-tensions/a-60419001>, (access 02.02.2026).

33. *Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of The Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021, [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en](https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en), (access 02.02.2026).

34. Ibidem.



significantly to the prevention of a major war. As Kenneth Waltz writes: "Yet, in the presence of nuclear weapons, the Cold War has not become a hot one, a raging war among major states. Constraints on fighting big wars have bound the major nuclear states into a system of uneasy peace. Hot wars originate in the structure of international politics. So does the Cold War, with its temperature kept low by the presence of nuclear weapons."<sup>37</sup> Even if NATO were to expand to Russia's borders, the Alliance would remain deterred from any attempt at territorial conquest or regime destruction due to Russia's nuclear capabilities.

This logic becomes particularly relevant in light of Finland's accession to NATO in 2023. Finland shares a 1,300-kilometer border with Russia and lies in close proximity to strategically vital regions, including Saint Petersburg. If physical proximity to NATO were inherently existentially threatening, Finland's membership should have triggered extreme countermeasures. Instead, Russia's reaction remained limited and rhetorical. Realists may argue that Russia's nuclear deterrent makes conventional NATO expansion tolerable. Yet this concession only reinforces the point: if nuclear weapons secure Russia's survival, then NATO's enlargement cannot plausibly explain a preventive war motivated by existential fear.

Shortly after assuming office, Vladimir Putin signaled openness to closer institutional integration with NATO, including the possibility of Russian membership. According to Lord George Robertson, who led the military alliance between 1999 and 2003, the Russian President asked him: "When are you going to invite us to join NATO?" Robertson responded: "Well, we don't invite people to join NATO; they apply to join NATO." Putin responded to this with the words: "Well, we're not standing in line with a lot of countries that don't matter."<sup>38</sup> Here, too, the evidence is more compatible with the assumption that Russia's accession to the military alliance did not fail due to a disregard for Russian security interests but rather because of Moscow's reluctance to accept a status perceived as inconsistent with its self-conception as a major power.

This ambivalence was reflected more broadly in Russia's practical cooperation with NATO and its differentiated responses to the alliance's activities. Realists claim that the Russian Federation has not been sufficiently integrated into the NATO security system. In June 1994, Russia agreed to sign NATO's Partnership for Peace (PFP) framework document. Since the PFP concept was introduced in October 1993, the Russian government has had to assess NATO's intentions, define its own goals, and adapt its foreign policy to align with domestic political developments.<sup>39</sup> William Perry, then U.S.

35. A. Roth, *Putin Issues Fresh Warning to Finland and Sweden on Installing Nato Infrastructure*, *The Guardian* 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/29/russia-condemns-nato-invitation-finland-sweden>, (access 02.02.2026).

36. *Ibidem*.

37. K. Waltz, *The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory*, "Journal of Interdisciplinary History", Vol. 18, No. 4, p. 628, DOI: [10.2307/204817](https://doi.org/10.2307/204817).

38. J. Rankin, *Ex-Nato Head Says Putin Wanted to Join Alliance Early on in His Rule*, *The Guardian* 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/04/ex-nato-head-says-putin-wanted-to-join-alliance-early-on-in-his-rule>, (access 02.02.2026).

39. S. Rynning, *A Balancing Act: Russia and the Partnership for Peace*, "Cooperation and Conflict", 1996, Vol. 31, Issue 2, pp. 211-234, DOI: [10.1177/0010836796031002004](https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836796031002004).

Secretary of Defense, hoped that the Partnership for Peace (PFP) could have served as a temporary substitute for NATO enlargement. The program would allow “Russia and other eastern European nations ... more opportunity to work with NATO,” and “by working on real operations with NATO, they would come to see NATO not as an enemy, but as a partner.”<sup>40</sup>

In 2012, Sergei Lavrov allowed NATO to use an airbase in the Russian city of Ulyanovsk for the transit of troops and military cargo to Afghanistan. The Russian Foreign Minister then declared: “It’s in our interests that the coalition achieves a success before withdrawing and makes sure that the Afghans are capable of defending their country and ensuring an acceptable level of security.”<sup>41</sup>

In August 2022, several Central Asian states, along with the United States, conducted joint military exercises. These exercises involved participants from the United States, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan in a six-day command post drill. Additionally, Tajikistan and the United States carried out a five-day bilateral field training segment at the Fakhrobad Training Center.<sup>42</sup> From 2002 to 2021, Kazakhstan was the main host of Exercise Steppe Eagle, the largest U.S.-sponsored multinational training exercise in Central Asia. The exercise also supported the deployment of around 300 Kazakh soldiers to Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2003 to 2008.<sup>43</sup> Some of the listed countries are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. While Russia and many realists portray potential Ukrainian membership in NATO as an allegedly existential threat, fearing the stationing of U.S. troops there, states neighboring Russia (and even allies within the CSTO) conducted military exercises with the U.S. Of course, such military exercises provoked protests from Russian authorities, but they were tolerated and not met with a military response. This suggests that the Kremlin’s concern is not about NATO or the potential stationing of U.S. troops, but rather about the particular significance of Ukraine to Russia.

The Kremlin’s concerns go beyond military threats and NATO’s proximity; they are deeply intertwined with broader geopolitical ambitions and the desire to maintain influence over certain former Soviet states, particularly Ukraine. All these facts cast doubt on the view, propagated above all by Neorealists, of a more aggressive Russian foreign policy provoked by NATO expansion. For years, Russia has not perceived NATO as an existential threat. The military alliance has tried to accommodate any security concerns within the framework of the NATO-Russia Founding Act. This suggests that the rejection of NATO’s eastward expansion played a rather minor role, if any, in the Kremlin’s decision to attack Ukraine. These aspects suggest that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine cannot be re-

40. K. Marten, *Reconsidering NATO Expansion: A Counterfactual Analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s*, “European Journal of International Security”, 2018, Vol. 3, Issue 2, p. 154, DOI: [10.1017/eis.2017.16](https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2017.16).

41. *Lavrov Backs NATO Using Ulyanovsk Base*, The Moscow Times 2012, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/03/14/lavrov-backs-nato-using-ulyanovsk-base-a13280>, (access 02.02.2026).

42. *Regional Cooperation 2022 Military Exercise Begins In Dushanbe*, U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan 2022, <https://tj.usembassy.gov/regional-cooperation-22/>, (access 02.02.2026).

43. *U.S. Security Cooperation With Central Asia*, U.S. Department of State 2025, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-central-asia/>, (access 02.02.2026).

duced to a reaction to NATO expansion, but this decision is strongly influenced by Russia's imperial memory and longstanding refusal to tolerate Ukrainian autonomy.

If offensive realism were correct, Russia would respond uniformly to NATO advances regardless of context. Instead, Russia accepted, cooperated with, or ignored NATO activity in multiple regions, while reacting with exceptional hostility only toward Ukraine. This inconsistency shows that systemic pressures alone cannot explain Russian behavior.

### Economic Interdependence

Economic interdependence constitutes another dimension that complicates a purely structural realist explanation. Kenneth Waltz himself acknowledges that "economic considerations enter into most, if not into all, imperialist ventures, but economic causes are not the only causes operating nor are they always the most important one."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the invasion of Ukraine does not correspond to Russia's economic interests. Prior to 2022, the Russian Federation was deeply embedded in energy trade with the European Union. Europe depended heavily on Russian natural gas, oil, and coal exports, while Russia relied on European markets for revenue, technology, and financial integration.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine predictably resulted in unprecedented Western sanctions. The financial sanctions contributed to a large capital outflow in 2014, which reached over US\$151 billion. This was the highest in Russian history, primarily due to foreign debt repayments, falling oil prices, and a deteriorating investment climate. In 2015, capital outflow decreased to US\$56.9 billion but remained tied to debt repayment. Sanctions also contributed to a sharp decline in foreign direct investment (FDI) and portfolio investments. In the third quarter of 2014, FDI dropped to just US\$1 billion, down from around US\$20 billion in the first two quarters.<sup>45</sup> These negative effects on the Russian economy were exacerbated in particular by the tightening of sanctions in 2022. Russia's natural gas exports have faced significant difficulties. Since the war began, the country has lost a major portion of its key market – the EU – primarily due to the destruction of the Nord Stream 1 pipeline in September 2022 and Russia's own decision to cut supplies through the Yamal-Europe pipeline. As a result, Russian goods exports fell by 32% in the period from January to August 2023 compared to the previous year.<sup>46</sup>

44. K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company 1979, p. 36.

45. M. Domańska, S. Kardaś, *The consequences of the Western financial sanctions on the Russian economy*, OSW Commentary, No. 203, Centre for Eastern Studies 2016.

46. V. Astrov, et al., *Monitoring the Impact of Sanctions on the Russian Economy*, "EconPol Policy Report", 2023, No. 46, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/302451/1/1899629033.pdf>, (access 02.02.2026).

However, the sanctions hit the Russian economy less severely than expected. Russia's economy saw only a slight contraction of 1.2 percent in 2022, followed by 3.6 percent growth in 2023 and 4.1 percent growth in 2024. Yet, as outlined in a study by the Center for European Policy Analysis, Russia's economic growth is largely driven by military expenditures, with investments primarily focused on defense-related sectors, import substitution efforts, and infrastructure development aimed at boosting trade with China: "In the first place, Russia has become addicted to military spending. Whether the war ends in a lasting peace or a fragile ceasefire, the country will have to rebuild its armed forces, which Russian army expert Dara Massicot estimates could take up to eight years. At present, thanks to the abundance of Soviet kit in storage, Russia's consumption of military equipment can vastly outstrip the arrival of new equipment. Even without any ongoing fighting, military spending would need to remain high."<sup>47</sup>

The decision to invade despite these foreseeable economic costs suggests that non-material considerations outweighed material benefits. The Kremlin was willing to risk substantial economic losses to pursue objectives that cannot be fully explained by conventional security or power calculations. This further supports the argument that ideational factors – particularly the civilizational and historical claims embedded in "Russkiy Mir" – played a decisive role in shaping Russia's war aims.

### Ukraine's Path to NATO: Cause or Consequence of Russia's Foreign Policy?

Neorealists consider Ukraine's possible accession to NATO to be one of the decisive reasons for the outbreak of war. What is not taken into account here, however, is what prompted Ukraine to take such a step. Mearsheimer writes that the "tragic truth is that if the West had not pursued NATO expansion into Ukraine, it is unlikely there would be a war in Ukraine today and Crimea would still be part of Ukraine."<sup>48</sup>

In fact, Ukraine's intention to join NATO can be traced back to the early 2000s. However, interest in joining the alliance declined abruptly by 2010. Already in 2003, during the tenure of Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, who would later become president, Ukraine passed a law outlining its goal of joining NATO. This followed a decree from President Leonid Kuchma a year earlier, which similarly set NATO membership as a key objective. However, in 2004, amid growing moral discredit, Kuchma shifted his foreign policy and turned toward Russia. His successor, President Yush-

47. A. Kolyandr, *Addicted to War: Undermining Russia's Economy*, Center for European Policy Analysis 2025, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/addicted-to-war-undermining-russias-economy/>, (access 02.02.2026).

48. J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Causes and Consequences...*, op. cit., p. 27.

chenko, pursued NATO membership more openly, a goal that was publicly supported by U.S. President George W. Bush in 2008.<sup>49</sup> As mentioned above, both Putin and Lavrov recognized the right of Ukraine to join the alliance in 2002 and 2005 respectively.

At the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, it was decided that Georgia and Ukraine would not be offered membership at that time. The then German Chancellor Angela Merkel rejected the possibility of Ukraine joining the military alliance. As explained in her memoir, she believed that Ukraine's aspiration to join NATO should be weighed against the overall security interests of the alliance. Merkel expressed worry about Ukraine's relationship with Russia, particularly regarding the Russian Black Sea fleet stationed in Crimea.<sup>50</sup>

French Prime Minister François Fillon also declared that his country would not support bids by Georgia and Ukraine to become members of NATO.<sup>51</sup> Russia could observe that France, Germany, and other allies pushed back against Washington's attempt to advance Georgia and Ukraine toward NATO membership. Although the summit communiqué offered both countries a misguided assurance that they would eventually join the Alliance, in reality, this was unlikely to happen without Moscow's de facto approval.<sup>52</sup> Ukraine was therefore not coerced into seeking NATO membership, but did so based on internal political decisions.

When Yanukovich assumed the presidency in early 2010, he reaffirmed his disinterest in NATO membership, causing the issue to lose prominence.<sup>53</sup> Even after the Euromaidan revolution, Ukraine did not initially intend to join NATO. On March 29, 2014, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Deschytzia declared: "The program of the new Ukrainian government does not contain the intention of becoming a member of NATO."<sup>54</sup>

In fact, the massive support for NATO membership in the country only increased with the Russian annexation of Crimea. According to a public opinion survey conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation and the Razumkov Center from June 2017, 69 percent of Ukrainians would vote "in favor" of accession to NATO. In 2012, only 28 percent would have voted for membership.<sup>55</sup> A public opinion survey from February 2023 conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) shows a further massive increase in support for membership in the alliance. According to it, 82 percent of Ukrainians support joining NATO.<sup>56</sup> While Neorealists blame the West for the war in that Ukraine was pushed into NATO, they fail to acknowledge that it was Russia's intervention in

49. W. Schneider-Deters, *Die Ukraine: Machtvakuum zwischen Russland und der Europäischen Union*, BWV Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag 2014, pp. 105–106.

50. T. Paternoster, *Angela Merkel Delayed Ukraine's NATO Bid over Russia Fears*, *Memoir Reveals*, Euronews 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/21/angela-merkel-delayed-ukraines-nato-bid-over-russia-fears-memoir-reveals>, (access 02.02.2026).

51. *France Won't Back Ukraine and Georgia NATO Bids*, Reuters 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/france-wont-back-ukraine-and-georgia-nato-bids-idUSL01151170/>, (access 02.02.2026).

52. A. Duncan, et al., *Myths and Misperceptions in the Debate on Russia: How They Affect Western Policy, and What Can Be Done*, Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs 2021.

53. S. Pifer, *NATO's Ukraine Challenge. Ukrainians want membership, but obstacles abound*, Brookings 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/natos-ukraine-challenge/>, (access 02.02.2026).

54. *Deschytzia States New Government of Ukraine Has No Intention to Join NATO*, Interfax-Ukraine 2014, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/198372.html>, (access 02.02.2026).

Ukraine in 2014 – rather than Western coercion – that shifted Ukrainian public opinion in favor of NATO membership.

**A**ndrius Kubilius, European Commissioner for Defense and Space, summarized the Russian position on NATO expansion as follows: “Russia demands ‘no NATO’ for Ukraine. Not because they fear an anti-Russian NATO offensive from Ukrainian territory but because they fear NATO will defend Ukraine against Russia’s next aggression. ‘No-NATO’ for Ukraine makes it easier for Russia to plan its next aggression.”<sup>57</sup>

**T**he frozen war in Donbas since 2014 has significantly reduced the chances of Ukraine joining NATO. As Steven Pifer writes: “The Kremlin has sought to create territorial disputes in the post-Soviet space, and some NATO members fear that giving Ukraine membership now would confront the alliance with an immediate Article 5 contingency against Russia.”<sup>58</sup> For this reason, the impression is growing that Ukraine’s possible accession to NATO was once again merely a pretext for the Russian Federation to launch the large-scale invasion in 2022. Ukraine’s efforts to join NATO were not the cause, but a result of Russian aggression against Ukraine.

### Explaining the Outlier: Ideology Inside Russia’s Black Box

**O**ffensive realism assumes that states behave as ideologically empty units (“black boxes”) responding to systemic pressures. Yet Russia’s foreign policy increasingly reflects the logic of “Russkiy Mir” (“Russian World”), an imperial–civilizational doctrine that fills the black box with powerful identity narratives.

**M**earsheimer does not believe that Russia is interested in gaining territory in Ukraine, but rather that its primary concern is security policy: “It is widely and firmly believed in the West that Putin is solely responsible for causing the Ukraine crisis and certainly the ongoing war. He is said to have imperial ambitions, which is to say he is bent on conquering Ukraine and other countries as well – all for the purpose of creating a greater Russia that bears some resemblance to the former Soviet Union. [...] While this narrative is repeated over and over in the mainstream media and by virtually every Western leader, there is no evidence to support it. To the extent that purveyors of the conventional wisdom provide evidence, it has little if any bearing on Putin’s motives for invading Ukraine.”<sup>59</sup>

55. *Public Opinion of the Population of Ukraine on NATO*, Ilko Kucheriv «Democratic Initiatives» foundation 2017, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/public-opinion-of-the-population-of-ukraine-on-nato>, (access 23.02.2026).

56. *National Survey of Ukraine (IRI): February 2023*, Sociological Group ‘Rating’ 2023, [https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/national\\_survey\\_of\\_ukraine\\_iri\\_february\\_2023.html](https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/national_survey_of_ukraine_iri_february_2023.html), (access 02.02.2026)

57. I. Kutieliava, *Keeping Ukraine out of NATO Helps Russia Plan Future Aggression*, *European Commissioner Says*, *Ukrainska Pravda* 2025, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/04/27/7509371/>, (access 02.02.2026).

58. S. Pifer, *NATO’s Ukraine Challenge...*, op. cit.

59. J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Causes and Consequences...*, op. cit., p. 14.

Interestingly, John Mearsheimer had a different understanding of Russian foreign policy in 1993. He once acknowledged the very ideational dynamics he now downplays, writing that “the Russians might decide to reconquer other parts of the former Soviet Union in the midst of a war, or might try to take back some of Eastern Europe.”<sup>60</sup> As he continues, “many Russians would change the present border with Ukraine, and some even reject the idea of an independent Ukraine. Senior Russian officials, for example, have recently been describing Ukraine’s independence as a ‘transitional’ phenomenon and have been warning other European governments not to open embassies in Kiev because they would soon be downgraded.”<sup>61</sup> The possibility of such a scenario, in which Russia might be interested in reconquering post-Soviet states such as Ukraine, was therefore taken very seriously by Mearsheimer in the early 1990s.

The particular importance of Ukraine for Russia was also noted by Zbigniew Brzezinski. In his book “The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives” from 1997, he writes that Russia is no longer an imperial state without Ukraine and that “if Moscow regains control over Ukraine, with its 52 million people and major resources as well as its access to the Black Sea, Russia automatically again regains the wherewithal to become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia.”<sup>62</sup>

In 2007, President Putin established the Russkiy Mir Foundation, defining “Russkiy Mir” (“Russian World”) as a community that includes ethnic Russians, non-Russian ethnic citizens of the Russian Federation, the Russian diaspora, Russian-speaking foreigners, and anyone who shows interest in or concern for Russia’s future. In practice, “Russkiy Mir” aligns with Russia’s cultural sphere of influence, which largely overlaps with the territory of the former Soviet Union.<sup>63</sup> This cultural, rather than geostrategic, significance of neighboring states for Russia is an aspect that is often overlooked in realist explanatory approaches.

According to political scientist Marlène Laruelle, the concept of the “Russian World” may refer to three different dimensions: “1. Russia’s policy for its near abroad (the concept emerged under the auspices of a study of Russia’s CIS policy); 2. Russia’s interaction with Russian diasporas in the world (the concept was structured at a time of rediscovery of the richness of the emigration’s intellectual life); and 3. Russia’s brand, both as a public-relations project and a messianic project.”<sup>64</sup>

60. J.J. Mearsheimer, *Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War*, “International Security”, 1990, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 53.

61. *Ibidem*, p. 55.

62. Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books 2016, p. 46.

63. A. Curanović, *The Guardians of Traditional Values: Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Quest for Status*, preface by L. Leustean, Transatlantic Academy 2015, pp. 8–10.

64. M. Laruelle, *The “Russian World”: Russia’s Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination*, Center on Global Interests 2015, p. 6.

In this context, the Russian World describes a sphere of influence, more specifically the countries “over which Moscow considers having a right to say.”<sup>65</sup> Despite the complexity of this term, in the course of this article, the concept of the “Russian World” ideology shall be understood as an imperial–civilizational doctrine claiming unity between Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, implying a geopolitical narrative asserting Russia’s right to lead and protect populations it defines as culturally or historically “Russian.” It should be pointed out that this objective is not adequately explained by geostrategic logic alone.

If Ukraine is understood by the Russian leadership not as a fully foreign state but as an integral part of a broader Russian civilizational space, then its political independence and external alignment are reinterpreted not as normal features of international politics, but as illegitimate deviations.

This ideational logic has been articulated not only by political leaders but also by religious authorities closely aligned with the state. On March 27, 2024, the World Council of the Russian People, led by Patriarch Kirill, issued a statement describing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a “holy war.” It declares: “The reunification of the Russian people should become one of the priority tasks of Russia’s foreign policy. Russia should return to the more than three-century-old doctrine of the trinity of the Russian people, according to which the Russian people consist of Great Russians, Malorussians [Ukrainians], and Belarusians, which are branches (subethnoses) of one people, and the concept of ‘Russian’ covers all Eastern Slavs – descendants of historical Russia.”<sup>66</sup>

An important source in this context is Putin’s well-known essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” published on July 12, 2021, in which he addresses the historical development of Ukrainian national consciousness. As he describes it, among “the Polish elite and some of the Little Russian intelligentsia, ideas about a Ukrainian people separate from the Russians arose and gained strength.”<sup>67</sup> As Putin complains, “[t]here was no historical basis for this, nor could there be, so conclusions were based on a variety of fabrications.”<sup>68</sup> He also argues that “spiritual unity” is under attack, as the creation of an independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine decreases the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. The essay is marked by a strong emphasis on historical and spiritual claims, framing Ukraine as an inseparable part of a broader Russian civilizational space, even though he recognizes the right of a Ukrainian state to exist.<sup>69</sup>

65. *Ibidem*, p. 12.

66. *Declaration of the 25th World Russian People’s Council: “The Present and Future of the Russian World”* [Наказ XXV Всемирного русского народного собора «Настоящее и будущее Русского мира»], Vsemirnyi russkii narodnyi sobor 2024, <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/105523>, (access 02.02.2026).

67. *Article by Vladimir Putin “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”*, President of Russia 2021, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>, (access 02.02.2026).

68. *Ibidem*.

69. *Ibidem*.

In June 2022, Putin openly expressed his intention to win back Russian lands: “Peter the Great waged the great northern war for 21 years. It would seem that he was at war with Sweden, he took something from them. He did not take anything from them, he returned [what was Russia’s]. Apparently, it is also our lot to return [what is Russia’s] and strengthen [the country]. And if we proceed from the fact that these basic values form the basis of our existence, we will certainly succeed in solving the tasks that we face.”<sup>70</sup> In an interview aired on national television from December 2022, Putin expressed his opinion that the invasion of Ukraine is aimed “to unite the Russian people.”<sup>71</sup>

Western political leaders have also acknowledged that President Putin adheres to this ideologically motivated worldview. According to German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Putin declared in a phone call with him that Belarus and Ukraine should not actually be independent states.<sup>72</sup> In fact, in January 2025, the Institute for the Study of War published a study showing how the Russian Federation is working toward a gradual annexation of the Republic of Belarus.<sup>73</sup> Since Belarus has not pursued any serious ambitions to become a member of NATO, this is consistent with the interpretation that it is not the Western military alliance but Putin’s concept of a triune Russian people that takes precedence in his decision-making.

Putin’s rhetoric strongly implies a denial of Ukraine’s historical legitimacy. In his speech from February 21, 2022, he declared: “Actually, as I have already said, Soviet Ukraine is the result of the Bolsheviks’ policy and can be rightfully called ‘Vladimir Lenin’s Ukraine.’ He was its creator and architect. [...] And today the ‘grateful progeny’ has overturned monuments to Lenin in Ukraine. They call it decommunization. You want decommunization? Very well, this suits us just fine. But why stop halfway? We are ready to show what real decommunization would mean for Ukraine.”<sup>74</sup> While he does not explicitly say, ‘Ukraine should cease to exist as a sovereign state,’ his ideological framing provides a legitimizing framework for questioning Ukraine’s sovereignty and national distinctiveness.

In June 2025, the Russian president expressed his views about Ukraine through less euphemistic phrases: “I have said many times that the Russian and Ukrainian people are one nation, in fact. In this sense, all of Ukraine is ours.”<sup>75</sup>

In sum, the evidence presented here shows that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine cannot be reduced to the security-driven logic assumed in offensive realism. Mearsheimer’s own earlier writings ac-

70 A. Roth, *Putin compares himself to Peter the Great in quest to take back Russian lands*, The Guardian 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/10/putin-compares-himself-to-peter-the-great-in-quest-to-take-back-russian-lands>, (access 23.02.2026).

74. *Putin Says West Aiming to ‘Tear Apart’ Russia*, Voice of America 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/putin-says-west-aiming-to-tear-apart-russia-/6890771.html>, (access 02.02.2026).

72. *Scholz: Putin Started War for ‘Completely Absurd’ Reasons*, Deutsche Welle 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-scholz-says-putin-started-war-for-completely-absurd-reasons/a-62880926>, (access 02.02.2026).

73. G. Barros, *Russia’s Quiet Conquest: Belarus*, Institute for the Study of War 2025.

74. *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, President of Russia 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>, (access 02.02.2026).

75. J.T. Psaropoulos, *Putin Confirms He Wants All of Ukraine, as Europe Steps Up Military Aid*, Al Jazeera 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/6/27/putin-confirms-he-wants-all-of-ukraine-as-europe-steps-up-military-aid>, (access 02.02.2026).

knowledge that Russian elites have long questioned Ukraine's sovereignty – a concern deeply rooted in enduring imperial and civilizational narratives rather than in contemporary NATO policy. The ideological framework of *Ruskiy Mir* – grounded in historical unity, religious mission, and the restoration of "Russian lands" – provides a coherent explanation for Moscow's behavior that structural theories fail to capture. As Mearsheimer himself acknowledged in earlier writings, Russian elites have long questioned Ukraine's sovereignty – concerns rooted less in NATO policy than in enduring imperial and civilizational narratives. Any analysis that treats the Russian state as an ideologically empty "black box" therefore overlooks a central driver of Russia's war aims.

**T**he black box concept is too narrow to fully explain the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The concept treats states as structurally identical units that respond only to systemic pressures. It does not take into account how ideology, identity, and historical narratives influence the foreign policy of certain states. The concept of "*Ruskiy Mir*" illustrates that Moscow's motivations are rooted in imperial and civilizational claims that predate NATO enlargement and cannot be reduced to power-maximization alone. In this sense, the structural black box of offensive realism fails.

**R**ussia has tolerated, cooperated with, or ignored Western military activity in regions that are far more strategically sensitive than Ukraine. These mismatches between theoretical expectations and historical evidence reveal the limitations of a purely structural interpretation.

**W**hat emerges instead is the central role of ideology, identity, and historical narrative in shaping Russian foreign policy. The concept of "*Ruskiy Mir*," the civilizational claims advanced by the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Kremlin's insistence on the "historical unity" of Russians and Ukrainians fill the black box with specific content that structures how threats are perceived and legitimizes the use of force. These ideational commitments are not epiphenomenal to material interests; they are constitutive of Russia's foreign policy goals.

**I**n order to understand why Ukraine and not Finland or the Central Asian countries became a scene of war, it is essential to recognize that not all black boxes are the same. This has broader implications for international relations theory. In order to accurately explain state behavior it is essential to take into account the ideational and historical background factors. The Russo-Ukrainian War reveals the limits of simplifying states into uniform units and underscores the need for a more nuanced theo-

**Conclusion:  
Not All Black  
Boxes are the  
Same**

retical synthesis. Ultimately, understanding Russia's actions requires acknowledging that systemic pressures matter, but they do not determine outcomes; ideology does.

*Address by the President of the Russian Federation, President of Russia 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>, (access 02.02.2026).*

Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of The Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021, [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en](https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en), (access 02.02.2026).

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