



*Back in the U.S.S.R.  
What Does Putin Want and  
How Should the West Respond?*

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# Acknowledgment I

- Presentation is partially based on research I conducted with my colleague Prof. Betsy Jose (PSCI)
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- My gratitude to Betsy, GIGA, and CU Denver
- And thank you IIB/CIBER for the opportunity to present this research to a larger audience



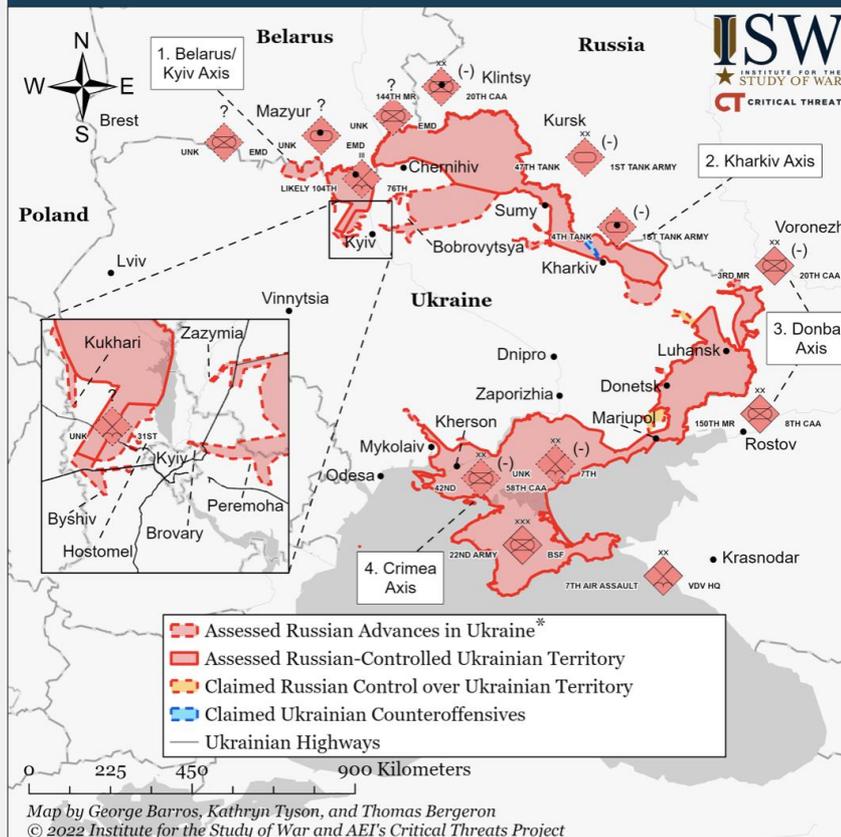
# Acknowledgment II

- Russian forces do NOT conduct “special military operations” in Ukraine – this is a **war of aggression**
  - » I would be arrested for saying that in Russia.
  
- This is NOT Russia’s war; this is **Putin’s war** – do not blame ordinary Russians for this war
  
- PLEASE DONATE (every \$ helps):
  - » <https://www.care.org>, <https://www.icrc.org/en/donate/Ukraine>,  
<https://razomforukraine.org/donate/>



# Where we are...

## Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 6, 2022, 3:00 PM EST



# How we got there...



# Prologue

- 1990/91: Dissolution of Russia's Colonial Empire (USSR)
  - » Russia sole heir of USSR (nuclear arsenal, UNSC seat, etc.)
- 1991-2000: Yeltsin Presidency
  - » Russian state degenerates (political, military, economy, welfare); rapidly declining life expectancy
  - » "Pluralism by default" (Lucan Way) – semi-democratic Russia
- 2000: Putin elected President in the wake of 2nd Chechen War

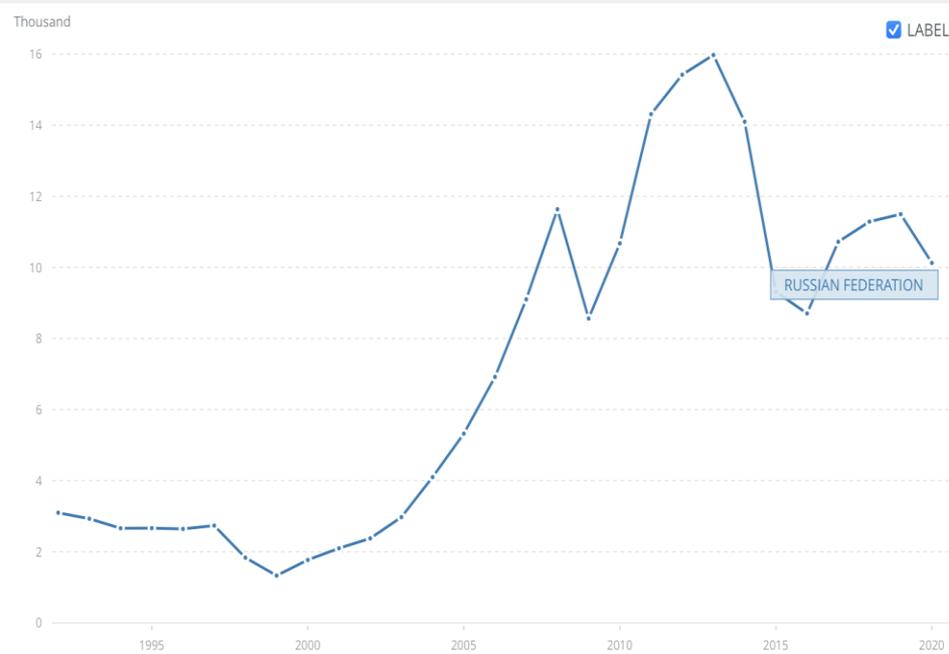
# Putin's Russia: Repression



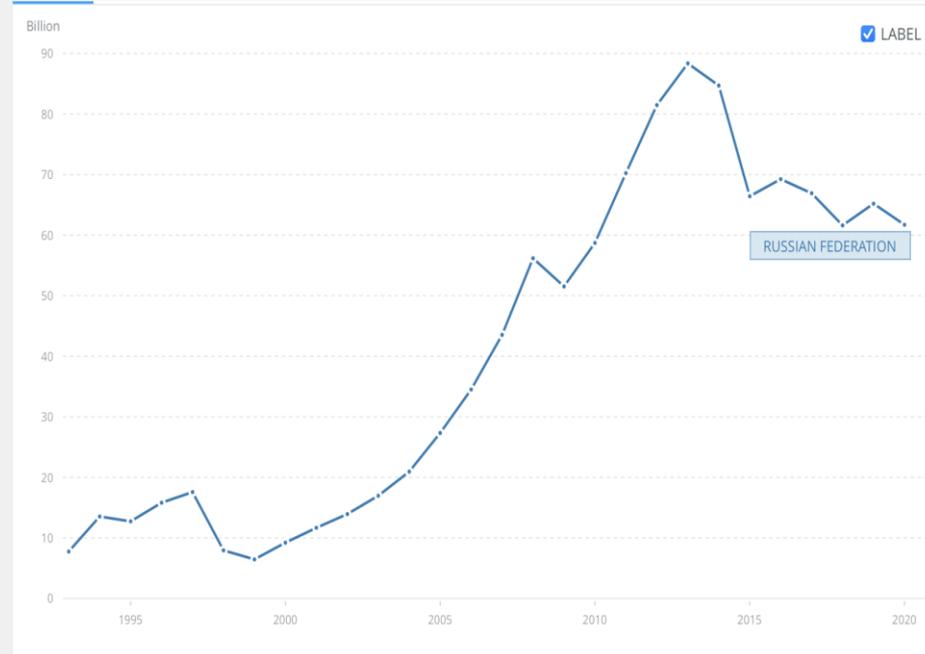
- Centralization of power in presidency at the expense of legislature and regional governments
- Rise of the *siloviki*, decline of oligarchs
- Increasing political repression
  - » Assassination of critical journalists (e.g., Politkovskaya) and political opponents (e.g., Nemtsov)
  - » Freedom House (FH) 1999: 4/5 (Partially Free); FH 2021: 7/6 (Not Free)
  - » Russia: a consolidated-autocratic and personalist regime

# Putin's Russia: Economic Recovery, Military Buildup

GDP per capita (current US\$)



Military expenditure (current US\$)



# Putin's Russia: Foreign Forays

2000-today: Economic pressure, esp. gas prices

2008: Invasion of Georgia abetting separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

2014: Annexation of Ukrainian peninsula Crimea and military support of separatists in Donbass

2015: Military intervention in Syrian civil war

2022: Russia formally recognizes the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic

2022: Full-scale invasion of Ukraine



# Putin's Playbook



Similar justifications for incursions into neighboring countries:

1. Some form of defensive security argument (Western encirclement – used in Crimea and Ukraine)
2. Some form of historical argument (denial of nation- and statehood of Ukraine, but also other countries)
3. Some form of humanitarian protection argument (Russians, Russian troops, ethnic Russians and/or Russian speakers under (imminent) attack mainly from "Fascists"), used in Georgia, Crimea, and Ukraine

Western countries have accepted some justifications until 2022

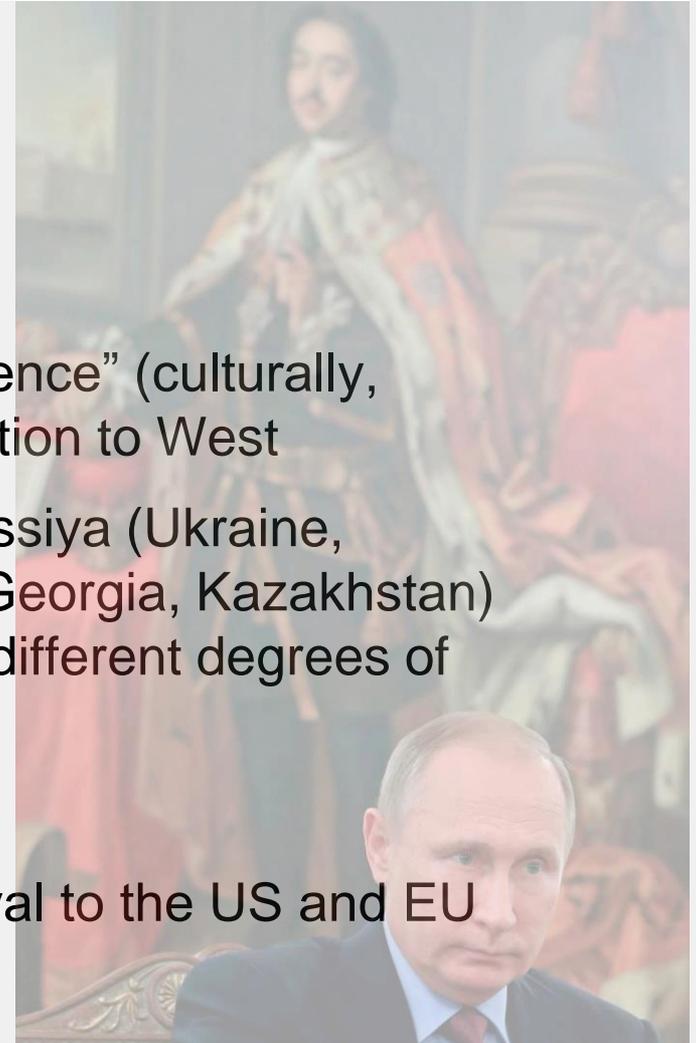
# What Does Putin Really Want?

Several possibilities:



- Pushing back Western alliances to strengthen security
  - BUT – Where is the immediate threat? And why now?
  - BUT – Opposite is achieved thru aggressive foreign policy
- Rally-around-the-flag – placating domestic audience
  - BUT – Putin does not suffer from low approval ratings
  - HOWEVER – Putin might have to placate regime elites

- Legacy-building ("Putin, the Great")
  - » Recreation of a Russian "sphere of influence" (culturally, politically, economically) in clear delineation to West
  - » Staggered spheres of influence: Novorossiya (Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus), former USSR (e.g., Georgia, Kazakhstan) Slavic brother countries (e.g., Serbia) – different degrees of sovereignty (according to Russia)
  - » Rebuilding Russia's "greatness", as a rival to the US and EU



# The West's Fault?

Mearsheimer and Russian analysts:

- Presence of US and NATO in backyard forced Russia to push back

BUT:

- Only convincing if that has been Putin's key concern – doubtful
- Moreover, Russia and NATO closely cooperated until a few years ago
- Moreover, Russia signed 1994 Budapest Memo
  - NATO never signed any promises not to expand
- Moreover, NATO did not push eastward, sovereign states decided to join NATO





# Where Will It End?

Spoiler alert: not well



- Putin won't back down – not his nature & retreat undermines legacy-building
- Enduring sanctions only reifies image of "tough" Russians (such as during Great Patriotic War)
- Drawn-out war, mostly using aerial bombardments (high civilian casualties, mounting evidence of war crimes)
- UKR will eventually surrender, a puppet regime will be installed, BUT Russia won't win peace

## Only hope:

- Putin will be toppled by either:
  - » Popular uprising due to economic hardships (unlikely, propaganda as well as soft and hard repression work well – see, Cuba)
  - » Coup d'état: members of security forces and military unite with oligarchs against Putin (more likely, BUT: military is “domesticated”, leaders of security forces handpicked, and oligarchs completely dependent on state-controlled companies)



# What Can the West Do?

- Maintain sanctions that hurt political/economic elite
- Continue providing defensive weapon systems
- Build “firewall” – EU and / or NATO membership to countries most at risk (Moldova, Georgia, Sweden, Finland)
- Train Ukrainians in tactics of non-violent resistance to counter puppet regime
- IN SHORT, force Russia to pay a high price for UKR



# Миру Україні

