

# UKRAINE – THE LINCHPIN OF RUSSIAN IMPERIALISM

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Russia has clearly lost some of its attractiveness, which the Kremlin regards as a threat to national security.

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In various statements and articles published in 2021, the Russian leadership made it clear that they considered Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy positions unacceptable. Russian strategists are realising that merely manipulating conflicts in neighbouring countries is not sufficient to sway them towards integration with Russia. The shocks in an otherwise stable-looking Belarus in 2020 were enough for the Kremlin to surmise that their example and model was not working, regardless of how strong the links, or even chains, tying the countries together. The unrest in Kazakhstan in early 2022 opened another fissure in Russia's integration model. Russia needed to resort to its Armed Forces to stabilise both Belarus and Kazakhstan. The internal conflict in Kazakhstan was calmed by sending in Collective Security Treaty Organisation troops. While Russia also readied its contingent to quell the popular protests in Belarus, Lukashenka, fearful of losing his authority, suffocated the protests mainly through the brutal violence of his own apparatus.

However, the continuing aggression against Ukraine has not produced the desired result for Russian leadership. Ukraine's westward integration has not been halted. Last year, Ukraine took significant steps towards securing its statehood and sovereignty, which worried the Kremlin and probably led to the view that hopes of a change of course by Ukraine were fading.



As the continuing aggression against Ukraine has not produced the desired result, Putin intends to use even more extreme methods.

Source: Alexey Nikolsky / AFP

Despite the eight-year Russian occupation of Crimea, Ukraine established the international Crimea Platform on 23 August 2021, not allowing the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia to be overlooked or forgotten. Despite Russia's fierce opposition, the participation of 46 countries in the Platform was a painful setback for Russia, and it had punitive measures in store for at least some of the joining countries.

The Ukrainian leadership has managed to significantly reduce Russia's political and economic influence in the country. Russian interference in Ukraine's domestic politics is overt and ongoing. Still, due to restrictions on the activities of a number of influence agents and their economic leverage, Russia can no longer be confident that it could activate enough collaborators to bring about change in Ukraine when it needs to.

However, Ukraine is critical for Russia to pose convincingly as a superpower, at least in Eurasia. Ukraine is the linchpin that keeps Russian imperial ambition together.

In an article published on 12 July 2021, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", President Vladimir Putin openly explained his logic as to why Russia should not allow Ukrainians – and probably also many other nations – to make their own decisions and choose their own path of development. Ukraine's progress in fleshing out a national identity for itself troubles the Russian president the most. President Putin sees this as a "forced change of identity" but seems to forget the numerous actions Russia has taken against Ukraine to induce such national consolidation in the first place.

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The Russian president acknowledges with exceptional candour that "forced assimilation" and the formation of a Ukrainian state "aggressive towards Russia" are effectively comparable to using weapons of mass destruction against Russia. According to Putin, "the number of Russian people may decrease by hundreds of thousands or even millions" as a result of such a division between Ukrainians and Russians. With this conclusion in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Russian leadership intends to use even more extreme methods to stop Ukraine – methods that threaten the security of Europe.

By concentrating forces on the Ukrainian border in spring 2021, Russia caught the attention of the US and a summit was held; now, the bar is set much higher. Russia is challenging European security as a whole and deploying an unprecedented contingent at Ukraine's borders to back this up. By threatening to subjugate Ukraine militarily, Russia seeks to force free democracies to accept its understanding of the European security architecture. If successful, there is nothing to prevent Russia from continuing to use this threat in the future.

In our assessment, both Russia's threat and possible aggression have a long-term impact on European security. In the event of an attack, the possibility of incidents and miscalculations will increase in the region more broadly. If Russia's threat leads to success, the changing security arrangements may allow Russia to make even more ambitious demands to achieve its goals in the future.