

Ukraine: Behind Russia's War Is Thirty Years of Post-Soviet Class Conflict

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The invasion of Ukraine is not simply a product of Vladimir Putin's expansionist mindset. It corresponds to a project for Russian capitalism that he and his allies have pursued since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Since Russian forces invaded Ukraine earlier this year, analysts across the political spectrum have struggled to identify exactly what — or who — led us to this point. Phrases like “Russia,” “Ukraine,” “the West,” or “the Global South” have been thrown around as if they denoted unified political actors. Even on the Left, the utterances of Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelensky, Joe Biden, and other world leaders about “security concerns,” “self-determination,” “civilizational choice,” “sovereignty,” “imperialism,” or “anti-imperialism” are often taken at face value, as if they represented coherent national interests.

Specifically, the debate over Russian — or, more precisely, the Russian ruling clique's — interests in launching the war tends to be polarized around questionable extremes. Many take what Putin says literally, failing to even question whether his obsession with NATO expansion or his insistence that Ukrainians and Russians constitute “one people” represent Russian national interests or are shared by Russian society as a whole. On the other side, many dismiss his remarks as bold-faced lies and strategic communication lacking any relation to his “real” goals in Ukraine.

In their own ways, both of these positions serve to mystify the Kremlin's motivations rather than clarify them. Today's discussions of Russian ideology often feel like a return to the times of [The German Ideology](#), penned by young Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels some 175 years ago. To some, the dominant ideology in Russian society is a true representation of the social and political order. Others believe that simply proclaiming the emperor has no clothes will be enough to pierce the free-floating bubble of ideology.

Unfortunately, the real world is more complicated. The key to understanding “what Putin really wants” is not cherry-picking obscure phrases from his speeches and articles that fit observers' preconceived biases, but rather conducting a systematic analysis of the structurally determined material interests, political organization, and ideological legitimation of the social class he represents.

In the following, I try to identify some basic elements of such an analysis for the Russian context. That does not mean a similar analysis of the Western or Ukrainian ruling classes' interests in this conflict is irrelevant or inappropriate, but I focus on Russia partially for practical reasons, partially because it is the most controversial question at the moment, and partially because the Russian ruling class bears the primary responsibility for the war. By understanding their material interests, we can move beyond flimsy explanations that take rulers' claims at face value and move toward a more coherent picture of how the war is rooted in the economic and political vacuum opened up by

the Soviet collapse in 1991.

What's in a Name?

During the current war, most Marxists have referred back to the concept of imperialism to theorize the Kremlin's interests. Of course, it is important to approach any analytical puzzle with all available tools. It is just as important, however, to use them properly.

The problem here is that the concept of imperialism has undergone practically no further development in its application to the post-Soviet condition. Neither Vladimir Lenin nor any other classical Marxist theorist could have imagined the fundamentally new situation that emerged with the collapse of Soviet socialism. Their generation analyzed the imperialism of capitalist expansion and modernization. The post-Soviet condition, by contrast, is a permanent crisis of contraction, demodernization, and peripheralization.

That does not mean that analysis of Russian imperialism today is pointless as such, but we need to do quite a lot of conceptual homework to render it fruitful. A debate over whether contemporary Russia constitutes an imperialist country by referring to some textbook definitions from the twentieth century has only scholastic value. From an explanatory concept, "imperialism" turns into an ahistorical and tautological descriptive label: "Russia is imperialist because it attacked a weaker neighbor"; "Russia attacked a weaker neighbor because it is imperialist," and so on.

Failing to find the expansionism of Russian finance capital (considering the impact of sanctions on the very globalized Russian economy and the Western assets of Russian "oligarchs"); the conquest of new markets (in Ukraine, which has failed to attract virtually any foreign direct investment, or FDI, except for the offshore money of its own oligarchs); control over strategic resources (whatever mineral deposits lie in Ukrainian soil, Russia would need either expanding industry to absorb them or at least the possibility to sell them to more advanced economies, which is, surprise, only severely restricted because of the Western sanctions); or any other typical imperialist causes behind the Russian invasion, some analysts claim that the war may possess the autonomous rationality of a "political" or "cultural" imperialism. This is ultimately an eclectic explanation. Our task is precisely to explain how the political and ideological rationales for the invasion reflect the ruling class's interests. Otherwise, we inevitably end up with crude theories of power for the sake of power or ideological fanaticism. Moreover, it would mean that the Russian ruling class has either been taken hostage by a power-hungry maniac and national chauvinist obsessed with a "historical mission" of restoring Russian greatness, or suffers from an extreme form of false consciousness — sharing Putin's ideas about the NATO threat and his denial of Ukrainian statehood, leading to policies that are objectively contrary to their interests.

I believe this is wrong. Putin is neither a power-hungry maniac, nor an ideological zealot (this kind of politics has been marginal in the whole post-Soviet space), nor a madman. By launching the war in Ukraine, he protects the rational collective interests of the Russian ruling class. It is not uncommon for collective class interests to only partially overlap with the interests of individual representatives of that class, or even contradict them. But what kind of class actually rules Russia — and what are its collective interests?

Political Capitalism in Russia and Beyond

When asked which class rules Russia, most people on the Left would likely answer almost instinctively: capitalists. The average citizen in the post-Soviet space would probably call them thieves, crooks, or mafia. A slightly more highbrow response would be "oligarchs." It is easy to dismiss such answers as the false consciousness of those who do not understand their rulers in

“proper” Marxist terms. However, a more productive path of analysis would be to think about why post-Soviet citizens emphasize the stealing and the tight interdependency between private business and the state that the word “oligarch” implies.

As with the discussion of modern imperialism, we need to take the specificity of the post-Soviet condition seriously. Historically, the “primitive accumulation” here happened in the process of the Soviet state and economy’s centrifugal disintegration. Political scientist Steven Solnick called this process “[stealing the state](#).” Members of the new ruling class either privatized state property (often for pennies on the dollar) or were granted plentiful opportunities to siphon off profits from formally public entities into private hands. They exploited informal relations with state officials and the often intentionally designed legal loopholes for massive tax evasion and capital flight, all while executing hostile company takeovers for the sake of quick profits with a short-term horizon.

Russian Marxist economist Ruslan Dzarasov captured these practices with the “[insider rent](#)” concept, emphasizing the rent-like nature of income extracted by insiders thanks to their control over the financial flows of the enterprises, which depend on the relationships with the power holders. These practices can certainly also be found in other parts of the world, but their role in the formation and reproduction of the Russian ruling class is far more important due to the nature of the post-Soviet transformation, which began with the centrifugal collapse of state socialism and the subsequent political-economic reconsolidation on a patronage basis.

Other prominent thinkers, such as Hungarian sociologist Iván Szelényi, describe a similar phenomenon as “[political capitalism](#).” Following Max Weber, political capitalism is characterized by the exploitation of political office to accumulate private wealth. I would call the political capitalists the fraction of the capitalist class whose main competitive advantage is derived from selective benefits from the state, unlike capitalists whose advantage is rooted in technological innovations or a particularly cheap labor force. Political capitalists are not unique to the post-Soviet countries, but they are able to flourish precisely in those areas where the state has historically played the dominant role in the economy and accumulated immense capital, now open for private exploitation.

The presence of political capitalism is crucial to understand why, when the Kremlin speaks about “sovereignty” or “spheres of influence,” it is by no means the product of an irrational obsession with outdated concepts. At the same time, such rhetoric is not necessarily an articulation of Russia’s national interest so much as a direct reflection of Russian political capitalists’ class interests. If the state’s selective benefits are fundamental for the accumulation of their wealth, these capitalists have no choice but to fence off the territory where they exercise monopoly control — control not to be shared with any other fraction of the capitalist class.

This interest in “marking territory” is not shared by, or at least not so important for, different types of capitalists. A long-running controversy in Marxist theory centered around the question of, to paraphrase Göran Therborn, “[what the ruling class actually does when it rules](#).” The puzzle was that the bourgeoisie in capitalist states does not usually run the state directly. The state bureaucracy usually enjoys substantial autonomy from the capitalist class but serves it by establishing and enforcing rules that benefit capitalist accumulation. Political capitalists, by contrast, require not general rules but much tighter control over political decision makers. Alternatively, they occupy political offices themselves and exploit them for private enrichment.

Many icons of classical entrepreneurial capitalism benefited from state subsidies, preferential tax regimes, or various protectionist measures. Yet, unlike political capitalists, their very survival and expansion on the market only rarely depended on the specific set of individuals holding specific offices, the specific parties in power, or specific political regimes. Transnational capital could and would survive without the nation-states in which their headquarters were located — recall the

seasteading project of floating entrepreneurial cities independent of any nation-state, boosted by Silicon Valley tycoons like Peter Thiel. Political capitalists cannot survive in global competition without at least some territory where they can reap insider rents without outside interference.

Class Conflict in the Post-Soviet Periphery

It remains an open question whether political capitalism will be sustainable in the long run. After all, the state needs to take resources from somewhere to redistribute them among the political capitalists. As [Branko Milanovic](#) notes, corruption is an endemic problem for political capitalism, even when an effective, technocratic, and autonomous bureaucracy runs it. Unlike in the most successful case of political capitalism, such as China, the Soviet Communist Party institutions disintegrated and were replaced by regimes based on personal patronage networks bending the formal facade of liberal democracy in their favor. This often works against impulses to modernize and professionalize the economy. To put it crudely, one cannot steal from the same source forever. One needs to transform into a different capitalist model in order to sustain the profit rate, either via capital investments or intensified labor exploitation, or expand to obtain more sources for extracting insider rent.

But both reinvestment and labor exploitation face structural obstacles in post-Soviet political capitalism. On the one hand, many hesitate to engage in long-term investment when their business model and even property ownership fundamentally depend on specific people in power. It has generally proven more opportune to simply move profits into offshore accounts. On the other hand, post-Soviet labor was urbanized, educated, and not cheap. The region's relatively low wages were only possible due to the extensive material infrastructure and welfare institutions the Soviet Union left as a legacy. That legacy poses a massive burden for the state, but one that is not so easy to abandon without undermining support from key groups of voters. Seeking to end the rapacious rivalry between political capitalists that characterized the 1990s, Bonapartist leaders like Putin and other post-Soviet autocrats mitigated the war of all against all by balancing out the interests of some elite fractions and repressing others — without altering the foundations of political capitalism.

As rapacious expansion began to run up against internal limits, Russian elites sought to outsource it externally to sustain the rate of rent by increasing the pool of extraction. Hence the intensification of Russian-led integration projects like the Eurasian Economic Union. These faced two obstacles. One was relatively minor: local political capitalists. In Ukraine, for example, they were interested in cheap Russian energy, but also in their own sovereign right to reap insider rents within their territory. They could instrumentalize anti-Russian nationalism to legitimate their claim to the Ukrainian part of the disintegrating Soviet state, but failed to develop a distinct national development project.

The title of the famous book by the second Ukrainian president, Leonid Kuchma, [Ukraine Is Not Russia](#), is a good illustration of this problem. If Ukraine is not Russia, then what exactly is it? The universal failure of non-Russian post-Soviet political capitalists in overcoming the crisis of hegemony made their rule fragile and ultimately dependent on Russian support, as we have seen recently in Belarus and Kazakhstan.

The alliance between transnational capital and the professional middle classes in the post-Soviet space, represented politically by pro-Western, NGO-ized civil societies, gave a more compelling answer to the question of what exactly should grow on the ruins of the degraded and disintegrated state socialism, and presented a bigger obstacle to the Russia-led post-Soviet integration. This constituted the main political conflict in the post-Soviet space that culminated in the invasion of Ukraine.

The Bonapartist stabilization enacted by Putin and other post-Soviet leaders fostered the growth of the professional middle class. A part of it shared some benefits of the system, for example, if employed in bureaucracy or in strategic state enterprises. However, a large part of it was excluded from political capitalism. Their main opportunities for incomes, career, and developing political influence lay in the prospects of intensifying political, economic, and cultural connections with the West. At the same time, they were the vanguard of Western soft power. Integration into EU- and US-led institutions presented for them an ersatz-modernization project of joining both “proper” capitalism and the “civilized world” more generally. This necessarily meant breaking with post-Soviet elites, institutions, and the ingrained, socialist-era mentalities of the “backward” plebeian masses sticking to at least some stability after the 1990s disaster.

The deeply elitist nature of this project is why it never truly became hegemonic in any post-Soviet country, even when boosted by historical anti-Russian nationalism as it was in — even now, the negative coalition mobilized *against* the Russian invasion does not mean that Ukrainians are united around any particular positive agenda. At the same time, it helps to explain the Global South’s skeptical neutrality when called on to solidarize with either a wannabe great power on a par with other Western great powers (Russia) or a wannabe periphery of the same great powers seeking not to abolish imperialism, but to join a better one (Ukraine). For most Ukrainians, this is a war of self-defense. Recognizing this, we should also not forget about the gap between their interests and the interests of those who claim to speak on their behalf, and who present very particular political and ideological agendas as universal for the whole nation — shaping “self-determination” in a very class-specific way.

The discussion of the role of the West in paving the way for the Russian invasion is typically focused on NATO’s threatening stance toward Russia. But taking the phenomenon of political capitalism into account, we can see the class conflict behind Western expansion, and why Western integration of Russia without the latter’s fundamental transformation could never have worked. There was no way to integrate post-Soviet political capitalists into Western-led institutions that explicitly sought to eliminate them as a class by depriving them of their main competitive advantage: selective benefits bestowed by the post-Soviet states. The so-called “anti-corruption” agenda has been a vital, if not the most important, part of Western institutions’ vision for the post-Soviet space, widely shared by the pro-Western middle class in the region. For political capitalists, the success of that agenda would mean their political and economic end.

In public, the Kremlin tries to present the war as a battle for Russia’s survival as a sovereign nation. The most important stake, however, is the survival of the Russian ruling class and its model of political capitalism. The “multipolar” restructuring of the world order would solve the problem for some time. This is why the Kremlin is trying to sell their specific class project to the Global South elites that would get their own sovereign “sphere of influence” based on a claim to represent a “civilization.”

The Crisis of Post-Soviet Bonapartism

The contradictory interests of post-Soviet political capitalists, the professional middle classes, and transnational capital structured the political conflict that ultimately gave birth to the current war. However, the crisis of the political capitalists’ political organization exacerbated the threat to them.

Bonapartist regimes like Putin’s or Alexander Lukashenko’s in Belarus rely on passive, depoliticized support and draw their legitimacy from overcoming the disaster of the post-Soviet collapse, not from the kind of active consent that secures the political hegemony of the ruling class. Such personalistic authoritarian rule is fundamentally fragile because of the problem of succession. There are no clear rules or traditions to transfer power, no articulated ideology a new leader must adhere to, no party

or movement in which a new leader could be socialized. Succession represents the point of vulnerability where internal conflicts within the elite can escalate to a dangerous degree, and where uprisings from below have better chances to succeed.

Such uprisings have been accelerating on Russia's periphery in recent years, including not just the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine in 2014 but also the revolutions in Armenia, the third revolution in Kyrgyzstan, the failed 2020 [uprising in Belarus](#), and, most recently, the uprising in Kazakhstan. In the two last cases, Russian support proved crucial to ensure the local regime's survival. Within Russia itself, the "For Fair Elections" rallies held in 2011 and 2012, as well as later mobilizations inspired by Alexei Navalny, were not insignificant. On the eve of the invasion, labor unrest was on the rise, while polls showed declining trust in Putin and a growing number of people who wanted him to retire. Dangerously, opposition to Putin was higher the younger the respondents were.

None of the post-Soviet, so-called maidan revolutions posed an existential threat to the post-Soviet political capitalists as a class by themselves. They only swapped out fractions of the same class in power, and thus only intensified the crisis of political representation to which they were a reaction in the first place. This is why these protests have repeated so frequently.

The maidan revolutions are typical contemporary urban civic revolutions, as political scientist [Mark Beissinger](#) called them. On a massive statistical material, he shows that unlike social revolutions of the past, the urban civic revolutions only temporarily weaken authoritarian rule and empower middle-class civil societies. They do not bring a stronger or more egalitarian political order, nor lasting democratic changes. Typically, in post-Soviet countries, the maidan revolutions only weakened the state and made local political capitalists more vulnerable to pressure from transnational capital — both directly and indirectly via pro-Western NGOs. For example, in Ukraine, after the Euromaidan revolution, a set of "anti-corruption" institutions has been stubbornly pushed forward by the IMF, G7, and civil society. They have failed to present any major case of corruption in the last eight years. However, they have institutionalized oversight of key state enterprises and the court system by foreign nationals and anti-corruption activists, thus squeezing domestic political capitalists' opportunities for reaping insider rents. Russian political capitalists would have a good reason to be nervous with the troubles of Ukraine's once-powerful oligarchs.

The Unintended Consequences of Ruling-Class Consolidation

Several factors help to explain the timing of the invasion as well as Putin's miscalculation about a quick and easy victory, such as Russia's temporary advantage in hypersonic weapons, Europe's dependency on Russian energy, the repression of the so-called pro-Russian opposition in Ukraine, the stagnation of the 2015 Minsk accords following the War in Donbas, or the failure of Russian intelligence in Ukraine. Here, I sought to outline in very broad strokes the class conflict behind the invasion, namely between political capitalists interested in territorial expansion to sustain the rate of rent, on the one hand, and transnational capital allied with the professional middle classes — which were excluded from political capitalism — on the other.

The Marxist concept of imperialism can only be usefully applied to the current war if we can identify the material interests behind it. At the same time, the conflict is about more than just Russian imperialism. The conflict now being resolved in Ukraine by tanks, artillery, and rockets is the same conflict that police batons have suppressed in Belarus and Russia itself. The intensification of the post-Soviet crisis of hegemony — the incapacity of the ruling class to develop sustained political, moral, and intellectual leadership — is the root cause for the escalating violence.

The Russian ruling class is diverse. Some parts of it are taking heavy losses as a result of Western sanctions. However, the Russian regime's partial autonomy from the ruling class allows it to pursue

long-term collective interests independently of the losses of individual representatives or groups. At the same time, the crisis of similar regimes in the Russian periphery is exacerbating the existential threat to the Russian ruling class as a whole. The more sovereigntist fractions of the Russian political capitalists are taking the upper hand over the more comprador, but even the latter likely understand that, with the regime's fall, all of them are losing.

By launching the war, the Kremlin sought to mitigate that threat for the foreseeable future, with the ultimate goal of the "multipolar" restructuring of the world order. As [Branko Milanovic](#) suggests, the war provides legitimacy for the Russian decoupling from the West, despite the high costs, and at the same time makes it extremely difficult to reverse it after the annexation of even more Ukrainian territory. At the same time, the Russian ruling clique elevates the political organization and ideological legitimation of the ruling class to a higher level. There are already signs of a transformation toward a more consolidated, ideological, and mobilizationist authoritarian political regime in Russia, with explicit hints at China's more effective political capitalism as a role model. For Putin, this is essentially another stage in the process of post-Soviet consolidation that he began in the early 2000s by taming Russia's oligarchs. The loose narrative of preventing disaster and restoring "stability" in the first stage is now followed by a more articulated conservative nationalism in the second stage (directed abroad against Ukrainians and the West, but also within Russia against cosmopolitan "traitors") as the only ideological language widely available in the context of the post-Soviet crisis of ideology.

Some authors, like sociologist Dylan John Riley, argue that a stronger hegemonic politics from above may help to foster the growth of a stronger counterhegemonic politics below. If this is true, the Kremlin's shift toward more ideological and mobilizationist politics may create the condition for a more organized, conscious, mass political opposition rooted in the popular classes than any post-Soviet country has ever seen, and ultimately for a new social-revolutionary wave. Such a development could, in turn, fundamentally shift the balance of social and political forces in this part of the world, potentially putting an end to the vicious cycle that has plagued it since the Soviet Union collapsed some three decades ago.

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