

Constructivism Russia and Ukraine

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Abstract

The research into the Ukraine war against Russia focuses on the international theory of constructivism and the complex factors of history, ideology, and ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Constructivism emphasizes socially constructed identities and relationships, which ties into the motivations of the actions that shaped this conflict. To understand what is happening now, one must understand the historical beginnings, the interests of each actor, the ideology and identities as well as the international alliances. With a focus on Vladimir Putin and his underlying motivation to reunify Russia, the United States interest in westward expansion and the membership and alliances within NATO.

Constructivism Russia and Ukraine

Russia and Ukraine have had ongoing issues arriving since the fall of the Soviet Union. Constructivism in retrospect aligns the best with the current conflict in between Russia and Ukraine. Constructivism can be defined as “the world, and what we can know about the world, as socially constructed” according to Theys (2018). The continuous conflict between Russia, Ukraine and the United States involvement is described by Theys as the leaders in every respective country shaping and reshaping the nature of international relations through their actions and interactions (2018). To truly understand this conflict, one must first understand the history of both countries, the interests from foreign actors, and the values of the current leaders.

Ukraine’s Beginnings

Russia and Ukraine have always been intertwined from the inception of these countries. Ukraine has been historically documented of thriving since before Christ and only in the 18th – 20th century did Ukraine become a part of two regimes, Austrian and Russian. While under two different regimes, Ukraine fought for political and civil rights, according to *Origins and History of Ukraine*. Ukraine’s ongoing fight to be itself has been documented throughout history such as from 1917 – 1921 when Ukraine and Poland attempted to hold off from communism and create its own nation state, to which Ukraine failed and ultimately became a part of the USSR regime (*Origins and History of Ukraine*, n.d.). During Ukraine’s dominance from Russia, millions of Russians migrated to Ukraine and the population of ethnic Ukrainians decreased from 77% in 1959 to 73% in 1991 due to a policy implemented during the Soviet Union reign of an in and out migration according to *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Upon Ukraine gaining independence, that has since been reversed, now with three-fourths of the population being ethnic Ukrainians and only one-fifth of the population being Russians (*Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc, 2024*). The most recent

invasion from Russia showcases how the geopolitics and long history of itself has a direct link to the actions of Russia and Russia's true intentions of invasion. Ukraine's desire to be independent from Russia goes against the Russian mindset instilled by the Soviet Union reign that to have power is to be able to control large masses of lands that hold international trade ports and thus having an economic advantage.

The USSR

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had a stronghold regime from 1922 – 1991 in Eurasia where only a few leaders had the greatest impacts and control. Vladimir Lenin has been documented to have created the Soviet Union and reconstruct the Tsarist Empire that once was the USSR. Lenin over the next two decades, created the world's largest country, the USSR, under force by collecting neighboring states such as Ukraine under their power (Davis, 2022). According to Davis, the USSR promised to allow for traditional cultures to continue but the reconstruction of the politics by Joseph Stalin moved to concentrate more power in the hands of the party leaders in Moscow. Joseph Stalin rose in political standing through a violent period in the Soviet government and was appointed the position of Office of General Secretary of the Communist Party giving him ultimate control to select party appointments who would bend to his will and do as he command (Biography.com Editors, n.d.). Upon Lenin's death, Stalin took control of the party allowing him to do as he pleased and setting the tone of the USSR. From Stalin's demise, other notable leaders took part in controlling the USSR. The longstanding reign and forceful nature of the USSR ultimately led to them becoming one of the two nuclear superpowers, with the United States being the other according to Davis. During this time, Mikhail Gorbachev ultimately led to the downfall of the USSR when he decided to "loosen the Soviet yoke", allowing for an "independent, democratic momentum that led to the collapse of the

Berlin Wall in November 1989, and then the overthrow of Communist rule throughout Eastern Europe” (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). The USSR was the controlling factor of communism and allowed the state to have ultimate control and dictatorship for the country. Military personnel to come into power due to their intelligence. The most notable is Vladimir Putin who gained power through the ranks after the Berlin Wall fell. This set the momentum for his hunger to bring back Russia as a dominate power in the world and to revel in the conquest of power that once was.

Vladimir Putin

Vladimir Putin is either highly respected, highly feared, or even a culmination of both. He started out as a KGB agent during the Soviet Union reign which fit his education career as a law gradate according to Kirby. Growing up, Putin was raised under the Soviet Union reign and thus was fed propaganda throughout his whole life. His whole identity and understanding have been curated from the Soviet Union teachings. Putin made his way into politics and gained power through the fall of the Soviet Union under Boris Yeltsin’s inner circle and has continued to maintain power since 2000. Early in his political career, he was faced with bombings attacking his citizens; Putin responding with force and a ground invasion to recapture the Russian republic of Chechnya from separatist rebels. From the beginnings of time, Putin had demonstrated force to keep Russia whole and to not allow for any nation states to leave. Although it has been documented countless times of Putin’s snark and vulgar comments, the people of Russia admired him for casting out the oligarchs and ensuring that they stay out of politics, although he also requested that they back him and his positions (Kirby, 2024). Vladimir Putin’s desire to have control and to make Russia great by taking over how the USSR once had was his ultimate goal. He wants to bring back what was during the time of the Soviet Union power in hopes to grow his

power and alliances that would directly attack the United States standing as the powerhouse in the world. At this current moment in time, Vladimir Putin's most pressing opponents are the United States of America, NATO, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

The United States Interests

“The U.S. must show the leadership necessary to establish and protect a new order that holds the promise of convincing potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interest” Paul Wolfowitz (Burns, 2024).

The United States, land of the free, home of the brave. It has made its name well known across the world and continues to be a force to reckon with. The United States has been able to maintain their worldly control by manipulating the outcome of unrest in countries. In just 2018, it was found out that “the Pentagon published a new strategy, stating that ‘great power competition – not terrorist – is now the primary focus of U.S. national security’” (Burns, 2024). This shows the shift that the United States main interests in power and holding onto the status quo of what we currently have. We are in a competition with other nations who pose a threat to our standing. Our main priority is to ensure that other nations are occupied with civil unrest to distract them from growing and getting closer to the United States. And in that part, that means not having Russia grow by overtaking Ukraine and pulling them back into Vladimir Putin's control. The United States can maintain this objective by continually attempting to add Ukraine to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Secondly, the United States known rivalry with Russia dates back to the Cold War. Since then, The United States has seen Russia as a threat and continues to attempt to ensure that there

are no adversaries to compete with its dominant global power. With Russia's past ideology of communism being the true way to lead, the United States must ensure that Russia does not have the ability to gain more power by acquiring more states in their favor. The United States wants to push the agenda of democracy and liberalism which Ukraine has shown that they are attempting to do with their presidential elections. It is another win for democracy which the United States is continuously attempting to implement in other nations. Providing support to fight the rise of Vladimir Putin and the fear of communism rising power back to power in his rule is why the United States is backing Ukraine vehemently.

NATO's Interests

North Atlantic Treaty Organization, known as NATO, was formed in 1949 to allow for nations to peacefully come to an agreement and provide allyship to its members in the form of military aid when a crisis commences. NATO has extended its membership to encapsulate 32 countries and is continually growing. The current president of Ukraine has urgently requested an invitation from NATO but acknowledges that that will not happen when they are at war with Russia. This is in part due to NATO's current members having alliances with Russia and therefore will disrupt their peace but also due to Slovakia's Robert Fico warning that adding Ukraine amid the current war "would be a good basis for a third world war" (Lau et al., 2024). NATO's stance to not engage in war is based off its merit to remain peaceful and allow for discourse to occur in a more appeasing way that does not call for military action. NATO's focus is to allow for negotiations and continue to provide aid to those countries that are facing unrest. Russia is not a part of NATO, thus if NATO were to invite Ukraine in, Vladimir Putin would see that as a direct assault from the current members and call upon his allies to fight back. NATO does not want to force the invisible hand to a nuclear war which is highly possible considering

the United States is a Member of NATO. Although NATO would like to expand more, there have been warnings of not allowing Ukraine membership due to its long back history with Russia (Gardinier, 2022). The United States and Russia have had a long history of being heavily equipped with nuclear weapons, and to pin these two nations against one another would not be beneficial for anyone.

Russia's Interests

The fight in Ukraine did not start with the current war. It has been ongoing since Ukraine became independent. Russia has continually attempted to sideline Ukraine and become what it was prior to the fall of the Soviet Union. The importance of losing Ukraine goes back to the Soviet Union, “when it was the second most populous and powerful of the fifteen Soviet republics and it had much of the union’s agricultural production, defense industries, and military, including the Black Sea Fleet and some of the nuclear arsenal.” Losing Ukraine meant that Russia also lost an important piece of their identity. With Kyiv, Ukraine’s capital, referred to as “the mother of Russian cities”, Putin and the Kremlin wanted to bring it back. With NATO encroaching for years prior to 2022, Putin acknowledged that Ukraine’s alliance would be seen as a hostility. In the event that Ukraine was to become a member of NATO, Russia would not have had the ability to maintain this war for as long as it has gone. The Kremlin and Vladimir Putin both understood that they needed to act before Ukraine became a member or else they would lose Ukraine forever and the desire to become reunified would be lost. Russia’s interests in Ukraine to not join NATO also showcase how they do not want the western expansion to come near their neighbors. Since the Cold War, NATO has slowly grown its membership, and Russia knows it would never be a part of it due to its more liberal stances. Russia has a conservative, traditional aspect and wants to remain that way in the Eastern Europe sphere. Experts have said

that the most important motivating factor is Putin's fear of Ukraine morphing into a more western-style democracy (Masters, 2023). This fear is what led to the attacks in 2020, resulting in NATO not offering membership to Ukraine and as long as this war continues, it will not be offered. Russian interests to continue this war even though there has been no true momentous moment is in reflection to its desire to keep Ukraine out of NATO. Russia has the military, weaponry and money to continue to fund this war, whereas Ukraine does not since it gave up its nuclear weapons. Russia is playing the long-term plan of wearing out Ukraine and its resources to the point of exhaustion so that they can go in for a fail-safe win.

Ukraine's Crisis in 2014

Once Ukraine gained its independence from Russia in 1991, the country had a lot of leftover arsenals from the Soviet Union which they ultimately destroyed due to treaties signed such as to ensure that nuclear warheads were not sold off and could not get into the wrong hands nor create a massive war. Russia was thrilled because they feared that the missiles would be used against them, the United States were happy because the less nuclear weapons out in the world, the more the United States is in control of, and Great Britain did not want it misused. During the presidential elections in 2010, Viktor Yanukovich had won and there was a lot of disapproval as Yanukovich had shown to be a sympathizer with Vladimir Putin and he wanted to create closer ties with him. A few years later Yanukovich decided to not sign the European Union Ukraine Association Agreement that would bring Ukraine closer to the European Union, which upset the country's citizens as they were wanting to become a part of the EU and instead, he signed the Customs Union of Russia. This resulted in the citizens uniting like they once had during the Orange Revolution, and they took to the streets to protest which was shown in the video posted on YouTube by WarFront in 2022. Unfortunately, unlike the Orange Revolution, these protests

were met with violence. This instilled the need to protest more and united even stronger, to make it be known widespread that the Ukrainians did not want to follow under Russia but rather, join the rest of Europe and gain more independence. While this was occurring, Putin made his move into Crimea and Crimea quickly fell under Putin's control. Ukraine has been divided in terms of what side they should lean towards more, whether that's to fall within Russia or go more towards the western side and NATO. In the YouTube video by WarFront it is stated that the older generation is more keen to side with Russian reunification whereas the younger generations want to move towards democracy and the European Union allyship. The long-lasting fight against falling into Russian authoritarianism is what led up to the Ukrainian Crisis in 2014 also referred to as the Euromaidan Revolution. As stated by Dickinson, "the Euromaidan Revolution underlined Ukraine's European choice and cemented the country's rejection of a Russian reunion." In retrospect, this was a major loss for Putin as his goal is to reunite all of Russia's neighboring countries to bring back what was the Soviet Union regime. Ukraine's win in the Euromaidan Revolution brings back that their identities as Ukraine is not rooted in Russia and that the citizens are moving towards democracy and a westward expansion. The Ukrainian people have spoken and will continue to fight against the continuous attacks from Russia due to their newfound identity and freedom.

Ukraine's Crisis in 2014 led up to the war that is currently going on. The desire to join NATO and the European Union stems from wanting to officially break free from Russia's continuous attempts to undermine its independent identity. The need to remove itself from Russia's long hold identity of being the most powerful during the time of the Soviet Union, is pivotal for Ukraine to finally be addressed as a European nation and align more with democratic values and allow for economic growth.

Constructivism

The ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia can be viewed through the lenses of constructivism. Constructivism is a fairly new international relation theory that focuses on the “why” behind social realities. Unlike most known theories such as realism or liberalism, which prioritize factors like power or institutional frameworks, constructivism focuses on social constructs. What this means is understanding relationship and context. Fully knowing the history, background, and cultural upbringing can explain the motivating factors such as identity, belief and values of individuals thus in turn allowing one to fully understand and predict how actors will behave. Relationships is also viewed as a major actor in constructivism. The social construction of allyship reflects the friend vs foe mindset. For example, if a friend has a hundred nuclear weapons vs a foe who has fifty, the main focus would be on the foe due to the nature of not know if you will be under attack. The friend having a hundred nuclear weapons can be viewed as a positive because when you are in need, they can help you out. The focus is not on the actual weapons but the actions that can come from the relationship. That is what constructivism views. Now the next step would be to understand the relationship itself as to why it is strained or not. What events had led up to viewing another state as a threat versus viewing a state as an ally. To truly understand constructivism, one must remember “that actions, interactions, and perceptions shape reality” (Theys, 2022). That is the questions constructivism arises and what can truly explain the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine.

Constructivism allows for fluidity and viewpoints to change. Due to individuals to change their viewpoints and their underlying reasons to act a certain way to be reactive, constructivism relies heavily on the importance of perceptions and relationships. We see this change with the fall of the Soviet Union being blamed on the loosening of the communist regime

and allowing independence. What was viewed as a secure way to entice more followship and comradery led to the downfall. When Vladimir Putin reflects on that, it only would make sense to assume that his control and angst comes from needing to have that power back but also having more of a strong arm so that history does not repeat itself.

United States Involvement

As stated prior, the United States likes to hold themselves on a high pedestal in the views of the world. The United States is seen as the key factor in controlling what is occurring throughout the world, and they have no means to forgo that perception. The United States wants to remain the powerhouse and will act accordingly so. That is evident in how much we have backed Ukraine in this ongoing war with Russia. As of September 25th, 2024, the United States has sent over a total of roughly \$375 million in weapons and aid according to Baldor and Lee (2024). Chip Burns also states in 2024 that the United States' intention is "to persecute, if not dismember, the Russian state." The views of the United States to remain the powerhouse is a true reflection of constructivism. The need to maintain that identity thus moves the United States to act in ways to preserve the perception. The conflicts before the Russian and Ukraine wars such as the Cold War show how Russia and the United States were fair contenders. With the then Soviet Union then collapsing, the United States has tried to make sure that Russia is never in a place to be able to overcome us. The only thing that the United States wants to protect, is it's in image and power. We have seen this war go on for about two years with current President Biden. Biden is extremely sympathetic towards Ukraine to the point of finally allowing Ukraine to fire long-range U.S. missiles towards Russia (Melton, 2024).

Our newly elected President for the 2025-2029 years, Donald Trump, has stated time and time again, to the point of making it his motto "Make America Great Again." Donald Trump's

motto and continuous shouts instills into Americans that their interests will be put first when he is back in office. That motto could also reflect as to how he may perceive the world's viewpoints on us. "Make America Great Again" can reflect that we have been in turmoil and losing our grasp as the behemoth hegemon. Trump has time and time again said that we will go back to being number one. In his last residency in office, he was shown to be friendly towards Vladimir Putin. Throughout his campaign, he constantly stated that he will stop the war in Ukraine. And now, that time is quickly approaching. There have been movements that Putin is willing to listen to Trump's negotiations. According to Rod Thornton, Trump may in fact just call it a tie and allow for the current lines to stay as is, allowing Putin to save face in the world arena as well as Zelensky to have to give up territories but also save more from perishing in this war (Chotiner, 2024). This is also since Trump does plan on pulling aid to Ukraine, therefore Ukraine will no longer have the backing of the most powerful nation in the world. Donald Trump going back into office will ultimately save money in America, stop the fighting in Ukraine, and allow for Putin to keep Crimea and the territories that he has already taken over. It could be seen as a major loss for Ukraine, but overall Zelensky also has to remember that his country is exhausted, and the fight will be less balanced once the funding is cut off.

The varying viewpoints and stances of values from these two leaders illustrate how constructivism explains their actions. With Biden's fear of Russia taking over Ukraine will allude to more power in the international realm where Trump's friendliness with Putin and his main goal is to have America seem great again is his motivating factor. Biden was acting based on his assumption that Russia would gain more power. Trump is going to act based on his relationship with Putin as well as his ideas on what makes America the powerhouse it is which is its economy. The stark contrast between the two is night and day in comparison.

Conclusion

The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine exemplifies the complex and multifaceted nature of modern international conflicts. Through the constructivist perspective, this study highlights how historical narratives, cultural identities, and political ideologies have been influential in fueling the tensions between the two nations. Ukraine's aspiration to align itself with Western institutions such as NATO and the European Union directly challenges Russia's desire to reassert its influence over its former Soviet sphere, as embodied by Vladimir Putin's vision of a resurgent Russian empire.

The research demonstrates that this conflict is not merely a geopolitical struggle but a deeper contest over identity and sovereignty, in regard to constructivism. The historical dominance of the USSR, the cultural significance of Ukraine as the "mother of Russian cities," and the Western alignment of Ukrainian leadership reveal the layers of meaning driving the aggression. Furthermore, the involvement of the United States and NATO highlights how global power dynamics intensify localized conflicts, reflecting bigger struggles for influence between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes.

While the study provides substantial insights, it acknowledges certain limitations, such as the evolving nature of the conflict and the unpredictability of international responses. Future research could explore the long-term impacts of Western support for Ukraine, the potential consequences of NATO's strategic decisions, and the role of economic pressures on Russia's actions.

Ultimately, this research reveals the importance of understanding conflicts through the lens of constructivism, which offers an overall view of how historical, social, and ideological

factors intertwine to shape global events in the constructivism lenses. Identifying these dynamics can allow for more effective diplomatic strategies, emphasizing the need for open dialogue, empathy and historical understanding on a broader spectrum.

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