

**Russia-Ukraine Conflict Through Class System Theory**

Manahil Syeda

Department of Political Science, Diablo Valley College

POLSC 250: International Relations

Professor John Kropf

November 20, 2024

### **Abstract**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, marked the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II, exhibiting extensive human, political, and economic consequences. Rooted in decades-long tensions between both nations, this war goes beyond merely existing as a territorial dispute but rather sheds light on the deeper dynamics of global capitalism and imperialism. Viewed through the lens of class system theory, this framework provides an interpretation on international relations, where nations with greater power and wealth have the stage to control resources, trade, military, and markets, leaving exploitation of vulnerable nations in its wake. Through the context of this conflict, Russia aims to expand its reaches into the extensive untapped reserves within Ukraine, consolidating economic power and political influence under the guise of promoting national security. Analyzing deeper reveals the economic interests of the west, where the United States exploits wartime economy for its own materialistic gains. In between these powers, Ukraine is caught within imperialistic warfare pushed forth by desires for economic gain. By situating the Russia-Ukraine conflict within these frameworks, the complexities of global power struggles and the means by which economic motivations lead to conflict come closer to the forefront.

## **Russia-Ukraine Conflict Through Class System Theory**

February 24th, 2022, the world witnessed Russia launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, being the largest war in Europe since World War II. This conflict, characterized by devastating human and geopolitical consequences, holds its roots in decades of political and ethnic tensions and economic entanglements between both nations. Framed by Russian President Vladimir Putin as a “special military operation” to “secure” and “liberate” Ukraine, this war holds greater implications within the influence, power, and sovereignty struggles within the global capitalist system and the world of international relations. Through the lens of the class system theory of international relations, the war in Ukraine becomes more than a territorial dispute but rather a perspective on economic exploitation, imperialism, and global capitalism, and the numerous methods by which it twists the world of war into a situation that can benefit the intervening nations. This perspective on the Russia-Ukraine conflict emphasizes the power dynamics and inequalities that exist in the international sphere, highlighting exactly how both Russia and Ukraine are shaped and limited by their capitalist interests within the context of the world.

### **The Class System Theory**

The class system theory is a framework rooting in Marxist thought that analyzes international relations through the perspective of economic class and inequality. It focuses on the existence of social class and structure within an economic frame, providing a distinction between richer and poorer countries, or nations with varying economic power, within the world of international relations. It emphasizes global capitalism and its tendencies towards exploitation, and provides an explanation on the incitation of conflict, where the main goal of the nations involved consists of increasing their wealth and power. The class system theory holds roots within capitalism, focusing on how states act according to the dominant economic class existing

within that nation (Kropf, n.d.). It claims that the global capitalist system leads to uneven development, where wealth ends up being concentrated in advanced capitalist states at the expense of poorer nations, especially due to the exploitation of resources, labor, and market in poorer states. As such, importance is placed on class inequalities, specially in terms of three main assets - capital, skills, and organizational assets - where those with higher levels of each can exploit those of a lower level (Pakulski, 2008). The edges of conflict lie deep within economic differences, especially as this theory emphasizes the exploitative nature of economic ties existing internationally.

There are numerous methods by which this exploitation occurs. Crucially, wealthy nations extract resources from poorer countries through trade agreements or direct intervention. This leaves resource-rich, developing nations left stripped of their sources of the economy, usually unwillingly, in ways that allow the developed nation to prosper at the expense of the developing. Further, multinational corporations take advantage of cheap labor in developing countries as a means to maximize their profits. This further reinforces economic inequality at the global scale and encourages poverty in the targeted nation. Again, this benefits the elite and the wealthy and strands the developing nation. Debt dependency is a crucial mechanism of exploitation, where institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have the power to impose programs that leave poorer nations dependent on wealthier. By seeming to help the growing nation by providing funds and resources, they ultimately leave this nation in everlasting debt that the wealthy nation can exploit to take advantage and hold power (The geopolitics..., 2022). Finally, and most relevant, includes military intervention. The class system theory links military interventions to economic motives, where wars, invasions, and occupations are justified as a means of promoting democracy or security, when in reality this

warfare is used as a means of securing access to resources or markets. These mechanisms tie into contemporary conflicts and their interaction with economic gain and goals, most notably within the Russian-Ukraine conflict due to its many unexpected actors.

### **Overview on the Russian-Ukraine Conflict**

Prior to the main Russia-Ukraine Conflict, Ukraine existed as a major figure within the Soviet Union during the Cold War, overshadowed only by Russia. Since its decision to sever ties from the Soviet Union, Ukraine began to align more closely to Western institutions (Maizland & Masters, 2023). However, Ukraine was left facing internal conflicts and difficulty in balancing foreign relations, where the western parts of Ukraine held greatly nationalist viewpoints, supporting integration with Europe, while those in the east preferred stronger connections to Russia. Prior, Ukraine and Russia held strong bonds, with about eight million Russians living in Ukraine as of 2001 and with its strong power prior to the Soviet collapse. Further, Russia was once Ukraine's largest trading partner, where Russia had aimed to print Ukraine into its single market and relies on Ukraine to bring Russia's energy exports to Central and Eastern Europe. Thus, with these internal and external conflicts, as well as Ukraine being seen as a major threat to Russia's power, unease and conflict continued to grow. This peaked once President Viktor Yanukovich of Ukraine decided not to solidify a trade and economic relationship with the European Union (EU) due to pressure from Russian President Vladimir Putin, instead opting to revive economic ties with Russia instead. This directly led to the protests of Euromaidan by the people in Ukraine in 2013, who viewed this decision as a "betrayal by a deeply corrupt and incompetent government." These protests met with significant retaliation, especially with the implementation of anti-protest laws, limiting freedom of speech and assembly, outlawing nongovernmental organizations, and essentially establishing a dictatorship (Ray, 2024). This,

however further incited the protestors, where after months of action and retaliation, Yanukovych fled the capital, leading to the appointment of a new president.

Russian power viewed this protest as a threat against Russia in favor of a “fascist” western frame of mind, one that endangered the ethnic Russian majority in Crimea. Ultimately, Russia ordered the invasion of Crimea in 2014, officially putting a start to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict (Maizland & Masters, 2023). This was described by Putin as a “rescue operation”, a result of Russian nationalists in Russia and Crimea advocating for a return to Russia, after Russia had previously transferred Crimea to Ukraine in 1954. Russia found it crucial to preserve its political influence in Ukraine and through the Soviet Union, especially after losing a major supporter in President Yanukovych. Putin aimed to justify his support for southeastern Ukraine separatists in a similar way, referring to the large number of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers existing there.

The origins of this conflict clearly indicate an economic tone to conflict, where threat to power’s influence, economic reach, and control on land can lead to outright war. Through its invasion of Crimea, Russia could begin paving its way to restoring its power, first through solidifying its control and military presence in the Black Sea, all under the justification of protecting security. Between 2014 and 2022, Ukraine faced losses in the thousands and displacement of millions throughout the conflict (Harvard, n.d.). In 2022, Russia returned, launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russian leaders claim that this was a retaliation to the United States and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) violating pledges to not expand their alliance into the Soviet area. Simultaneously, Putin warned the United States that attempting to bring Ukraine into the alliance would be seen as an attack on Russia. On face value, this appears to be a conflict of power, an aim to prevent one’s control from being

questioned. This holds some truth, but especially so through an economic perspective, a clash of strategic goals and economic interests perceived as a threat to a money-seeking reach.

### **Russian Economic Interests**

Before analyzing the underlying economic impacts of the conflict, an understanding of Russian and Western economic, capitalism, and imperialistic motives is crucial. Since the Ukraine crisis, Putin has presented his three-principle demands consisting of the following: preventing NATO's expansion (as a way of ultimately preventing Ukraine from joining NATO), cancel weapon deployment near Russian borders, and return NATO's military to the state it was in 1997. In the subtext of these demands, however, comes a desire to infringe upon Ukraine's sovereignty and territory and prevent further conversation. Russia's actions before and throughout this conflict highlights a push to further military, economic, and political power, all of which Russia believes is being threatened by Western action, whether through the growth of the European Union or military expansion through NATO. Previously, Russia focused on developing a strong "sphere of influence," maintaining its military presence through territorial occupation and pushing its interests upon the nation. However, in the case of the Ukraine conflict, Putin took a greatly active approach, desiring benefits that a strategy beyond a frozen conflict can provide (Mendiguren, 2022).

This leads directly into the economic powers Russia aims to achieve. Russia has long kept track of Western European economic expansion through the east, most notable when Ukraine and Georgia entered a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement which committed the nations to aligning their key trade and regularity areas with EU legislation and reinforcing political association between the eastern states and the EU. Here, Russia took action, attempting to end Ukraine's agreement and limit this relationship. Prior, Russia has received a

greater portion of Ukraine's exports than the EU, but by 2018, the share held by Russia fell to 7.7% and EUs increased to 42.6% (Mendiguren, 2022). Further, the EU continued to increase its economic power, becoming the top trading partner of various countries beyond just Ukraine. Easily, this is perceived as a threat to Russian economic power. Further, Russian export markets in fuel and energy make up a significant portion of its economic interests - more than 60% of its total export revenues. Crucially, where revenues from the exports make up 40% of Russia's federal budget, over 25% of Russia's crude oil and 40% of its natural gas resources are exported to the EU. With the relationship between Russia and the EU becoming ever more strained, sanctions on these exports would hold devastating effects on its economy.

In the context of the Russian-Ukraine conflict, Ukraine holds significant reserves of natural gas, coal, and oil - all fueling economic motives of conflict for Russia. In Ukraine lies some of the world's largest reserves of titanium, iron, lithium, and coal, collectively worth trillions. With Ukraine in the hands of Russia, Ukraine loses its land and ability to sustain an industrial economy, thus lessening as a threat in the face of Russia. By 2022, it was estimated the \$12.4 trillion worth of the energy deposits and metals of Ukraine are held until Russian control, alongside the oil and natural gas deposits. Since the invasion of 2022, Russia has seized 41 coal fields, 27 natural gas sites, 14 propane sites, and further metal ore sites that were previously used for Ukrainian steel production but now pushed under Russian economic control (Faiola & Bennett, 2022). In this way, Russia pushes forth as an economic power, forcing other nations to potentially become dependent on the energy resources Russia has now gained, furthering the level at which Russia stands.

Even more crucially is the power of the Black Sea. As Russia seized critical Ukrainian ports and pushed a blockade on the Black Sea, Ukraine was deprived of a crucial means of



providing exports without access to sea transit routes that could potentially be seen as even more valuable than the materials themselves. Further, with Russia being one of the greatest oil producers, having the ability to export freely is important to its revenue. Therefore, with Ukraine being a key point of transit for oil and gas exports leaving Russia and moving to the EU, Russia annexing the Crimean Peninsula is a key strategic economic move. In the process of Russia expanding its boundaries through the Black Sea and setting itself as the first to exploit the numerous reserves in the land, Ukraine is left without its key resources, its economy sacrificed for that of Russia (What does..., 2022). This seizing of land and resources clearly indicates an economic motive, a further emphasized difference in class in order to establish greater power in the international realm. Russia undermines Ukraine's economic independence and sovereignty and further enhances its own supply, in an attempt to fixate its place as a global energy powerhouse. In this way, Russia builds leverage against NATO and the EU, using their need to depend on Russia for energy as a clear political tool.

### **Russian Oligarchs**

The wartime economy of Russia is a crucial indicator of economic benefit as a goal - especially where wealth held by Russian individuals is increasing as war continues. Russian Oligarchs, or the wealthiest Russian nationals, have had crucial "contributions" to the war in Ukraine, benefitting from the spoils of war that follow. Through analysis on state contracts and lists of wealthy Russian individuals, it was found that at least 81% of Russia's richest businessmen played a role in supplying the military-industrial complex of Russia, its army, and its National Guard. Further, many do so while outwardly presenting their criticism on war (Laskin, 2023). At least 12 business focused individuals received more than \$11.4 billion for all of 2023, many of which were found to be closely tied to Putin, and a few of them sanctioned by

the West (Tan, 2024). Contracts between the oligarch's companies and the military-industrial complex throughout military conflict in Ukraine equate to about \$2.4 billion. These oligarchs were also found to be critically financially linked to the Russian bombing on a theater in Ukraine, as well as numerous instances where bombs, missiles, ammunition, and other military assets were used in warfare directly linked to Ukrainian attacks (Laskin, 2023). Further, where Russia's export has faced Western sanctions, by redirecting to countries like China, India, and the Global South, exporters - including Vagit Alekperov, key shareholder and former president of oil giant, Alexey Mordashov, main shareholder of steel company, and Vladimir Lisin, chairman of steel company - are finding dividends greater than 150 billion rubles. Each has been sanctioned by a combination of the US, UK, European Union, and Australia (Tan, 2024). Therefore, even with the attempt of the West to isolate Russia and reduce its power as an economic powerhouse, the economy of Russia continues to expand rapidly by seeking other methods of furthering its gain even within warfare.

### **Western Imperialism**

Russia itself is not the only power viewing Ukraine as an economic gold mine. Western powers, particularly the United States and the European Union, view Ukraine as a strategic and economic opportunity within the framework of capitalist expansion and geopolitical competition. The United States claims to be committed to restoring Ukraine's territory and sovereignty and does not recognize Russia's claims to Crimea. As of February 2023, the United States provided Ukraine more than \$50 billion in assistance, primarily for military aid. In turn, the US additionally worked to limit Russia by expanding international sanctions on the nation in financial, energy, defense, and tech aspects. Further, significant western operations in Russia were shut down in this limiting process.

However, from a broader perspective on the Ukraine-Russian war and the interaction of the United States within, it can appear that the war is truly being fought between the United States and Russia, but with Ukraine as a proxy (Beal et al., 2022). The US with its imperialistic goals makes an attempt to depower Russia, greatly through the expansion of NATO, and Ukraine seems to be caught in the middle of these various economic interests. The capitalist empire in the United States requires a war economy for its survival, and thus with war in Ukraine, the US takes political measures to keep its superiority commercially and economically.

Notably, while war may have severe consequences in Russia, it especially has pushed forth the integration of Ukraine with US-led global capitalism. With US and NATO interference, Ukraine has been left financially dependent on global economic systems managed by the US. A major instance of this is the existence of Ukraine debts to Western creditors, preventing Ukraine from having a central war economy of its own, but paving the way for the US and EU to take advantage of this debt as a way of furthering and piecing out their economic interests (Bailey, 2023). Not only is the US now able to enhance the alliance of European countries to NATO, but it also in turn gains economic benefits of its own. Where Russia, the second greatest arms dealer in the world, is placed under sanctions, the US comes in to fill this void, using this situation as a means to exploit the war and benefit US military and corporations (Porobić, 2023). The US established European dependence on its natural gas as an alternative to that from Russia, and weapon sales as “aid” to Ukraine have in turn led to greater profit and business for American manufacturers (Bailey, 2023). Since Russia’s occupation of lands in Ukraine, the prices and profits of the oil industry increased by 350 per cent, and the profits of the arms industry increased by 150. Disaster capitalism is clearly apparent through this process, where peace negotiations and economic negotiations are kept separate and out of the hands of those actually

influenced by the war. IFIs, investment funds, and other corporations arrive with their specific financial and political interests and shape the economic, political, and social processes in ways that benefit them most economically. As Porobić states, solidarity is used as a debt trap, where projected total bills of war being as high as potentially \$750 billion, and numerous billions being provided as “support” all serve as a means of adding to Ukrainian debt and being exploited as a tool in the hands of capitalist power (Porobić, 2023). With the US claiming to support Ukraine through wartime, the post-Maidan government of Ukraine is forced to be dependent on the US, aligning Ukraine with the west and ultimately leaving the US in a position of power. War has provided opportunity for capitalism and profit, exploiting the individuals caught in the war themselves.

### **NATO's Role**

Additionally, NATO holds deep roots within the Russia-Ukraine conflict, feeding its strategic, political, and economic interests. NATO frames its actions as a means of supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and self-defense, but, similar to the West and to Russia, its role in the conflict also reflects its greater geopolitical and economic objectives in maintaining dominance of the West and limiting Russian influence.

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has expanded eastward, bringing Soviet bloc countries into its alliance. This has been to the high dissatisfaction of Russia, which detects this movement as an infringement on its security. Therefore, where the relationship between Russia and NATO became strained, Ukraine inclining towards NATO has been a significant point of contention (Shaohan, 2023). This decision by NATO to expand eastward lies in a desire to build a security framework that integrates and strengthens cooperation with Eastern Europe. Underlying this, however, is a desire to bring Eastern European nations closer to Western-led

economic and defense structure. By strengthening economic ties, more markets are created for businesses in the West. Further, since the invasion by ARussia in 2022, NATO has provided extensive military aid to Ukraine, including but not limited to weapons, ammunition, and training for the force in Ukraine (NATO's response..., 2024). This has direct benefits back to the West due to the increased demand for defense and military products provided by US businesses (Topic: relations..., 2024). Under the guise of benevolently providing aid for Ukraine, the economy and capitalist society in the United States is further strengthened.

Finally, NATO members have established significant sanctions on Russia and its prominent individuals, targeting energy exports, financial institutions, and key industries (Bilateral security..., 2024). Altogether, these sanctions exist to weaken Russia's economic power, limiting its ability to finance its efforts in war and thus limiting its ability to exert control over other nations and their economies overall. On the other hand, as this directly limits the Russian economy from extending its resources to European nations, this forcibly creates room for the United States and western nations to step in, providing an alternate source of energy and crucial resources. Through each of these efforts, is it clear just how greatly each action presented with the intention of "aiding" and "supporting" Ukraine, truly holds motives in expanding the economic reach of the nations involved. This is a pattern that repeats consistently throughout nations in times of war, twisting the experience of warfare in one that enables others to consistently reap economic benefits. NATO's goals deeply illustrate its overarching geopolitical objective of weakening the influence of Russia as a global power while reinforcing Western dominance, all under the claim of supporting Ukraine militarily and economically. Further, with Ukraine as a shared concern, NATO members are brought closer together in their alliance, making the Western influence over these nations a much more streamlined process and building

a greater power central (Shaohan, 2023). Overall, NATO's role stretches far beyond military support and closer towards economic interests tied to global capitalism and strategy in the geopolitical frame, just as supported by the class system theory point of view. At the expense of a vulnerable, war-ridden nation, countries are willing to put their economy at the forefront of their goals, while presenting well-meaning intentions of "supporting" the end of war at face value.

### **Conclusion**

The Russia-Ukraine conflict, when viewed through the lens of class system theory, sheds light on exactly how economic exploitation, imperialism, and global capitalism have shaped the livelihood, intentions, and consequences of nations far beyond the two parties involved in the war. This conflict goes far beyond borders and national security as the nations themselves may claim, but instead is deeply rooted in individualistic and highly strategic economic interests - Russia for control over greater resources and enforcing other nations' dependency on its products, the West and United States in expanding its markets and taking advantage of disaster economies during time of war, then Ukraine itself caught within the global economic system aiming for independence while needing to suffer the economic consequences that come with society during and after war. The potential for a war between the United States and Russia is a very real risk but recalling how closely the imperialist interests of both align even on different sides, such a war is not practical for each other's interests. Both powers aim to reach high levels of economic power, and strategically, a war would be devastating economically and politically for those involved, especially to the United States and Russia themselves. To prevent such a war, it is crucial that interactions between nations go beyond just the diplomatic, and instead to paying heed towards the economic, political, social, and structural inequalities that incite such military

conflicts in the first place. Balancing these interests on all sides while meeting shared goals of stability and cooperation holds the potential for a more safely interconnected global system overall.

## References

- Bailey, K. (2023, May 31). Washington is using the Ukraine war to rebuild its global power. *Jacobin*. <https://jacobin.com/2023/05/us-nato-russia-war-ukraine-washington>
- Beal, T., Hill, D., & Sweezy, P. M. (2022, August 29). U.S. imperialism: Reflections from a Ukrainian mirror. *MR Online*. <https://mronline.org/2022/08/29/u-s-imperialism-reflections-from-a-ukrainian-mirror/>
- Bilateral security agreement between the United States of America and Ukraine. (2024, June 13). *The White House*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/06/13/bilateral-security-agreement-between-the-united-states-of-america-and-ukraine/>
- Faiola, A., & Bennett, D. (2022, August 10). Ukraine risks losing vast mineral resources to Russian occupation. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/10/ukraine-russia-energy-mineral-wealth/>
- Global Center for Climate Justice. (2022, March 17). What does Russia's invasion of Ukraine have to do with the climate crisis? – everything! *Climate-XChange*. <https://climate-xchange.org/2022/03/what-does-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-have-to-do-with-the-climate-crisis-everything/>
- Harvard. (n.d.). Background – Russo-Ukrainian War. *Russo-Ukrainian War*. <https://war.huri.harvard.edu/background/>
- Kropf, J. (n.d.). Class system theory. *KropfPoliSci*. <https://www.kropfpolisci.com/polsc250.15.class.system.theory.pdf>



- Laskin, E. (2023, August 1). A guidebook to Russian wartime oligarchs How Russia's richest businessmen profit from the war in Ukraine. *Meduza*.  
<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/08/01/a-guidebook-to-russian-wartime-oligarchs>
- Maizland, L., & Masters, J. (2023, February 14). Ukraine: Conflict at the crossroads of Europe and Russia. *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/background/ukraine-conflict-crossroads-europe-and-russia>
- Mendiguren, L. (2022, March 10). What does Putin want?: Assessing interests in the invasion of Ukraine. *Harvard Negotiation & Mediation Clinical Program*.
- NATO's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. (2024, October 3). *NATO*.  
[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_192648.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_192648.htm)
- Pakulski, J. (2008). Social equality and inequality. *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict*, 1939-1954.  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/B978012373985800163X>
- Porobić, N. (2023, February 14). Commodifying war: The political economy of disaster capitalism in Ukraine and beyond. *WILPF*. <https://www.wilpf.org/commodifying-war-the-political-economy-of-disaster-capitalism-in-ukraine-and-beyond/>
- Ray, M. (2024, November 20). Russia-Ukraine war | casualties, map, causes, & significance. *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/event/2022-Russian-invasion-of-Ukraine>
- Shaohan, G. (2023, August 28). NATO's strategic influence in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. *The Diplomatic Insight*. <https://thediplomaticinsight.com/nato-strategic-influence-in-the-russia-ukraine-conflict/>

Tan, H. (2024, July 9). Russia's war economy is so hot that at least 12 of its oligarchs received \$11 billion in dividends over 15 months. *Business Insider*.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-economy-oligarchs-billionaires-dividend-payouts-commodities-ukraine-war-crisis-2024-7>

The geopolitics of inequality: Discussing pathways towards a more just world. (2022, October 21). *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*. <https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-57-geopolitics-of-inequality/>

Topic: Relations with Ukraine. (2024, October 3). *NATO*.

[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_37750.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37750.htm)