

POLITICAL ANALYSIS

The Russian-Ukrainian War: Causes, Trajectory, and the Unresolved Settlement

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March 2026

Note on provenance: This paper originates from an undergraduate research project completed at the university level in 2022 (Political Science 231, International Relations). It has been substantially revised, analytically deepened, and updated through March 2026 to reflect four years of additional empirical evidence, scholarly debate, and geopolitical development. The analytical framework and original arguments are the author's own.

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ArcGIS StoryMaps (2024). *Title of the Story* [Online map]. Available at: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/36a7f6a6f5a9448496de641cf64bd375>

Abstract

This paper analyses the causes and evolution of Russia’s war against Ukraine through the three-level analytical framework of international relations: the systemic, the domestic, and the individual. The original version of this analysis was produced in 2022 in the immediate aftermath of Russia’s full-scale invasion; this substantially revised edition integrates four years of empirical evidence and scholarly literature to reassess the original arguments in light of what has since occurred.

The central argument is that no single level of analysis is sufficient. Russia’s aggression was the product of a convergence: a structural geopolitical competition between Russia and the West over Ukraine’s strategic orientation; a domestic political culture rooted in historical mythology, imperial grievance, and authoritarian consolidation; and the personal ambitions and miscalculations of Vladimir Putin. What the subsequent four years have confirmed, above all, is the scale of Putin’s strategic errors — and the extraordinary human cost those errors have imposed on both countries.

As of March 2026, Russia has suffered an estimated one million or more military casualties, controls approximately 20 percent of Ukrainian territory after advancing at a pace slower than almost any major offensive in modern military history, and faces an economy overheating under the unsustainable strain of permanent war mobilization. Ukraine has lost the majority of its pre-war energy infrastructure to Russian strikes, seen six million citizens displaced internationally, and finds itself negotiating under severe pressure — but has not collapsed. A negotiated settlement remains elusive, with peace talks mediated by the Trump administration stalled as of March 2026 on the irreconcilable question of territorial concessions.

I. Introduction: The War at Four Years

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. At the time, the Kremlin anticipated a campaign of days, not years: the capture of Kyiv within 72 hours, the installation of a compliant government, and the effective termination of Ukrainian statehood as an independent political project. None of that occurred. Four years later, the war has become the deadliest conventional conflict in Europe since the Second World War, with combined military casualties estimated by CSIS at approaching two million by spring 2026 — including approximately 1.2 million Russian soldiers killed or wounded, and between 500,000 and 600,000 Ukrainian military casualties (CSIS, 2026).

The war did not begin in February 2022. Its proximate roots lie in February 2014, when Russian forces occupied the Crimean peninsula following the EuroMaidan uprising and the removal of President Viktor Yanukovich. Russia subsequently fomented and supported armed separatist movements in the Donbas oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, launching what analysts now recognize as the opening phase of a broader strategy of destabilization. The 2022 invasion was an escalation of a conflict already eight years old.

This paper examines the causes of that conflict and its subsequent trajectory through a three-level analytical lens: the systemic level, examining the structural competition between Russia, NATO, and the European Union; the domestic level, examining the political culture, historical mythology, and internal dynamics that shaped Russian decision-making; and the individual level, examining the role of Vladimir Putin's personal ambitions, miscalculations, and political survival imperatives. It then addresses what four years of war have revealed about the original analytical judgments — and what the current state of the conflict and peace negotiations tells us about the path forward.

II. The Domestic Level: Historical Mythology, Nationalism, and the Russian Political Psyche

A. The Myth of Shared Identity

No account of Russian aggression against Ukraine is complete without engaging the deep historical narratives that have shaped Russian political culture over centuries and continue to animate Russian elite and popular attitudes toward Ukraine. Chief among these is the assertion of a fundamental civilizational unity between Russians and Ukrainians — a claim that Putin articulated with increasing explicitness in the years preceding the invasion, and which he stated without qualification in June 2025 when he declared that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people” and therefore “all of Ukraine is ours” (Wikipedia, Peace Negotiations, 2026).

This claim draws on a selective reading of Eastern Slavic history that treats Kyivan Rus as the exclusive cultural patrimony of the Russian state, erases centuries of distinct Ukrainian historical development, and denies the legitimacy of Ukrainian national consciousness. As Wood (2016) documents, the mythology of Crimea as a twice-given “gift” — first by Potemkin to Catherine the Great in 1783, then by Khrushchev to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954 — became a touchstone of Russian irredentist sentiment that provided cultural fuel for the 2014 annexation and has never been extinguished.

This mythology intersects with the concept of “*derzhavnost*” — the belief in Russian greatness and the central role of the state as the embodiment of national identity. As Verkhovsky (2016) analyzes, this concept has proven remarkably durable across the Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods: in each era, the greatness of the Russian state has been invoked to justify the subordination of individual rights at home and the exercise of power politics abroad. Putin’s articulation of this concept in the context of Ukraine represents not an aberration from Russian political tradition but its logical expression.

B. Nationalism, Oligarchy, and the Manufactured Consensus

The domestic level of analysis illuminates an important asymmetry: while historical grievance and imperial nostalgia provide the cultural raw material for Russian aggression, they are not self-organizing political forces. The nationalism that has animated Russian policy toward Ukraine has been cultivated, instrumentalized, and where necessary manufactured by a state apparatus and oligarchic class that have rallied around a single figure — Vladimir Putin — and whose interests are served by an external enemy and a politics of national mobilization.

Verkhovsky’s (2016) analysis of the Russian nationalist movement between 2000 and 2015 reveals its fundamentally ambiguous relationship with the Kremlin. The “*russkie mir*” (Russian world) project — the aspiration to establish transborder cultural and political unity under Moscow’s leadership — has never been the product of a coherent grassroots movement. Russian

nationalist organizations have repeatedly been permitted influence when useful to the Kremlin and marginalized when they threatened to develop independent political agency. The formation of the “Slavist Anti-Fascist Front” in early 2014, orchestrated in part by Duma deputy Aleksei Zhuravlev, illustrates how quickly such organizations could be mobilized to provide political cover for Russian military intervention — and how thoroughly their appearance of independence was manufactured.

What has changed between 2022 and 2026 is the degree to which this manufactured nationalism has been institutionalized at the state level. Putin’s “Time of Heroes” (Vremya Geroev) initiative, announced in 2024 and now fully operational, is systematically replacing the technocratic, Western-oriented elite of the 2010s with combat veterans who have demonstrated ideological loyalty to the Special Military Operation. As Carnegie analysts observed in late 2025, this represents the construction of a new administrative class invested in the durability of the wartime system — a class for whom the war is not merely an external policy but a source of social identity and political advancement (Carnegie Endowment, 2025).

C. The EuroMaidan and the Loss of the Proxy State

The immediate domestic trigger for Russian intervention in 2014 was the collapse of the Yanukovich government and the loss of Moscow’s most reliable instrument of political influence in Kyiv. Putin had invested significantly in Yanukovich’s presidency, partly because of the latter’s support for extending Russia’s lease on the Sevastopol naval base — the anchor of Russian power projection in the Black Sea. The EuroMaidan uprising, precipitated by Yanukovich’s last-minute rejection of the EU Association Agreement under Russian pressure, and escalated by his government’s decision to use violence against protesters, ended this relationship and confronted Moscow with the prospect of a Ukraine oriented firmly toward Europe.

The Association Agreement itself, as Jarabik et al. (2018) analyze, was a more ambitious document than its name suggests. It encompassed substantial harmonization with EU law and regulation, free trade provisions, energy sector modernization, and a trajectory toward visa liberalization — a comprehensive reorientation of Ukrainian governance standards that was structurally incompatible with Ukraine’s existing trade and political relationships with Russia. From Moscow’s perspective, the Agreement represented not a bilateral EU-Ukraine arrangement but a direct challenge to Russian suzerainty in its “near abroad.”

Ukraine’s subsequent four years of political development have demonstrated the depth of this reorientation. Despite the devastation of the war, Ukraine has advanced its EU accession process significantly: it received candidate status in June 2022, opened accession negotiations in June 2024, and completed its first screening chapters by late 2025. The democratic and institutional reforms required for accession — the very development that Moscow characterized as a Western plot — have proceeded under conditions of active war, a circumstance that has substantially strengthened rather than weakened the European political case for Ukrainian membership.

III. The Systemic Level: NATO, the EU, and the Architecture of Strategic Competition

A. The NATO Enlargement Question

The systemic level of analysis situates Russia's aggression within the broader structural competition between Russia and the Western alliance system for influence over the post-Soviet space. The NATO enlargement question is the most frequently invoked systemic explanation for the conflict, and it deserves careful treatment — both because it contains genuine analytical substance and because it has been systematically misused as a justification for aggression that it does not in fact explain.

Russia's stated objection to NATO enlargement is that the progressive incorporation of former Soviet and Warsaw Pact states into the alliance constitutes an existential threat to Russian security. Putin designated NATO enlargement as a "red line" and cited it explicitly as a reason for the invasion. This objection has found sympathetic treatment among some Western realist scholars, most prominently John Mearsheimer, who argued before 2022 that expanding NATO into Ukraine was a provocation that rational Russian policy could not accept.

The analytical problem with this argument is not that it is entirely without merit as a description of Russian threat perceptions, but that it confuses description with justification and correlation with causation. Ukraine was not a NATO member in February 2022 and was not on a credible near-term accession path — the 2008 Bucharest promise of eventual membership had produced no membership action plan in the intervening fourteen years, and NATO's internal divisions on the question were well-known. More fundamentally, as Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kuleba observed before the invasion, Ukraine was already a constitutionally neutral country in 2014 when Russia first invaded: the neutrality argument provided no protection.

What the systemic level more convincingly explains is the broader competition for Ukraine's strategic orientation — a competition in which NATO membership was one dimension among several, and in which the EU Association Agreement, Ukrainian democratic consolidation, and the simple fact of Ukraine's existence as a successful independent state were all, in different ways, threatening to Moscow's regional primacy project.

B. The EU and the "Civilizational Choice"

The European Union's role in the conflict's origins has received less analytical attention than NATO's, but is in some respects more illuminating. As Jarabik et al. (2018) document, the EU's Eastern Partnership program, of which the Ukraine Association Agreement was the centerpiece, was understood in Brussels primarily as a development and governance tool — a mechanism for extending EU standards and norms to neighboring states. In Moscow, it was read as a geopolitical instrument designed to absorb Ukraine into EU structures at Russia's expense.

The EU's rhetoric of offering partner states a "civilizational choice" was, as analysts at the Carnegie Endowment have noted, particularly inflammatory to Russian ears — implying as it did that the European path represented civilization while the Russian path did not. By 2013, the Kremlin regarded the challenge from the EU as nearly equivalent to that from NATO in terms of its implications for Russian regional influence. The failure of EU and Russian officials to reach a workable compromise on the Association Agreement — the possibility of which was never seriously explored — transformed what might have been a manageable economic negotiation into a political crisis.

Four years of war have fundamentally altered the EU-Ukraine relationship. Ukraine is now an EU candidate state, has received over €134 billion in EU financial support, and has been formally integrated into several EU economic mechanisms. The "choice" that Russia sought to prevent has been made irreversibly, under conditions far more extreme than any EU official contemplated when drafting the Association Agreement in 2013.

C. Ukraine as a Battlefield Between Russia and the West

A more analytically serious version of the systemic argument does not reduce the conflict to NATO enlargement but recognizes Ukraine as the focal point of a genuine structural competition between Russia and the West over the post-Cold War European security order. Wilson (2014) framed this competition as one in which neither Moscow nor Brussels was wholly innocent of treating Ukraine as an arena for influence rather than a sovereign actor with its own interests.

What four years of war have clarified is the stakes of this competition. Russia's invasion has produced outcomes at the systemic level that are almost entirely contrary to its stated objectives: NATO has expanded to include Finland and Sweden (adding over 1,300 kilometers of new NATO-Russia border); European defense spending has increased at its fastest pace since the Cold War; and the Western alliance, despite significant internal tensions over the pace and extent of support for Ukraine, has maintained considerably greater cohesion than Moscow anticipated. The war has strengthened, not weakened, the Western institutional architecture that Putin sought to destabilize.

The Trump administration's return to the White House in January 2025 introduced a significant complication to this picture. Washington's engagement in peace mediation — involving envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner — has been conducted with considerable sympathy for Russian positions on territorial questions and has at points created visible tension with European allies. The U.S. suspension of military aid and intelligence sharing to Ukraine in early 2025, subsequently reversed after Ukraine agreed to a partial ceasefire, illustrated the fragility of Western coalition coherence when subject to domestic political pressures in the lead ally (House of Commons Library, 2026).

As of March 2026, the peace process is stalled. Russia has rejected every U.S.-led ceasefire initiative — six in 2025 alone — while continuing offensive operations. Ukraine and U.S. officials have claimed a framework agreement is "90 percent complete," but the Kremlin's

position on territorial questions — demanding recognition of its occupation of four Ukrainian oblasts plus Crimea, and insisting Ukraine withdraw even from parts of these oblasts it currently holds — remains entirely incompatible with Kyiv’s stated red lines (Jamestown Foundation, 2026; Al Jazeera, 2026).

IV. The Individual Level: Putin, Miscalculation, and the Logic of Authoritarian Risk

A. The Decision to Invade: Ambition and Intelligence Failure

The individual level of analysis examines how the personal characteristics, beliefs, and decision-making environment of Vladimir Putin shaped the decision to invade Ukraine. The analytical consensus, supported by extensive post-2022 reporting, is that Putin made a catastrophically miscalculated decision based on systematically distorted information — and that the structure of his authoritarian system made this failure both predictable and nearly inevitable.

Putin's objective in February 2022 was not limited territorial revision — it was the effective elimination of Ukrainian statehood as an independent political project. The expectation of a three-day campaign to capture Kyiv and install a compliant government reflected a belief, reportedly reinforced by FSB assessments and by Putin's own ideological framework, that Ukraine lacked genuine national cohesion, that Ukrainian elites would capitulate or flee, and that the Ukrainian population would not resist. All of these assumptions proved false.

Financial Times reporting from December 2025, drawing on multiple official sources, confirmed that Russian military and security authorities regularly provided Putin with intelligence updates that inflated Ukrainian casualties, downplayed Russian tactical failures, and projected an optimistic operational picture. General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, is reported to be the primary channel for these sanitized briefings. Putin's own interlocutors outside the formal chain of command have privately characterized the war as a “growing drag” on the Russian economy — a view that has not penetrated the official presentation of the conflict (Financial Times, December 2025, cited in ISW, 2025).

B. The Political Survival Imperative

A structural feature of Putin's individual decision-making that the 2022 analysis identified and that subsequent events have confirmed is the relationship between external aggression and domestic political survival. Putin faces a political system in which there is no legitimate exit: no term-limit retirement, no institutional mechanism for peaceful succession, and no realistic prospect of legal immunity following a loss of power. As analysts at the time observed, the democratization of Ukraine posed a symbolic threat — demonstrating that a post-Soviet Slavic country could successfully build a functioning democracy — that was potentially more dangerous to Putin's domestic position than any military capability.

Four years of war have both confirmed and complicated this analysis. The Prigozhin mutiny of June 2023 — the most direct challenge to Putin's political authority since the consolidation of his power in the early 2000s — was itself a product of the war's internal contradictions, specifically the tension between the Wagner Group's battlefield role and the formal military chain of command. Prigozhin's death in a suspicious plane crash two months later demonstrated

both Putin’s continued capacity to neutralize internal threats and the violence of the mechanisms required to do so.

The Carnegie Endowment’s analysis of “Wild Putinism” (2025) captures the current state of the Russian political system with precision: Putin’s personal role in routine domestic governance has been increasingly consumed by tactical maneuvering, producing a system characterized by constant ambiguity, half-measures, and institutional inertia. The war has made the formal structures of Russian governance less rather than more functional, while simultaneously strengthening the Kremlin’s capacity for coercive control. Elite dissatisfaction — particularly the fury of the private sector at crushing interest rates (the Central Bank of Russia held rates at 21 percent through mid-2025) and relentless tax increases — has not, as of March 2026, translated into any organized political challenge to Putin’s position (Atlantic Council, 2025; Carnegie Endowment, 2025).

C. The Wartime Economy and Its Unsustainable Trajectory

The war’s economic dimensions provide some of the most revealing evidence of Putin’s miscalculation. The Russian economy has proven more resilient than Western governments anticipated in 2022 — a fact that is analytically important and has been used by Moscow as part of a broader information strategy to signal that Russia can sustain the war indefinitely. But topline GDP figures conceal a picture of structural strain that is becoming increasingly apparent.

Russia’s economy grew at approximately 0.6 percent in 2025, a sharp deceleration from the war-driven expansion of 2023 and 2024 — and CSIS analysts assess this as the first serious recessionary risk since the invasion began (CSIS, 2026). Inflation reached nearly 9 percent officially, with real household inflation estimated to be substantially higher. The Central Bank’s key interest rate peaked at 21 percent — the highest since the immediate post-Soviet period. Military spending has been allocated at approximately 6 percent of GDP, the highest since the Cold War, while social services and non-defense programs face real-terms cuts. The National Welfare Fund, Russia’s sovereign wealth buffer, has been drawn down significantly.

Particularly revealing is the distributional character of the economic pressure. As Carnegie analysis notes, the greatest economic losers in Russia’s overheated economy are precisely Putin’s core supporters: public sector workers, pensioners, teachers, and healthcare personnel whose wages and benefits are indexed to official inflation figures that substantially understate the real cost of living they face (Carnegie Endowment, 2024). A Russian Field poll from February 2026 found that 53 percent of Russian respondents now believe negotiations toward a peace settlement should be prioritized, against 38 percent who favor continuing the military operation — the most significant shift in Russian public opinion on the war since 2022 (Russia Matters, March 2026).

The war has also produced a structural transformation of the Russian elite. The departure of Russia’s liberal technocratic class, the seizure of assets from business leaders who opposed the war (the Tinkoff Bank case being the most prominent documented example), and the systematic

promotion of war loyalists through mechanisms like “Time of Heroes” have created a new governing class whose interests are intertwined with the war’s continuation. As CSIS analysts observe, this represents the completion of a long-held Kremlin goal: the reshoring of Russian oligarchic wealth within the country’s borders, combined with the replacement of “system liberals” with ideologically committed regime stakeholders (CSIS, 2025).

V. The Battlefield: Four Years of Attrition and Its Strategic Implications

A. Territorial Control and the Pace of Russian Advance

As of March 2026, Russia controls approximately 20 percent of Ukrainian territory — including Crimea, the Donbas regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, and significant portions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts. Russia has held the battlefield initiative since approximately January 2024, following the failure of Ukraine’s 2023 counteroffensive, and has been advancing on multiple axes. But the pace of that advance is analytically critical: it has been slower than almost any major offensive campaign in modern military history.

CSIS’s February 2026 analysis documents the operational reality: from late February 2024 to early January 2026, Russian forces advanced just under 50 kilometers in their most prominent offensive toward Pokrovsk, at an average rate of approximately 70 meters per day — achieving their most significant breakthrough, the capture of Pokrovsk itself in early December 2025, after nearly two years of grinding combat (CSIS, 2026). In Kharkiv Oblast, Russian advances toward Kupiansk averaged 23 meters per day over a 14-month period. These are not the operational tempos of a military force achieving decisive results; they are the tempos of an army paying extraordinary costs for incremental gains.

Russia’s air campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure has been substantially more effective than its ground campaign. Some 90 percent of Ukraine’s thermal power generation was destroyed as of May 2025, and 50 percent of its hydropower installations were damaged or destroyed. Ukraine’s energy infrastructure was operating at approximately one third of its pre-invasion generation capacity by autumn 2025, with Kyiv residents facing up to 16 hours of daily power outages. Russian strikes have left Ukraine’s energy system able to meet only 60 percent of national electricity demand as of January 2026.

B. Russian Casualties and the Cost of Initiative

The human cost of Russia’s battlefield initiative has been staggering by any historical standard. Estimates from multiple Western intelligence agencies and research institutions converge on approximately 1.2 million Russian military casualties — killed, wounded, and missing — between February 2022 and early 2026, including between 230,000 and 430,000 killed. CSIS assessed in January 2026 that at current rates, combined Russian and Ukrainian casualties could reach two million by spring 2026 — making this the deadliest conventional conflict since the Korean War.

The Ukrainian toll is also severe: Zelensky’s February 2026 estimate of 55,000 Ukrainian soldiers killed represents the most recent official figure, though Western intelligence assessments of total casualties, including wounded, are substantially higher. Ukraine’s civilian casualty rate increased 31 percent in 2025 compared to 2024, driven by Russia’s escalating drone campaign,

which saw monthly launches triple between December 2024 and December 2025 (Russia Matters, January 2026).

C. The Drone War and Technological Adaptation

Air and drone attacks rose from approximately 6,000 in 2023 to nearly 16,000 in 2024 and more than 29,000 in 2025, reflecting Russia's expanding drone programme using domestically-produced Shahed-type weapons that cost between \$20,000 and \$50,000 each. Ukraine has simultaneously developed a sophisticated long-range drone strike capability targeting Russian energy infrastructure, military production facilities, and logistics. From January to mid-March 2026, Ukrainian forces launched at least 110 drone strike packages against Russian territory, with Ukraine's SBU Alpha unit claiming to have neutralized roughly half of Russia's operational Pantsir air defense stockpile.

The drone war illustrates a broader pattern of technological adaptation that neither side anticipated at the conflict's outset. Ukraine's ability to strike deep into Russian territory — reaching Kazan, Saratov, and other cities hundreds of kilometers from the front — has eroded the Russian home front's sense of insulation from the war and created domestic political pressures on the Kremlin that compound the economic strains analyzed above.

VI. The Peace Process: Negotiations, Stalemate, and the Settlement Gap

A. The Architecture of Failed Diplomacy

The war's diplomatic history is, in large part, a history of missed opportunities that the subsequent years have made increasingly costly to recover. The Istanbul talks of March–April 2022, conducted in the conflict's first weeks, produced what Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Dmitry Kozak has described as a near-agreement: a ceasefire in exchange for Ukrainian neutrality guarantees and Russian withdrawal. That agreement was reportedly blocked by Putin himself, who — at the moment when Russian forces were being expelled from the Kyiv region — expanded his objectives to include territorial annexation. A December 2025 New York Times investigation provided a detailed account of Kozak's opposition to the full-scale invasion and his attempted ceasefire call in the conflict's first days, for which he was sidelined.

Renewed negotiations began in 2025 after Donald Trump became president of the United States. Trump's administration formulated peace plans generally favorable towards Russia, but these offers were met with refusal from both Russia and Ukraine. European countries have been more aligned with Ukrainian proposals, and planned for a ceasefire guarded by a “coalition of the willing” with troops in Ukraine.

The Trump administration's 28-point peace framework, details of which were published by Axios in November 2025, calls for a comprehensive non-aggression agreement, NATO non-expansion commitments, and a process for determining territorial disposition — with Ukraine asked to make painful concessions on occupied Donbas territory in exchange for security guarantees and economic reconstruction support (Axios, 2025). Ukraine agreed to 95 percent of a framework document by December 2025, but the remaining five percent — primarily the territorial and security guarantee questions — has proved unbridgeable.

B. Russia's Negotiating Posture

Russia's behavior in the peace process reveals the fundamental tension between Putin's stated openness to settlement and his actual negotiating demands. Putin's stated conditions for peace include recognition of the occupied territories as part of Russia, Ukraine's renunciation of NATO membership, the ‘demilitarization’ and ‘denazification’ of Ukraine, the lifting of sanctions, and a revision of Europe's security architecture. These conditions are, in their totality, a demand for Ukrainian capitulation rather than a negotiated settlement — and they are accompanied by continued offensive military operations designed to improve Russia's territorial position ahead of any agreement.

Ukraine and the U.S. have been working on a long-term peace plan, with Ukrainian officials including Zelensky willing to agree to ceasefires and start negotiations, while Russian officials including Putin have refused to establish a ceasefire. Russia has rejected every U.S.-led ceasefire

initiative presented in 2025, while launching a massive missile and drone attack on Kyiv hours after the U.S. presented what it described as its “final offer” in April 2025, killing 13 civilians (Wikipedia, Peace Negotiations, 2026).

European, U.S., and Ukrainian officials claim a peace agreement is 90 percent complete, but the Kremlin’s position remains distant from the draft terms, and Putin has attempted to justify stalling by fabricating a Ukrainian drone attack on his personal residence and using a Ukrainian corruption scandal to delegitimize Kyiv’s political leadership.

C. The Settlement Gap and Its Implications

The fundamental obstacle to a negotiated settlement is not procedural but substantive: there is no currently available compromise between Russia’s territorial maximalism and Ukraine’s refusal to formally cede sovereign territory. Ukraine’s constitution, amended in 2019 to enshrine the NATO membership aspiration, cannot be amended without a constitutional majority that Zelensky does not have political support to assemble in the current environment. Russia’s demand for formal recognition of its occupation of four oblasts — including significant portions it does not militarily control — is a demand that no Ukrainian government could accept and survive politically.

The February 2026 Russian Field survey finding that 53 percent of Russians favor peace negotiations over continued military operations suggests that the domestic political cost of continued war is rising in Russia as well. Putin’s detachment from social and economic challenges has been aggravated by the war, and various parts of the Russian private sector are furious about the crushing weight of tax hikes and soaring interest rates. But elite dissatisfaction in a consolidated authoritarian system does not automatically translate into political pressure for course correction, as the post-Prigozhin period has demonstrated.

VII. Overall Assessment: What Four Years Have Confirmed and What Remains Uncertain

The three-level analytical framework that this paper has applied to the origins and trajectory of Russia's war against Ukraine yields a coherent, if sobering, synthesis. At the systemic level, the conflict confirms that structural competition for regional primacy — between a Russia committed to exclusive spheres of influence and a Western alliance committed to the expansion of its normative and security order — creates genuine risk of violent conflict when it intersects with the internal politics of contested states. The systemic argument explains the context and the stakes; it does not justify the method.

At the domestic level, the conflict confirms that political cultures rooted in historical mythology, imperial grievance, and manufactured nationalism create enabling conditions for aggression that persist across institutional changes and are not easily moderated by economic interdependence or diplomatic engagement. Russia's domestic political transformation since 2022 — the construction of a new wartime elite, the suppression of internal dissent, the systematic institutionalization of the war as a defining feature of Russian identity — suggests that these enabling conditions have deepened rather than weakened over the course of the conflict.

At the individual level, the conflict provides a detailed case study in authoritarian miscalculation: a leader whose information environment had been systematically corrupted by the incentives of sycophantic subordinates, whose ideological framework denied the agency and coherence of the society he sought to dominate, and whose political survival imperatives created a structural bias toward risk-taking that no amount of Western deterrence signaling could overcome. Putin's miscalculation has been costly — for Russia, for Ukraine, and for the international order — but it has not yet forced the course correction that rational-actor models might predict, because the authoritarian system that generated the miscalculation also insulates the decision-maker from its consequences.

The greatest uncertainty as of March 2026 is not whether Russia can be defeated militarily — the evidence suggests it cannot achieve its original objectives — but whether the political conditions exist, on either side, for a settlement that does not simply freeze the conflict until one party is ready to resume it. Ukraine cannot negotiate away its sovereignty; Russia cannot negotiate away the territorial gains it has paid for with a million casualties. The path between these positions, if it exists, has not yet been found.

What the four years since this analysis was first written have made clear is that the war's consequences extend far beyond the battlefield. It has redrawn the European security architecture in ways that are likely to persist for a generation. It has accelerated the decoupling of Russia from the Western economic and institutional order in ways that will prove irreversible regardless

of how the conflict ends. It has demonstrated both the resilience of Ukrainian national identity — the very thing Putin denied existed — and the fragility of the Western coalition commitment to sustain that identity’s political expression under sustained economic and political pressure.

The question Putin asked in 2022 — “which empire needs reconstituting?” — has been answered empirically. The Russian empire, in either its Soviet or Tsarist form, is not being reconstituted. What is being constituted, at catastrophic human cost, is a new Ukrainian national consciousness forged in war — and a new European strategic landscape in which Russia has transformed itself from a potential partner into a structural adversary for at least a generation.

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