

The dossier *War in Ukraine. How did the war come about?* (text and collection of materials) was compiled in response to the spiraling events in late February 2022. It represents the authors' knowledge to the best of their ability; emphases, omissions, and simplifications are intended to reduce complexity for use in civic education. The same applies to the collection of materials; in particular, the dossier and the collection make no claim to completeness.

Guidance for use:

The text is intended as background information for teachers, social and youth workers, parents, etc. in schools, in extracurricular activities and in the family, as well as for individuals for their personal orientation in political discussions. The text can also be used directly in educational activities and lessons. We recommend it for higher secondary schools and, depending on the class and time available, for older pupils in lower secondary schools.

The developments and events mentioned in the text are not exhaustively explained in every case. For some of the terminology, the footnotes contain definitions/explanations accessible to young people. Depending on your own level of knowledge, the text may also raise new questions. This could be an opportunity to research and thus strengthen your own basis for forming personal opinions - The collection of resources in the second part of the dossier can be a starting point.

The text refrains from making predictions, even if the current situation raises urgent questions about the consequences and our future that leave us perplexed or (over)challenge us emotionally. When discussing the topic, it is therefore particularly important to maintain a respectful, interested and open approach to each other and to emerging emotions.

Information on Dossier, Part 2:

Which questions arise most frequently in connection with the war in Ukraine? Which questions remain unanswered by this dossier? Which questions are left unresolved in your own research?

Send us the questions to [office@demokrative.ch](mailto:office@demokrative.ch) and we will compile part 2 of the dossier in the form of a Q&A document.

Editor and Authorship:

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# War in Ukraine.

## How did the War come about?

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Why Russia attacked Ukraine is a complicated question. We are currently exposed to a flood of information and horror stories. Much of the information on current developments is contradictory and cannot be verified or is very difficult to verify. In some cases, false information is deliberately published in order to influence public opinion. This will not change in the short term.

In the current situation, facts, analyses and assessments by experts can provide orientation. Basic knowledge of the involved countries and their political developments helps us to classify current events and assess how plausible certain information is.

This text aims to provide such orientation. It draws on analyses and assessments that are shared among experts. The text focuses on developments in Ukraine and Russia over the past three decades leading up to Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022. Using the description of these developments, explanations are derived as to what motivations might lie behind the war.

Underlying this text's focus are some basic assumptions:

- The narrative spread by Vladimir Putin, especially in the Russian state media, about the situation in Ukraine and the reasons for the Russian attack, is propaganda and does not correspond to the truth. This propaganda, its logic, as well as the references to real current or historical developments, will not be analyzed in this text.
- Russia's attack on Ukraine is a blatant violation of international law; the Russian regime is responsible for this attack. Ukraine is an independent country with a democratically elected

government that must and may decide independently and democratically on its foreign and domestic policies. Geopolitical decisions and dynamics, as controversial and critical as they may be judged, cannot justify the attack, nor can they sufficiently explain it. Accordingly, geopolitical developments are described only insofar as they contribute to an understanding of the current war.

The reason for this document's focus on the last thirty years is that despite many similarities, developments in the two countries since the collapse of the Soviet Union have differed in important aspects. Until 1991, both countries were constituent states of the Soviet Union, an autocratic federation of 15 states<sup>1</sup>. From 1991 onward, both countries began to develop into democratic states and societies<sup>2</sup>. Such a development is very difficult, because from one day to the next the known rules no longer apply. At the same time, it takes a lot of time and work to reorganize the whole country; out of necessity, some of this work has to be done by the same people who did it in the 'old' system. In our view, these developments hold an important key to understanding the situation today.

### Important Developments since 1990 in Russia

Russia had to deal with a severe economic crisis in the 1990s. Money lost value (inflation); stores were empty at times. In 1999, a new president came to power in Russia, Vladimir Putin. He remains president until this day and has not made Russia more democratic since taking office. Instead, he has expanded his power and introduced rules that make it very difficult for the people and Russian politicians to oppose his decisions. For example, since 2004, the governors (presidents) of the regions (analogous to cantons/states) can be removed by the president at any time. Another example is the massive electoral fraud documented at least since the 2007 parliamentary elections. In response to the increasingly credible reports of electoral fraud, there were numerous demonstrations throughout Russia in 2011-2013.

Putin has fought several wars since the beginning of his term: Putin's first war was the Second Chechen War that lasted from 1999 to 2009. Chechnya is a constituent state of Russia. The war was preceded by a series of terrorist attacks, accompanied by further repression of civil society, and increased Putin's popularity in Russia. In August 2008, Russian troops attacked Georgia (Caucasus War). The Russian government recognized two regions as independent states that are Georgian territory under international law (South Ossetia and Abkhazia). As of 2015, the Russian army participated in the civil war in Syria and took sides with the internationally outlawed ruler Bashar al-Assad.

Over time, the oppression of political opposition and independent forces has steadily increased. Non-governmental organizations are worn down by bureaucratic hurdles or court proceedings (most recent example: the Russian human rights organization Memorial). Prominent individuals are threatened or killed (e.g., war correspondent Anna Politkovskaya in 2007, liberal opposition politician

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<sup>1</sup> **Suggested explanation:** We know constituent states in particular from federally organized democracies such as Switzerland, where the constituent states are called cantons, or Germany and Austria, where they are called federal states (Bundesland).

<sup>2</sup> **Suggested explanation:** Democracy is a form of state and government in which the government, parliaments and, if applicable, the president are elected by those entitled to vote in free and fair elections. Elections also take place in non-democratic countries. The difference is that in non-democratic countries the election campaign is often not fair (e.g., limited freedom of speech and media), courts are not independent from the government and human rights are not sufficiently protected. Non-democratic countries can be described as authoritarian, autocratic, totalitarian or dictatorship, depending on their characteristics.

Boris Nemtsov in 2015, or the attempted poisoning of opposition politician Alexei Nawalny in summer 2020). The media are increasingly controlled by the state.

### Important Developments since 1990 in Ukraine

The developments in Ukraine and Russia have been similar in many regards: the economic situation is not easy; Soviet-era politicians sometimes remained in power for a long time; a few people became very rich in a very short time by shamelessly exploiting the situation after the collapse of the Soviet Union without clear rules ('oligarchs')<sup>3</sup>; corruption<sup>4</sup> is a big problem; and to some extent, so is electoral fraud.

Unlike in Russia, however, demonstrations in Ukraine against electoral fraud and controversial presidential decisions have been successful over the past twenty years. The following two examples in particular:

- **Orange Revolution:** In 2004, a presidential election was held in which Viktor Yanukovich was declared the winner, but domestic and foreign election-observers reported massive fraud. This was followed by large demonstrations, which led to the Supreme Court ordering the election to be repeated. The rerun was won by the opposing candidate, Yushchenko. These demonstrations went down in history as the Orange Revolution. Interestingly, Yanukovich subsequently served as Yushchenko's prime minister for two terms and eventually won the next regular presidential election in 2010, which was judged by observers to be free and fair. This shows how difficult it is to find one's orientation in times of democratization. It is true that electoral fraud should not be trivialized. At the same time, profiteers can also represent real interests and majorities.
- **Maidan<sup>5</sup>:** In 2013-14, mass protests erupted again in Kyiv. This time, the trigger was President Yanukovich's refusal to sign an agreement with the European Union. Instead, he wanted to deepen relations with Russia and its Eurasian Union. For many people, this marked the end of a dream: the dream of being able to travel to Europe without visas and to boost the economy thanks to the free trade agreement with the EU. The agreement with the EU was also symbolic of Ukraine's orientation towards Europe and its further development towards a free and democratic country. Corruption continued to be a major problem, and protesters demanded the resignation of President Yanukovich and his government. Yanukovich fled to Russia in February 2014. The Maidan demonstrations were marred by violence from both the police and the protesters; more than 100 people died.

Since the Maidan protests, Ukraine has held parliamentary and presidential elections twice (in 2014 and 2019). After parliament removed Yanukovich from office in 2014, oligarch Petro Poroshenko was elected president. In 2019, there was a peaceful transfer of power from Poroshenko to his successor and currently incumbent President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

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<sup>3</sup> **Suggested explanation:** Oligarchs refer to people (mostly men) who became very rich through shady deals in the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many of them exert great influence on the politics of their countries through their wealth; the phenomenon exists in both Russia and Ukraine.

<sup>4</sup> **Suggested explanation:** Corruption is the term used to describe political decisions (e.g. of a parliament, a government, or a neighborhood administration) that can be 'bought'. Then the politicians do not decide in the sense of their opinion or party or in the sense of the interests of the people they represent. They decide what the person who pays them money wants.

<sup>5</sup> Maidan means 'square' in Ukrainian. The term is used because the demonstrations started on the Independence Square in Kyiv, in Ukrainian: Maidan nezalezhnosti.

## The Role of Russia

The Russian regime has not only closely monitored but also actively influenced developments in Ukraine. In February 2014, clearly in response to the ouster of Yanukovich as Ukrainian president, Russia annexed<sup>6</sup> the Crimean Peninsula. To do so, it first supported demonstrations in the Crimean Peninsula directed against the Maidan movement and advocating the rapprochement with Russia pushed by ousted President Yanukovich. Subsequently, Russian soldiers without nationality marking occupied Crimea's regional parliament. In March 2014, Putin declared that the Crimean Peninsula was immediately a new constituent state of Russia. Observers compared Russia's actions to the war in Georgia in August 2008<sup>7</sup>.

After the annexation of Crimea, demonstrations also occurred in other regions on the Ukrainian-Russian border because parts of the population disagreed with the removal of Yanukovich as president and preferred rapprochement with Russia to rapprochement with Europe; at times, demonstrators occupied government and administrative buildings. Russia used these protests to provoke further violence, sending partly armed volunteers and partly Russian soldiers to take control of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions by force. The Ukrainian government responded with armed force but lost control of part of its territory. Since then, an armed conflict of varying intensity has prevailed in parts of Ukraine. In February 2022, immediately prior to his attack on Ukraine, Putin recognized the Luhansk and Donetsk regions as independent states. This action is similar to the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states after the 2008 Caucasus War.

## The Role of the EU

The EU has closely monitored developments in Ukraine. Many governments have shown clear sympathy for protests against electoral fraud and corruption (2004) and against the breakaway from the EU, as well as against corruption (2013-14). Unlike Russia, the EU's role is less unified. On the one hand, this is because the EU is an association of states and its members shape their foreign policy partly independently. On the other hand, all members of the EU are democratic countries in which different opinions can be expressed and discussed. For example, there were and still are heated discussions about how to react to the developments in Ukraine and how to assess the role of Russia.

This is what the EU can agree on:

- The annexation of Crimea is assessed as a violation of international law and therefore the EU has imposed sanctions<sup>8</sup> on the new government in Crimea;
- Ukraine is a partner country of the EU in the so-called *Neighborhood Policy*. This means that it has not been eligible for the EU as a member so far, but nevertheless both parties would like to maintain closer relations with each other. Such closer relations can mean easier entry regulations for the residents of the neighboring country, closer economic relations etc. In return, the EU demands from its partner countries the strengthening of democracy, the

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<sup>6</sup> **Suggested explanation:** Annexation means the forcible and illegal appropriation of foreign territory (colloquially also conquest).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, radio report on parallels with the situation in Ukraine, URL: <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/schleichende-okkupation-was-georgien-mit-der-ukraine-gemein-hat-dlf-a0729c5b-100.html>, last accessed 02 March 2022.

<sup>8</sup> **Suggested explanation:** The word sanctions is used when speaking of a measure intended to enforce a certain behavior or to punish a certain behavior. There are political sanctions, for example, exclusion from international organizations or expulsion of diplomats, and economic sanctions, for example, freezing of accounts abroad.

holding of free elections and the fight against corruption. This relationship of the EU with countries bordering its territory is called *European Neighborhood Policy*.

## The Role of the USA and NATO

The USA and NATO are often mentioned in analyses. This is mainly for historical reasons, since the USA faced the Soviet Union for years during the so-called Cold War<sup>9</sup>.

The Soviet Union no longer exists today. As the largest successor state to the Soviet Union, Russia has inherited the role of the Soviet Union in certain areas. An important example is the possession of Soviet nuclear weapons. At the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, these were stationed not only in Russia but also in the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Belarus and Ukraine. In 1994, these three states renounced the nuclear weapons in favor of Russia. In return Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom signed a document in Budapest in 1994, guaranteeing the independent countries of Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Ukraine sovereignty and respect for existing national borders. Russia has clearly violated this document by annexing Crimea in 2014 and now by attacking all of Ukraine.

Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union stood alone in the Cold War. The U.S. formed the NATO defense alliance with like-minded countries; the Soviet Union formed the Warsaw Pact with many Eastern European countries. The Warsaw Pact was dissolved after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and thus the end of the Cold War in 1991. NATO not only remained in existence but was expanded: various former members of the Warsaw Pact sought to join NATO. Since 1999, many of these countries have joined NATO. Russia and NATO have organized their relations in the NATO-Russia Council since 1997.

Ukraine has long expressed interest in joining NATO. So far, NATO member states have been against it; however, Ukraine is a NATO partner and has participated in NATO military operations in the past. Since 2014, accession has been impossible because no country can join if it is currently engaged in warlike conflicts and does not have its entire territory under control. Because Ukraine is not a member of NATO, NATO did not intervene in the war, although it strongly condemns Russia's attack<sup>10</sup>. What NATO is doing right now is increasing its defense readiness in Ukraine's neighboring countries, many of which are NATO members.

## The Minsk Agreement and the OSCE

After the annexation of Crimea and the escalation of the conflicts in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions in 2014, efforts were launched to bring the conflicting parties to the table, to agree on a ceasefire and to achieve a peaceful resolution of the conflicts. The OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), of which all successor states to the Soviet Union (including Russia) are members, played an important role in this.

Mediated by the OSCE, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande negotiated with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin in the

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<sup>9</sup> **Suggested explanation:** The Cold War is the term used to describe the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union after the end of World War II. The war was 'cold' because the two countries did not directly use armed force against each other. Nevertheless, the tensions are called war, because the relations were very aggressive, and the countries often threatened each other with violence.

<sup>10</sup> NATO is a defensive alliance. If a NATO member is attacked, it is imperative that the alliance stand by its member, including by military means.

Belarusian capital of Minsk; on the OSCE side, Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini, among others, was responsible for the negotiations. The result of the negotiations was the Minsk agreements on a ceasefire as well as on regional elections in the conflict areas, after which Ukraine was to regain control over the regions. However, the ceasefire was broken within days of the agreement. Until the war began in February 2022, both Russia and Ukraine repeatedly referred to the Minsk agreements to underscore their demands. With the war, the agreements have now fully failed.

For which Reasons did Russia attack Ukraine?

What exactly the crucial factors were, we do not know. A war is not declared after a discussion in public, as we are used to decisions from our democratic governments. A war is ordered by the commander in chief of the army.

The events and developments in Russia and Ukraine described above provide clues as to what motivated Putin and his regime to attack Ukraine.

War as an instrument to stabilize Putin's authoritarian regime:

Democratically elected politicians lose their power if they lose elections. Authoritarian regimes such as that of Vladimir Putin do not have to fear being ousted from power in free elections, but they are nevertheless dependent on support at home. On the one hand, the political and economic elites are important; on the other hand, so is the population at large.

When a country wages war, it demands absolute loyalty - first and foremost, of course, from its soldiers, but secondly also from their families and the entire population, who suffer the consequences. The Russian attack on Ukraine was answered by the West with severe economic sanctions, which have destabilized the Russian economy within days. Russia and its inhabitants, even the richest among them, are isolated and so are important companies and banks. The political calculation of Putin and his regime in this situation is probably something that was called 'Burgfrieden' (literal translation from German: castle peace) in the Middle Ages: When a country (a 'castle') is at war with external parties, internal disputes are put aside to join all forces for war. Whether this calculation works out is currently an open question.

In Russia there are no mass demonstrations against the war, but many smaller political actions in various cities. Examples include not only demonstrations but also people quitting their jobs at state institutions in protest or spreading news and pictures from Ukraine that are not allowed to be shown by the Russian media.

War as an instrument to discourage democratic forces in Russia and its neighboring countries:

It is very difficult for the population to remove an autocratic regime. However, it is still a considerable effort for the regime to suppress protests, and if it resorts to violence in the process, it damages its reputation. Moreover, examples from nearby countries, including the Orange Revolution and the Maidan protests in Ukraine, show the Russian people that demonstrating can be worthwhile even in a country with a less established democracy. Putin and his regime want to do everything in their power to prevent democratic movements in countries in the immediate vicinity of Russia from succeeding and thus becoming role models for people in Russia and other neighboring countries, such as Belarus.

By stoking internal conflicts in countries like Georgia and Ukraine, and by instigating and now directly waging war, Putin is making it unmistakably clear that the consequences of demonstrations and democratic reforms are chaos, war, and the resulting poverty and lack of prospects.

## What happens Now?

The focus of this text was on the developments that help us to better understand the current events and to classify the news about them. It may well be that even after reading the text, many questions remain unanswered. As a starting point for the search for further answers and explanations, we have compiled a collection of materials (see next and following pages).

The question of where to go from here is on everyone's mind. And it is even more difficult to answer than the question of the reason for the war. We recommend two ways of dealing with this difficult situation:

- **Search for information on local initiatives** that support people in Ukraine or people who have fled Ukraine; for example, using the hashtag #StandWithUkraine on the Internet or via the nearest Ukrainian consulate or embassy.
- **Commit to democracy and human rights where you live:** Dramatic developments show that our liberal democracies cannot continue to exist without our intervention. Think about how you can participate democratically where you live.
- **Ask pressing questions:** We intend to compile a second part of this dossier in the form of a 'Question & Answer' document, researching or seeking materials to answer the most pressing questions of the moment.

Contact: [office@demokreative.ch](mailto:office@demokreative.ch)



# War in Ukraine.

## Collection of materials

Below you find some English language material that can serve as a starting point to learn more about the various backgrounds of the current war in Ukraine, and to keep updated.

You may also check the collection of German language materials in the German version of this dossier:

[https://www.demokrative.ch/images/Dossiers/Dossier\\_KriegUkraine\\_Demokrative\\_Ma%CC%88rz2022.pdf](https://www.demokrative.ch/images/Dossiers/Dossier_KriegUkraine_Demokrative_Ma%CC%88rz2022.pdf)

Current News:

- **News on BBC:**  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60525350>
- **UkraineAlert by the Atlantic Council:**  
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/category/blogs/ukrainealert/>
- **Ukraine under Attack by Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty:**  
<https://www.rferl.org/Ukraine-in-the-crosshairs>

Background:

- **International Crisis Group, commentaries and reports on various related topics:**  
<https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia>
- **«Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom»**  
Netflix-Documentary on the Maidan protest winter in 2013-14, freely available on youtube  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzNxLzFfR5w>

Background on specific topics:

- **Russian politics:**  
Background articles on a variety of topics related to Russia  
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/tagged/russia/>
- **Conflict and security:**  
Background articles on a variety of topics related to conflict and security, including articles on Russia-related wars in general and the Ukraine war in particular:  
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/tagged/conflict-security/>
- **NATO, expansion to Eastern Europe:**  
[https://www.democracynow.org/2022/3/1/nato\\_expansion\\_ukraine\\_russia\\_crisis](https://www.democracynow.org/2022/3/1/nato_expansion_ukraine_russia_crisis)
- **On parallels between Russia's war in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2022:**  
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/22/russia-ukraine-invasion-georgia-2008-south-ossetia-tskhinvali/>
- **Sanctions against Russia:**  
<https://correctiv.org/en/latest-stories/2022/03/01/sanctions-tracker-live-monitoring-of-all-sanctions-against-russia/>