

# Ukrainian political sociologist: This is a war of leadership failures at many levels

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**Volodymyr Ishchenko, a Ukrainian political sociologist, sees the Russian invasion as the consequence of a “crisis of hegemony” and failure of leadership both on the global level and inside Russia. He talks with Courthouse News.**

What drove Russian President Vladimir Putin to invade Ukraine? Why has war returned to Europe?

For [Volodymyr Ishchenko](#), a Ukrainian political sociologist at the Free University of Berlin, the [horrors of war](#) now destroying his country have come about by failures of leadership at multiple levels.

“On the global level, that’s actually the crisis of the United States’ hegemony,” Ishchenko said in a telephone interview with Courthouse News.

America’s failure as a world leader allowed Russia’s elites to see themselves as “somehow equal to the Western elites, to the American capitalists, to the European capitalists,” he said.

Focusing on the politics of post-Soviet societies, he said states that emerged from the Soviet bloc were defined by a lack of national leadership.

“My analysis of the post-Soviet transformations was exactly taking this point about the crisis of hegemony – capacity of the ruling class to lead the whole society, not simply to dominate it but to actually present themselves as actual leaders in the development of society,” he said.

He said those who came to rule in post-Soviet Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet bloc gained their power “through the stealing of the state.”

“When the Soviet Union was collapsing, those guys were basically stealing former state property and that’s how they amassed their wealth,” he said.

He said the West viewed post-Soviet elites as illegitimate and unequal. Inside their own nations, post-Soviet elites – many of whom amassed great wealth in a matter of months – also were not regarded as legitimate “even by their own citizens,” he said.

“We understand that there is massive mistrust among Russian citizens and the citizens in other post-Soviet countries toward their own elites,” he said. “There’s no legitimacy in that oligarchic wealth.”

Narrowing the lens even further, he said Russia has failed on the regional level to offer the old Soviet republics much reason to tie their futures in with Russia.

“It’s again the crisis of hegemony in the meaning of not being capable to present an attractive soft power project to the former Soviet peripheries: to the former Soviet republics, Ukraine, Belarus,

Kazakhstan, the Caucasian republics, Central Asia and so on," Ishchenko said.

"Russia, for 30 years, could not present anything comparable to American soft power, to the European Union's soft power – the power of attraction," he continued.

"Russia failed in doing this despite all the talk about Russian propaganda that influences the outcome of elections," he said. "It has proved to be much weaker even in the closest states, in the neighboring states, and that's why this Euromaidan Revolution" happened.

The roots of the war in Ukraine go back to the so-called "Euromaidan Revolution."

Over the winter of 2013 and 2014, a mass uprising broke out when former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych scrapped a deal to bring Ukraine into closer alignment with the EU and instead opted to deepen relations with Russia.

Protesters took over Maidan Square at the center of Kyiv in November 2013 and stayed for months. The uprising eventually turned violent under the influence of far-right radical nationalists.

The revolt was massively supported in western Ukraine, but also by many urban segments. In eastern and southern Ukraine, though, support was much weaker. Eventually, the violent uprising forced Yanukovych to flee to Russia and a pro-Western government was installed in Kyiv.

But the [tensions within Ukraine](#) only sharpened and worsened following the Euromaidan Revolution with Russia's annexation of Crimea and the breakout of armed conflict in Donbas, a region of eastern Ukraine. The war in Donbas carried on for eight years, killing about 14,000 civilians and forcing 2 million people from their homes.

Ishchenko said Russia decided to use coercion and military force to get its way in Ukraine.

"So we should see this invasion as the failure of soft power, the failure of anything like an attractive development project," he said. "Russia resorts to hard power."

He said Russia, lacking ideological or symbolic resources of enticement, is able to force its neighbors to remain under its influence only through the strength of its security apparatus and military.

"Even Belarus and Kazakhstan are sticking to Russia not because Russia proposes anything attractive to them, but because Russia was capable to support the regimes in [Belarus](#) and [Kazakhstan](#) during the recent revolutions," he said.

Ishchenko said Russia is in the midst of its own leadership crisis because the Putin regime is what he called a fundamentally unstable system based on paternalism and not on ideology.

"On the domestic level, it's also the crisis of hegemony," he said.

Russia, he said, is dealing with the problem of who will succeed Putin.

"At some point he must decide who will rule afterward; but at the same time, a smart successor could remove Putin before his age comes to the end," Ishchenko said. "So this is a very typical problem that is discussed in the literature about these kinds of regimes."

He said the "crisis of hegemony" has reached a climax.

"On the global level, it's not only about the threat, if it ever was, but it's also about an opportunity," he said.

He said Russia's elites have appointed themselves as the "representatives of the great Russian civilization" and its thousand-year history.

"This class of people who emerged in the post-Soviet Russia, they are asserting their co-equal status" to Western elites, he said.

He cited a document that Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping [signed only days](#) before the Ukraine invasion. The document argued that "the new global order should be democratized" by recognizing an "equal role of other so-called civilizations, Russian, Chinese and so on," Ishchenko said.

"But of course this is all based on claiming representation of some imagined community," he added.

Since Putin [launched the invasion](#) of Ukraine, debates have raged over why the Russian leader did what he did.

In the West, an equation, or narrative, has developed to explain what has happened: Putin is a new version of Adolf Hitler.

Like Hitler, this theory posits, Putin is a psychopath carrying out a fascist, blood-thirsty, imperialistic, nationalistic and revanchist ideology advanced by a school of right-wing and traditionalist Russian intellectuals and elites embodied by the figure of Alexander Dugin, an ultra-nationalistic anti-Western Russian philosopher dubbed "Putin's whisperer" by Western media. Many experts, though, say Dugin's influence is exaggerated.

Alternatively, there are many experts - and Russian elites, [including Putin](#) - who argue that the war in Ukraine is largely the fault of the United States and its insatiable, and ill-advised, push to expand NATO in such a way as to encircle Russia and thereby defeat it.

But Ishchenko doesn't subscribe to either theory.

"Starting from that general perception, is it ideology or is it geopolitics? I would say it's neither," he said.

He said the notion that Putin has become a deranged, isolated and reckless dictator imbued with a Russian fascist ideology lacks evidence and is based "on comments that one or two journalists were capable to get from their anonymous sources" close to the Kremlin.

"It is based on very hard to verify inside observations: Putin got isolated during the Covid pandemic because some insiders said this; he started to talk to some weird people with weird ideas who read weird, obscure writings by philosophers and that influenced his mind," he said. "But how would we actually, objectively, verify all these claims? And that's a problem for me."

Moreover, he said a defining characteristic of post-Soviet regimes is a lack of ideology.

"They have been very non-ideological, they've relied on patronage networks, patron-clientelistic relations and they are discussed in concepts like clans, financial industrial groups," he said.

"Ideologies in these regimes, in post-Soviet societies in general, were very weak, unarticulated, and there has been no real difference between right and left," he said, adding that politicians in such societies routinely switch parties. "So ideology used to be meaningless."

He said political parties and civil society in general are very weak in Russia, making it hard to

believe the Putin regime could blindly invade Ukraine because of some ideology that put their own power at risk.

He said NATO's expansion cannot explain the outbreak of war either.

"I see it not exactly like in that typical geopolitical story that NATO expanded and they promised Russia that it would not expand and then Russia felt betrayed and then it was automatically almost supposed to mean war in Ukraine," he said. "It is a very clichéd and superficial story."

From a geopolitical perspective, the invasion makes no sense, he said, because Ukraine was not going to become a member of NATO any time soon and the war is now likely going to push Finland and Sweden into joining NATO.

Instead, he said the invasion makes more sense from the point of view of domestic politics.

"The Russian regime could become stronger, more stable, it could become more ideological, more mobilizing," he said.

With the West banning all things Russian, he said the Putin regime may inculcate the feeling among Russians that they are under siege and "that it is now the whole Russian nation that is in danger."

"This aggressive war might turn into a kind war of defense for Russia," he said.

As Russia is ostracized by the West, the country is witnessing a wave of émigrés leave, but they are the very people most likely to back an overthrow of Putin.

"That's another problem solved," Ishchenko said. "Many protesting people are now outside of Russia and the protests against the war are very weak."

He said the Ukraine war may make the Russian regime more stable as it seeks to consolidate itself around an imperialistic and conservative ideology.

Since the invasion, he said, Russian intellectuals and scholars have advocated building a more ideological state.

"The war is not the outcome of some fanatical ideology and it's not simply this clichéd geopolitical story, kind of like an automatic relation to NATO expansion," he said. "No, the war is in the rational interests of the Russian ruling class. A stronger ideological regime might be an outcome of the war, not the other way round."

He said Russian elites want to "assert their status globally, to empower themselves regionally and to consolidate their power on the domestic level."

He continued: "They see this actually as an opportunity, not just as a risk. They see it as an opportunity to abandon Russian dependence on the West, to re-orient towards the global south markets - towards China, India, Africa - to start producing those products necessary for the Russian economy which were previously imported from the Western countries."

For Russian ideologists and experts loyal to the Kremlin, "a crisis is an opportunity to build a better state," he said.

He pointed to the recent writings of Dmitri Trenin, a prominent Russian political expert who was until recently the head of the Carnegie Moscow Center. Trenin was quoted regularly in the West.

“Trenin calls for a new edition of Russia,” Ischenko said, summarizing Trenin’s thinking. “He calls on Russia seize this opportunity, to exploit the crisis, the sanctions and the war in order to build a better state.”

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