



**CARTA**  
INTERNACIONAL

ASSOCIAÇÃO BRASILEIRA DE  
RELAÇÕES INTERNACIONAIS

ISSN 2526-9038

# Transforming Ukraine: state-society relations and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine<sup>1</sup>

*Transformando a Ucrânia:  
relações Estado-sociedade e a invasão  
russa à Ucrânia de 2022*

*Transformando Ucrania: relaciones  
Estado-sociedad y la invasión rusa a  
Ucrania de 2022*

DOI: 10.21530/ci.v20n3.2025.1578

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## Abstract

This article analyzes Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, seeking to explain the motivations behind Russia's decision to carry out this action. With a perspective that draws attention to great powers' perceptions about the connections between other states' domestic politics and the global balance of power, the paper argues that Russia, with the 2022 invasion, sought to reverse trends in state-society relations in Ukraine which influenced both foreign and domestic policies in a direction that Moscow considered detrimental to its interests regarding Ukraine.

**Keywords:** Russo-Ukrainian War, State-society Relations, Great Powers.

- 1 This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Finance Code 001.
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Artigo submetido em 07/05/2025 e aprovado em 10/02/2026.





## Resumo

Este artigo analisa a invasão russa em larga escala à Ucrânia de 2022, objetivando explicar as motivações por trás da decisão da Rússia em realizar tal ação. Com uma perspectiva que chama atenção para as percepções das grandes potências sobre as ligações entre a política doméstica de outros Estados e o equilíbrio de poder internacional, o trabalho argumenta que a Rússia, com a invasão de 2022, buscou reverter tendências nas relações Estado-sociedade na Ucrânia que influenciavam as políticas doméstica a externa do país de um maneira considerada por Moscou como prejudicial para seus interesses quanto à Ucrânia.

**Palavras-chave:** Guerra Russo-Ucraniana, Relações Estado-sociedade, Grandes potências.

## Resumen

Este artículo analiza la invasión rusa a gran escala a Ucrania de 2022, con el objetivo de explicar las motivaciones detrás de la decisión de Rusia de realizar tal acción. Con una perspectiva que llama la atención sobre las percepciones de las grandes potencias sobre los vínculos entre la política interna de otros estados y el equilibrio internacional de poder, el artículo sostiene que Rusia, con la invasión de 2022, buscó revertir tendencias en las relaciones Estado-sociedad en Ucrania que influenciaban las políticas interna y externa del país de una manera que Rusia consideraba perjudicial para sus intereses en Ucrania.

**Palabras clave:** Guerra Ruso-ucraniana, Relaciones Estado-Sociedad, Grandes potencias.

## 1. Introduction

Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine generated heated debates about the reasons why Vladimir Putin's government carried out this action. Explanations in the literature can be divided into three main currents: realist, liberal and empire.

Realism in International Relations (IR) is an internally diverse theoretical tradition. Nevertheless, it is possible to summarize that realist interpretations tend to revolve around the following logic: Russia, regardless of its domestic political characteristics, felt challenged by changes in the balance of power, primarily related to material capabilities, in its neighborhood posed by Ukraine's rapprochement with the West (mainly with regard to Ukraine's possible NATO accession) (Mearsheimer 2022; Walt 2023). From an offensive realist point of





view, given the inherent uncertainties regarding other states' intentions, as well as a cost-benefit assessment of military actions, Russia's decisions to invade and annex Ukrainian territories reflected states' inexorable tendency to expand their power and strategic advantages in conditions assessed as favorable (Dawood and Costa 2024; Sushentsov and Wohlforth 2020). Following a defensive realist logic, in turn, Russia's actions could be interpreted as a reactive, limited attempt to preserve Moscow's claimed sphere of influence and strategic positions in the face of the perceived threat posed by Western encroachment (D'Anieri 2019).

Unlike Realism's tendency to downplay the importance of domestic factors, one of the main features of the Liberal IR paradigm is the idea that states' foreign policies reflect their internal characteristics (Pecequilo 2016). This means the theoretical acceptance that ideas, interests, and power coalitions coming from society can strongly influence state policies (Moravcsik 1997). In this regard, liberal interpretations on Russia's Ukraine policy have focused primarily on the political regime issue. According to this logic, states with liberal democratic features tend to be more peaceful, since these factors would accustom their society and leaders to cooperative and non-violent foreign policy behavior. Conversely, states with authoritarian political regimes, in the absence of liberal democratic values and institutions, tend towards a more aggressive foreign policy behavior, facilitated by the lack of domestic checks and balances in relation to rulers (Pecequilo 2016). An important consequence of this approach is the thesis that authoritarian leaders tend to see liberal democracy as a potential threat to their rule. Accordingly, liberal arguments commonly maintain that, by launching the invasion, Putin aimed to consolidate his authoritarian rule by using narratives of conflict against Ukraine and the West (Ferraro 2023), as well as to eliminate a perceived threat posed by the existence of a democracy in Ukraine (Person and McFaul 2022).

Finally, empire perspectives see Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion essentially as an imperialist undertaking. Imperialism can be understood as the exercise of power through direct conquest or forms of political and economic influence that amount to the domination of a political center over peripheral spaces (Young 2016). Empire-centered interpretations therefore can be related to the realist understanding of spheres of influence and tend to argue that, by launching the 2022 full-scale invasion, Russia sought exactly to establish such kind of imperial(ist) control over Ukraine. Importantly, according to such views, Russia's moves were driven mainly by Putin's Russian imperial ideology which denies





the historical validity of Ukrainian statehood and seeks to bring Ukraine “back” to Russia’s control (Kuzio 2022; Plokhly 2023).

These interpretations provide valuable contributions to understanding Russia’s actions, but also have some shortcomings. It is true that Russia has claimed a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, including Ukraine, ever since the Boris Yeltsin presidency (1991-1999) (D’Anieri 2023), showing a typical great power behavior. However, realist arguments have also been questioned. Although NATO did not revoke its 2008 promise to admit Ukraine at some undefined moment, the prospects of Ukraine’s actual accession were manifestly uncertain and distant on the eve of the 2022 invasion. Furthermore, although Ukraine’s military had been strengthening with Western support, Ukraine continued to have serious military disadvantages compared to Russia (D’Anieri 2023). Finally, contrary to Russia’s claims, there is no indication that Ukraine was intent on launching a large-scale offensive against the pro-Russian separatist polities in eastern Ukraine (Strana.ua 2023). These factors raise questions about the thesis of an imminent threat to Russia from the military standpoint if one accepts the defensive realist argument. True, one could argue, according to an offensive realist logic, that from Russia’s perspective the military imbalance in Moscow’s favor could actually present an opportunity. However, this reasoning raises the question of why Russia did not launch the full-scale invasion in 2014-2015 instead, when the Ukrainian state was in acute disarray and its military even weaker.

Concerning liberal views, domestic actors’ interests and worldviews have strongly influenced Russia’s and Ukraine’s foreign policies. However, the regime type argument is debatable in the case of Russia’s invasion: although Ukraine did maintain stronger democratic features than Russia, the liberal thesis about an authoritarianism vs. democracy conflict can be questioned considering authoritarian tendencies in Ukraine since 2014 under the influence of the conflict with Russia (Way 2019). As for the regime strengthening thesis, evidence indicates the 2022 invasion contributed to strengthening Putin’s rating and domestic power (Ferraro 2023). However, already prior to the 2022 invasion, the Putin regime had high approval rates and drastically reduced potential dissent in Russia by repressing domestic opposition (D’Anieri 2023), meaning that Putin already enjoyed a favorable domestic situation. This situation is consistent with the idea that the lack of institutional constraints increases the autonomy of an authoritarian executive to pursue war. However, it says little about the motivations, strategy and goals that guided Russia’s 2022 invasion in the first place.





Finally, the idea that Ukraine is a key component of Russia's imperial experience, and therefore that Ukraine should be subject to some kind of Russian control, is in fact widespread in Russian elite and society (Kasyanov 2019,; Solchanyk 2001,). However, empire interpretations often over-emphasize the ideological setting of the Putin elite itself, while not giving due attention to its interaction with developments in Ukraine's foreign and domestic policy and their role in the assessed balance of power.

Taking into account these considerations, this article proposes an alternative explanation about Russia's 2022 invasion. It argues that with the 2022 invasion, Russia sought to reverse transformations in Ukraine state-society relations that affected both Ukraine's foreign and domestic policies in a way seen by Moscow as detrimental to its power interests.

This approach draws on a Gramscian perspective on state-society relations, according to which the state acts to adapt society to ideas and behaviors aligned with the political order favored by ruling groups. The achievement of these goals occurs through two distinct, but connected dimensions. The first one makes use of bureaucratic and coercive tools of the state—the “political society”—, which aim to imbue state actions with a mandatory character over society. The second, in its turn, occurs through hegemony, understood as the ability to secure consent to the political order through adhesion and concessions. This dimension is associated with the concept of “civil society,” a sphere where organizations outside state control disseminate ideologies with hegemonic aspirations (Gramsci 2007). Such organizations include political parties, unions, religious organizations and media outlets.

Unlike liberal thought, which emphasizes the precedence of social actors over the state (Moravcsik 1997), this article's approach draws on historical sociology's attention to the co-constitution between state and society, as social forces can reinforce or challenge state policies, whereas the state's bureaucratic-coercive power, in turn, regulates social life. Modern states have played a crucial role in consolidating national identities through educational, linguistic, and cultural policies, whilst various states themselves emerged from revolutions and national movements emanating from society (Tilly 1994). More generally, changes in the domestic balance of power among social groups, as well as transformations in ideological attitudes and economic structure have had a major impact on state form and policies (Cox 1981; Halliday 1994). Therefore, these historical phenomena indicate the need for a broader understanding of power in international politics,





which, in addition to material factors, includes the dimensions of ideology—a set of ideas, norms and values believed to make sense of the world and guide social relations—and regulation—a state’s ability to regulate social life in a centralized and territorialized manner (Mann 2012).

Due to such international implications, state-society relations in a given region have often aroused the interest of foreign states, especially great powers. This has driven interference through political, economic, and military support for political actors — either government or non-government ones — in the territory of interest, as illustrated in the various cases of foreign support for *coups d’état* and secessionist movements (Halliday 1994). Examples include the armed interventions carried out by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, which aimed to transform political institutions, affect elite power balance (by overthrowing unfriendly actors and installing friendly ones in power), and influence the circulation of ideologies abroad. Such actions have often occurred in neighboring territories considered to be of strategic importance by intervening states. The transformational goals of these interventions in terms of state-society relations evidence a perceived connection between this factor and the balance of power (Lawson and Tardelli 2013; Owen IV 2002; Westad 2007).

Several authors have drawn attention to the implications of the state-society factor for Russia’s Ukraine policy. The decrease of the political influence of pro-Russian forces, the failure of the Minsk process and the strengthening of Ukrainian national identity and state policies promoting it in 2014-2021 have been particularly highlighted (D’Anieri 2023; Kudelia 2025; Ishchenko 2023; Popova and Shevel 2024). Others stressed that Russia’s interests encompass not only Kyiv’s geopolitical reorientation, but also reshaping Ukraine’s domestic political order in a Russia-friendly way (Stanovaya 2025). Employing a Gramsci-inspired approach, Volodymyr Ishchenko (2023) argued that the predominance of the nationalist and pro-Western development model in Ukraine since the Maidan resulted to a significant extent from the inability of certain sectors of the Ukrainian elite to articulate, in the civil society sphere, an alternative national development project with domestic and foreign policies more consonant with Russia’s interests.

This article contributes to this literature by providing an analysis of Russian thinking and policies regarding state-society relations in Ukraine as a broader historical process throughout the post-Soviet period. Furthermore, it also analyzes how the Russian government and its supporters positioned themselves on this





issue since the beginning of the 2022 full-scale invasion. Finally, from an IR theoretical perspective, the article refines aspects of the realist (the notions of balance of power and spheres of influence), liberal (the influence of domestic actors) and empire (great powers' tendency to strive for control over peripheral spaces) interpretations with the inputs of its state-society approach.

Considering the historical particularities of Russian-Ukrainian relations, this article analyzes Russia's thinking and policies regarding two central dimensions of state-society relations in Ukraine: the exercise of state power, in the sphere of political society, and hegemonic disputes, in the sphere of civil society. In methodological terms, the first dimension directs the analysis to Russia's approach regarding Ukraine's policies in the following areas: state structure, political competition, foreign policy and national identity. The second, in turn, focuses on the ideological setting in Ukrainian society, considering the prospects for ideological hegemony and the rise to power of different social forces in the country. This involves analyzing the actions and programs of relevant political parties and other actors in Ukrainian society, and how Russia interacted with these factors. Public opinion trends in Ukraine are also analyzed. In view of these, the article argues that trends and events in both dimensions influenced Russia's balance of power assessments and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

## **2. Shaping independent Ukraine: Russia between Yeltsin's moderation and nationalist expansionism (1991-1999)**

Debates in Russia have seen involvement in state-society dynamics as a key factor in ensuring Russian influence in the post-Soviet space. Already in 1992, the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP), a leading think tank known for its connections with Russia's political elite, advocated the development of relations with Russians and Russian speakers in the region. The guarantee of their rights was described as an important goal, with the use of force to achieve it not being ruled out. Furthermore, the SVOP recommended that Russia strengthen relations with foreign actors who advocated policies in line with Russian regional interests (SVOP 1992).

From this point of view, Ukraine seemed a promising target. According to the 2001 census, ethnic Russians were 17% of Ukraine's population, concentrated in the south and east, with Russians being a 60% majority in Crimea. An even





larger share spoke mostly Russian, mainly in southeastern Ukraine—where demands for regional autonomy, an official status for Russian, and participation in Russia-led regional projects were common (Solchanyk 2001). Furthermore, in the 1990s many Ukrainians attributed the country's economic decline to the severance of ties with Russia. In Ukraine's 1994 presidential election, Leonid Kuchma, an eastern Ukrainian who campaigned advocating the restoration of ties with Russia and making Russian a state language, won the election with a massive vote in the south-east (D'Anieri 2023,; Solchanyk 2001). In Crimea, whose 1954 transfer to Soviet Ukraine was widely contested in Russia, a movement with pro-Russian inclinations, including supporters of territorially joining Russia, threatened Ukraine's integrity.

In this context, prominent Russian politicians and intellectuals, particularly Yeltsin's opponents, advocated for the development of ties with Russians and Russian speakers, and an active involvement in efforts at shaping Ukrainian state-society relations (Klimin 2009). In this regard, proposals by Konstantin Zatulin, the main ideologue of Russia's Ukraine policy in parliament, are illustrative. Zatulin argued that Russia should support a pro-Russian political bloc in Ukraine and that only a federalized Ukraine, with an empowered autonomous south-east, would make Ukraine a Russia-friendly country (Zatulin and Migranyan 1997). This highlights the perception that Moscow should interfere in the state-society co-constitution driven by the interplay between the political society (changing Ukraine's state structure by empowering southeastern provinces) and the civil society (supporting pro-Russian actors in Ukraine) to ensure a Russia-friendly order in Ukraine.

To some extent, the Yeltsin government engaged in efforts to shape Ukrainian state-society relations, as illustrated by the 1997 Russian-Ukrainian Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership, which resulted in mutual commitments to protect ethnic, language and cultural identities. However, Yeltsin's approach differed from the more interventionist ones. Ukraine's 1996 constitution, while defining Ukrainian as the sole state language, guaranteed the free use of Russian and the equality of citizens regardless of ethnicity. Nonetheless, many Russian politicians accused Ukraine of suppressing Russian identity and language, demanding stronger guarantees for their protection. Yeltsin's Russia at times did criticize Ukraine's policies, but did not embrace a more interventionist approach (Klimin 2009). These differences were also present in the Crimea question. While the Russian parliament adopted declarations questioning Ukrainian sovereignty and





even claiming jurisdiction in Crimea, Yeltsin committed to Ukraine's territorial integrity, contributing to a form of regional autonomy that did not challenge Ukraine's unitary state structure (Sasse 2007).

### **3. Intensified engagement: the Putin era (2000-2013)**

Vladimir Putin's presidency was a turning point in Russia's foreign policy, owing to Putin's ideological profile, strong economic growth in the 2000s, and developments in Russia-Ukraine and Russia-West relations. Central to Putin's worldview is the defense of Russia's great power status, including through military power. In domestic politics, Putin promoted greater state control of the economy, administrative centralization and regime primacy over political processes (Sakwa 2020). Therefore, Russia was capable and willing to pursue a more assertive foreign policy, with Putin considering Russian influence over Ukraine a priority (Zygar 2023).

This was illustrated in Ukraine's 2004 presidential election, when Russia supported the candidate of the Party of Regions (PoR), Viktor Yanukovich, with public appearances with Putin and the work of Kremlin-aligned political strategists in his campaign (Petrov and Ryabov 2006). The main party of the pro-Russian electorate, the PoR was led mainly by the Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts) political-oligarchic clan. It advocated for policies such as keeping Ukraine out of NATO (D'Anieri 2023), with Yanukovich's campaign also stressing the officialization of the Russian language and the free functioning of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church — Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), which had links with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). In contrast, Yanukovich's rival, Viktor Yushchenko, was a pro-Western candidate who identified with Ukrainian nationalist views in identity issues. While the election held in November 2004 was won by Yanukovich with a massive vote in southeastern Ukraine, evidence of large-scale fraud led to the Orange Revolution protests, concentrated in Kyiv, central and western Ukraine. Putin recognized Yanukovich's victory, while the Western powers supported the protesters' demands. Another election round was held, won by Yushchenko. However, this solution was made possible by a compromise whereby the presidential powers would be reduced, meaning the PoR elite could retain power through parliament and the post of prime minister (Arel and Driscoll 2023). This compromise appeased more radical ideas, such





as the threat, raised at the PoR-led November 2004 Sievierodonetsk Congress, of establishing an autonomous republic in southeastern Ukraine with possible Russian support (Arel and Driscoll 2023; Skhidnyi Variant 2009).

Nonetheless, the outcome of the Orange Revolution intensified Russia's view of a great power struggle over Ukraine, heightening the perceived urgency of engaging in Ukrainian state-society relations. In 2005, Zatulin, member of United Russia — the party supporting Putin — reiterated that only a federalized Ukraine, with Russian as a state language and united UOC-MP and ROC, could guarantee long-term friendly relations with Russia (Zatulin 2005). Importantly, the PoR and United Russia strengthened their ties in Donbas, while members of the Putin elite established relations with other pro-Russian actors in eastern Ukraine (Skorkin 2016). Furthermore, Russia maintained ties with the head of Kuchma's presidential cabinet (2002—2005), Viktor Medvedchuk, who became Putin's closest partner in Ukraine (Zygar 2023). Segments of Ukrainian civil society were seen as potential Russian allies against Yushchenko, for instance regarding NATO accession: a SVOP working group recommended that Russian NGOs support Ukrainian civil society actors opposed to it and suggested a referendum on the issue (Belkin 2008) at a time when opposition was the prevalent position in Ukraine.

Yushchenko also sought to create an independent Orthodox Church in Ukraine, separated from the ROC. Many Ukrainians believed this would diminish the hegemonic potential of pro-Russian forces, strengthening Ukrainian national identity. Additionally, Ukraine's memory policies under Yushchenko advocated that the 1930s famine was a genocide perpetrated by the Soviet regime, and that members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its armed wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), were national heroes. The OUN-UPA were anti-Soviet, radical nationalist organizations centered in the west of contemporary Ukraine which sought independence during the interwar and World War II (WWII) periods. Members of the OUN-UPA persecuted other nationalities (particularly Jews and Poles) and at times allied with Nazi Germany (Popova and Shevel 2024), facts which are often glossed over or denied by their supporters. Russia strongly opposed these policies, especially as the Putin regime sought to consolidate society around the idea of Russia as the heir to Soviet greatness and WWII victory. The Russian government considered that Yushchenko's use of state power to advance such identity policies aimed to weaken Russian influence in Ukraine (Kasyanov 2019).





In 2008, Putin ally Dmitry Medvedev became Russia's president. Despite his reputation as a liberal and westernist, Medvedev continued Putin's regional approach (Tsygankov 2022). This was evidenced in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, whose secession hampered Georgia's NATO accession. Importantly, Moscow strengthened its claims to be the protector of Russians and Russian speakers abroad by framing its actions as a humanitarian intervention to protect its citizens (a large share of South Ossetia's inhabitants had Russian citizenship) and recognizing South Ossetia's (and Abkhazia's) independence invoking self-determination. Further evidencing the perceived importance of state-society relations as an element of the balance of power, Medvedev believed that parts of Ukrainian society could effectively become Russia's allies in countering state-promoted pro-NATO and nationalist identity policies under Yushchenko. Medvedev even publicly stated the hope for a new leadership in Ukraine (Medvedev 2009) and sources indicate that Russia took steps to facilitate an alliance between Yanukovych and Yulia Tymoshenko against Yushchenko (Zygar 2023).

Russia's prospects in Ukraine improved after Yanukovych was elected president in 2010 with no ostensible Russian involvement beyond United Russia publicly declaring support for the PoR candidate (United Russia 2009). The Yanukovych government, although developing relations with the European Union (EU), declared Ukraine's military neutrality and authorized the extension of the Russian Black Sea fleet's basing rights in Crimea. Furthermore, Yushchenko's WWII memory approach was replaced by policies closer to Russian perspectives. Finally, in 2012, the so-called Kivalov-Kolesnichenko law was passed, allowing the official use of Russian at the regional level. Therefore, although the PoR abandoned its federalist discourse, Ukrainian state-society relations under Yanukovych moved closer to Moscow's preferences.

#### **4. From crisis to full-scale invasion: the Maidan and Russia's attempt to transform Ukraine by force (2013-2025)**

With Putin's return to presidency in 2012, Russian foreign policy gained more conservative and nationalist tones, as well as a more confrontational attitude towards the West. This was due to factors like the 2011-2012 protests in Russia, which Putin saw as instigated by the US, and Western interference





in the Middle East. This approach was reflected on Russia's intensified efforts at military strengthening, especially after the 2014 Ukraine crisis, as well as at leading regional integration projects (Sakwa 2020; Tsygankov 2022). In this context, Russia sought to attract Ukraine to its orbit by influencing Ukrainian state-society dynamics.

Leaks and journalistic investigations indicate Putin aide Sergey Glaziev authored a plan which proposed establishing a sort of pro-Russian movement in Ukraine in support of Kyiv's adhesion to the Russia-led Customs Union. This movement would include leaders from southeastern Ukraine, UOC-MP adepts, and members of the more pro-Russian wing of the PoR (Dzerkalo tyzhnia 2013). In 2013, Glaziev and Medvedchuk held conferences in Ukraine promoting Russia-led regional initiatives (Skorkin 2016), while Glaziev threatened an armed intervention connected to appeals by pro-Russian Ukrainians should Kyiv sign an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU (D'Anieri 2023,). Uncertain about the economic benefits of the EU deal, and under intense Russian pressure, Yanukovich suspended AA negotiations in November 2013 (D'Anieri 2023; Sakwa 2015). This decision led to the Maidan protests led by pro-Western segments of Ukrainian society, which also reflected discontent with authoritarianism and state capture under Yanukovich. With repression by the authorities and the radicalization of the movement, the Maidan began to seek Yanukovich's departure from power. Russia, in turn, sought to sustain Yanukovich by providing economic support (D'Anieri 2023) and, according to Ukrainian sources, weapons used by Ukrainian security forces to suppress the protests (Koshkina 2015). However, Yanukovich was eventually deposed by the parliament in February 2014, an action considered by Moscow as a West-instigated *coup d'état*. A new interim government composed of PoR opponents came to power, while Yanukovich fled to Russia.

The Maidan also worried Moscow due to the presence of Ukrainian nationalism. Despite being a minority, Ukrainian far-right groups of anti-Russian orientation played an important role in the protests (D'Anieri 2023, 206), leading individuals from this milieu to take up some positions in the interim government, including in security (Sakwa 2015). Furthermore, the Kivalov-Kolesnichenko law was repealed in parliament. Although not approved by acting president Oleksandr Turchynov, the repeal foreshadowed that Ukrainian state-society relations would move away from Russian preferences. To counter this, Russia supported pro-Russian protesters in southeastern Ukraine who opposed the Maidan. They voiced demands like the officialization of the Russian language, regional autonomy, federalization or





even secession, while appealing for Russia's support (Arel and Driscoll 2023; Kudelia 2025). In February 2014, actors from the southeastern elite organized a Sievierodonetsk-like congress in Kharkiv claiming the primacy of regional authorities over Kyiv. The congress was attended by Russian politicians and the consul in Kharkiv (Mediaport 2014). In March 2014, a Russian government plan proposed solving the crisis through measures directed both at the political and civil societies, including Ukraine's federalization and military neutrality, making Russian a state language and curbing Ukrainian nationalist organizations (Russia 2014). At the same time, claiming to protect Russians, Russian speakers and their right to self-determination, Russia allied with sectors of Crimea's elite to annex the region amid pro-Russian manifestations (Arel and Driscoll 2023). In the post-annexation period, pro-Ukrainian intelligentsia largely left Crimea, while thousands of Russians settled in the region. There was also a significant exodus of Crimean Tatars, with pro-Kyiv Tatar institutions and leaders being harassed (Lewis 2025; Matveeva 2018).

Outside Crimea, pro-Russian secessionism failed in southeastern Ukraine, as regional elites remained mostly loyal to the Ukrainian state and popular support for secession and annexation by Russia was far lower (Arel and Driscoll 2023). Donbas, the region with the highest rate of support for annexation by Russia outside Crimea — estimated at about 30% in April 2014 (KIIS 2014)—and site of a greater degree of elite passivity or defection to pro-Russian secessionism (Kudelia 2025), was the single exception to this rule. In April 2014, separatists declared the founding of the pro-Russian Donetsk (DNR) and Luhansk (LNR) People's Republics. With Ukraine's military response to the armed secessionist insurgency, events in Donbas developed into a war.

Support for the Donbas separatists came from Russia in various forms. For example, leaks and journalistic investigations indicate Russian officials and politicians provided guidance to separatists. Furthermore, Russian citizens—including from nationalist and far-right circles—joined the Donbas insurgency. Finally, Russia, in addition to providing weapons to DNR/LNR forces, directly intervened militarily in Donbas in 2014 and early 2015 (Hauter 2023; Kudelia 2025).

Attempts to end the conflict centered on the Minsk platform, launched in 2014. The February 2015 Minsk Agreement (Minsk II), signed by Russia, Ukraine, and DNR and LNR leaders, provided for the reintegration of the DNR/LNR-controlled territories into the Ukrainian state with autonomy and local security forces (OSCE 2015). The DNR and LNR kept control over a significant portion of Donbas,





including regional capitals Donetsk and Luhansk, with Russia providing military and economic support and consolidating its role in the political management of these areas (Kudelia 2025; Matveeva 2018). Despite occasional ceasefire disruptions, the Minsk II frontlines generally held until Russia's 2022 invasion.

After the Maidan, the idea of the political empowerment of the south-east and of pro-Russian political forces in Ukraine gained renewed strength in Russia (Lukyanov 2014). These proposals were even more important for Russia considering the consequences of the 2014 events. First, the annexation of Crimea and the *de facto* secession of DNR/LNR-controlled areas removed a significant share of the pro-Russian electorate from Ukrainian politics (D'Anieri 2023). Second, according to opinion polls, negative views on Russia in Ukraine jumped from an average 8% to almost 43% after the 2014 events; positive views, in turn, fell from around 86% to 42% (KIIS 2022). Additionally, polls showed growing support for EU and NATO accession (Popova and Shevel 2024),<sup>3</sup> with Ukraine making these constitutional goals. In parallel, the Ukrainian military began to strengthen and modernize with Western support (D'Anieri 2023), and Western influence grew in Ukrainian politics.

There was also growing adherence to Ukrainian national identity and nationalism (Popova and Shevel, 2024); despite their poor electoral performance, Ukrainian nationalist groups became influential political actors, often with close ties to the state (Arel and Driscoll 2023). Nationalist narratives became increasingly accepted in mainstream politics, as illustrated by laws that recognized OUN-UPA members as Ukraine independence fighters and equated Soviet socialism with WWII Nazi occupation as totalitarian regimes. Furthermore, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine was established in 2019 with state support as an autocephalous church aspiring to replace the UOC-MP, a move strongly condemned by Russia. Finally, new legislation promoting the Ukrainian language was adopted (D'Anieri 2023; Popova and Shevel 2024). These intertwined trends in Ukrainian political and civil society created serious challenges to Russian interests in Ukraine.

To counter these trends, Russia's Ukraine strategy relied primarily on the reintegration of DNR/LNR-controlled areas, aiming to increase the presence of pro-Russian leaders and voters in Ukrainian politics. Achieving these goals, however, proved difficult. Ever since Petro Poroshenko's presidency (2014-2019), Ukraine

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<sup>3</sup> While the exclusion of Crimea and DNR/LNR-controlled areas contributed to such results, similar trends, considering regional differences, were also observed in Kyiv-controlled south-east.





was reluctant to implement Minsk II's reintegration provisions, which were rejected by a large share of Ukrainian society and political elite that considered the country to be at war with Russia. From this perspective, the reintegration of separatist-controlled regions would effectively mean the establishment of a Russian enclave in Ukraine (Arel and Driscoll 2023).

Another key feature of Russia's strategy was to support a pro-Russian force in Ukrainian party politics. Journalistic investigations allege that Russia was involved in efforts to form an alliance between Medvedchuk and former PoR politicians (Koshkina 2018). In 2018, the Opposition Platform — For Life (OPZZh) party was created, centered on an alliance between Medvedchuk and a faction of the PoR and later the Opolobok, a PoR successor party, led by Yuri Boiko and Serhiy Lyovochkin. The OPZZh advocated the protection of the Russian language, memory policies opposed to the post-Maidan line, the free functioning of the UOC-MP, Ukraine's military neutrality and the implementation of Minsk II stressing Donbas autonomy (OPZZh n.d.). Russian support for OPZZh was evidenced by Russian state media links with Medvedchuk-linked TV channels, as well as by Russian officials' meetings with OPZZh leaders during Ukrainian electoral campaigns. Moscow also imposed sanctions on Opolobok members who did not join the OPZZh.

Volodymyr Zelensky's coming to power as president of Ukraine in 2019 raised expectations of changes, as Zelensky stressed the need for a negotiated peace in Donbas and avoided controversial national identity issues. Another hope for Russia was the OPZZh's electoral results: coming second in the 2019 parliamentary election, behind only Zelensky's Servant of the People party (though far away); and winning several southeastern oblasts in the 2020 regional elections. However, amid strong internal opposition, Zelensky adopted an approach similar to Poroshenko's regarding the Minsk process (D'Anieri 2023; Ishchenko 2023) and made no major changes in the post-Maidan line of identity policies (Plochy 2023). Ukrainian state-society relations kept distancing from Putin's interests, taking a drastic worsening in 2021. In February, Ukrainian authorities blocked Medvedchuk-linked TV channels under accusations of illegal relations with Donbas separatists and Russian funding (D'Anieri, 2023; Popova and Shevel 2024). Medvedchuk and members of his OPZZh wing were also targeted by Ukrainian sanctions and, in May 2021, Medvedchuk was put under house arrest on charges of treason by illegally cooperating with Russia. In the aftermath of these measures, OPZZh's positions in Ukrainian politics significantly deteriorated.





Throughout 2021, Ukrainian sanctions also targeted other politicians and media outlets accused of advocating pro-Russian positions.

Evidences indicate these measures played a key role in Russia's balance of power assessments. From the state-society co-constitution standpoint, they pointed to a path of unprecedented restrictions on political and hegemonic competition for actors who could influence Ukraine's state policies in ways favored by Russia. Shortly after Medvedchuk's arrest, Putin denounced the Ukrainian authorities' actions, claiming they aimed to suppress pro-Russian segments of Ukrainian society (Russia 2021). Russia also began a military buildup along the Ukraine border (D'Anieri, 2023). Russian elite forces engaged in drills whose scenario was the seizure of "enemy structures" (Shuster 2024), indicating possible preparations for a regime change operation in Ukraine. In parallel, as skirmishes intensified in Donbas, a new security crisis arose. US-Russia talks led to an easing of tensions in the first half of 2021, but Russia kept troops near the Ukrainian border. In late 2021, Russia renewed the escalation by launching large-scale military drills (Arel and Driscoll 2023). Russia also submitted draft security agreements to the US and NATO seeking, among other proposals, a commitment that Ukraine would not join NATO. Negotiations, however, did not lead to the outcomes desired by Moscow. Days before the 2022 invasion, urgent Minsk platform negotiations failed to change Kyiv's position on the Donbas war, which further irritated Moscow (Solov'ev 2022).

Since 2014, amid tensions with Ukraine, nationalism was rising in Russia too, with a growing delegitimization of the idea of independent Ukraine in Russian official discourse (Plokyh 2023). In this regard, the July 2021 "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians" article signed by Putin was a landmark. The text has been most often remembered for the presence of Russian imperial-nationalist theses challenging the historical foundations of Ukrainian national identity and statehood (Plokyh 2023). However, another key feature of the article has gone largely unnoticed: Putin argued that the rise of Russia-friendly forces to power and the implementation of the Minsk platform were made impossible by an anti-Russian alliance between Ukrainian nationalism and Western geopolitical interests. Putin further claimed that Ukrainian state and society were transforming along nationalist and anti-Russian lines, posing an acute security threat to Russia (Putin 2021).

The aforementioned string of events was likely perceived by Putin as the ultimate failure of Russia's 2014-2021 Ukraine strategy, leading Russia to launch





the 2022 full-scale invasion to impose its control over Ukraine. Pointing to the importance of the state-society factor, Russia's regime change goal in the invasion was evidenced by military operations towards Kyiv and Putin's public appeal for the Ukrainian military to overthrow Zelensky (Russia 2022). Both before and during the war, Western intelligence and journalistic investigations have alleged that Russia was intent on installing a puppet government in Ukraine to be led by Medvedchuk and members of his OPZZh wing or former PoR politicians like Yanukovich and Oleg Tsariov (United States 2022; Kravets and Romanyuk 2023; Strana.ua 2022). Russia is also said to have demanded Yuri Boiko's appointment as prime minister in peace negotiations, which was denied by Boiko and the OPZZh (Gordon 2022). Ukrainian military resistance has prevented Russia from imposing a regime change in Kyiv, but Russia still claims Zelensky is an illegitimate leader, suggesting Moscow's continuing interest in a leadership change in Ukraine.

During the war, pro-Putin intellectuals and politicians have often drawn attention to the state-society factor, arguing that Russia's victory should include not only Ukraine's military defeat, geopolitical reorientation and territorial dismemberment, but also the dissemination of pro-Russian ideologies and the suppression of the Ukrainian national idea in order to ensure that Ukraine becomes friendly to Russia (Karaganov 2023; Ukraina.ru 2023; Zatulin 2022). In this sense, military occupation allowed Moscow to carry out regime changes in Russian-occupied areas in southeastern Ukraine. Although the overwhelming majority of local elites condemned the Russian invasion (Ishchenko 2023; Kudelia 2025; Lewis 2025), some politicians, often with previous careers in parties like the PoR, OPPZh and Opoblok, and pro-Russian activists joined Moscow's occupation governments (Lewis 2025). In these areas, locals have faced intense pressure to adhere to Russian rule, with reports of frequent human rights violations as Russia has harshly repressed opposition, targeting especially individuals deemed as potential leaders of Ukrainian resistance. Social payments, resource allocation and bureaucratic tools, like requiring Russian citizenship and business regulations for various needs, were also used to prompt compliance and co-opt locals (UN Human Rights Office 2024; Lewis 2025). Demography has also been an important factor: opponents of the Russian occupation have been expelled, while there has been a significant influx of Russian immigrants, often stimulated by Moscow (Lewis 2025). Estimations indicate that more than half of the pre-invasion population, presumably including a high share of opponents to Russian rule, left these regions. As in post-annexation Crimea and separatist-controlled Donbas,





these demographic changes can contribute to reducing potential civil society resistance against Russian rule. In September-October 2022, Russia declared the annexation of Ukraine's Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, including areas of these regions that were not occupied by Russian forces.

Evidence from Russia's proposals in peace talks also shows that Russia attempted to transform Ukraine with measures directed at both the political and civil society spheres. The negotiations centered on territorial and security issues (mainly Ukraine's neutrality), but Russia also made demands regarding Ukrainian state-society relations. For example, in draft peace agreements discussed in 2022, Moscow demanded the recognition of Russian as a state language and the repealing of legislation limiting its use in state, education and media. Additionally, Russia sought a ban on "aggressive nationalism", the repeal of Ukraine's post-Maidan historical memory legislation, and the end of policies that it considered discriminatory against the UOC-MP. Finally, another noteworthy element was the call to repeal Ukraine's 2014 so-called "Lustration Law", which barred certain categories of officials from the Yanukovych and Soviet eras from holding state office for up to ten years (Surnachova 2024; The New York Times 2024a, 2024b). A memorandum presented by the Russian government in June 2025 contained similar provisions related to Ukrainian domestic issues (Russia 2025).

In Russian-occupied areas, efforts at ideologically legitimating Russian rule were illustrated by a July 2022 manifesto which claimed that Russian rule would bring freedom and prosperity after what was depicted as decades of oligarchic exploitation, aggressive Ukrainian nationalism and repression of Russian language and identity in independent Ukraine (Social Forum "We are together with Russia" 2022). In line with this narrative, Russian was declared a state language, while Ukrainian became an optional subject in Russia-controlled schools. References to Ukrainian national identity and especially Ukrainian nationalists were eliminated from public space. Russia's historical memory approach was adopted, as illustrated by measures regarding placenames, public celebrations and monuments. Russian curricula and teaching standards were implemented in schools and universities. Pro-Russian ideologies were also disseminated through youth organizations and a controlled media environment (Lewis 2025). The policies and proposals mentioned above evidence the Russian government's goal of transforming the political order in Ukraine, showing how state-society relations have been perceived by Russia as a relevant aspect of its Ukraine policy.





## 5. Conclusion

Throughout history, great powers have often perceived state-society relations in other countries as variables affecting the global balance of power. As this paper showed, Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine can be understood as an action driven by such considerations. In this sense, the invasion represents the culmination of a process spanning the entire post-Soviet period in which Russia sought to keep Ukraine in its claimed sphere of influence by, among other means, engaging in state-society dynamics in Ukraine to influence the formation of a friendly political order in the neighboring country. Initially stronger outside government, proposals in this direction became increasingly present in Russian foreign policy under Putin. In the context of the war, Russia's regime change goals and domestic policy demands in peace negotiations, as well as identity policies and repression of Ukrainian opposition in Russian-occupied territories, attest that changing state-society relations, and not only keeping Ukraine out of NATO and disabling its military potential, was an important goal for Russia.

The preceding analysis contributes to refining certain aspects of the prevailing realist, liberal and empire-centered interpretations about Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia's actions indicate how state-society relations can also be a component in states' assessments of the balance of power—in addition to material factors traditionally emphasized by IR realists—and the ability to control peripheral spaces discussed in empire-centered and realist perspectives. Finally, Russia's attempts to establish a friendly political order in Ukraine, by changing state policies and promoting the circulation of pro-Russian ideologies, show how the liberal IR accent on domestic factors can be refined by drawing attention to the historical co-constitution of state and society.

This article also offers some considerations on the consequences of the war and possible scenarios of Russia-Ukraine relations. As national identity and antagonism towards Russia have strengthened in Ukraine amid the war, some political positions deemed pro-Russian have been delegitimized, with various politicians of the traditional pro-Russian camp, including former OPZZh members, adhering to such trends. Furthermore, several political parties have been banned on charges of espousing pro-Russian views—including the OPZZh. Although met with some domestic criticism, there have been state-sanctioned efforts to remove Russia- and Soviet-associated symbols from Ukrainian cities. Finally, despite officially declaring a break with the ROC, the UOC-MP has





been subject to pressure and may be prohibited. These developments point to an increased willingness in Ukraine's civil and political society to regulate the limits of acceptable political positions and ideologies in ways that run counter to Russia's interests.

On the other hand, war fatigue in Ukraine has led to more openness to concessions. Additionally, the US under the Trump administration has signaled its intention to reduce military support for Ukraine and urged Kyiv to make concessions while engaging Russia in peace talks. This context may help Russia achieve some of its goals. Illustratively, a peace plan proposed by the Trump administration in November 2025, in addition to security-related provisions such as keeping Ukraine out of NATO and limiting the size of its military, addressed issues related to Russia's positions regarding national identity policies and the holding of elections in Ukraine (Ravid and Lawler 2025). Nonetheless, from a state-society relations perspective, a likely medium and long-term consequence of the war will be the further strengthening of national identity, pro-Western views and negative attitudes towards Russia in Ukraine's society. These factors can contribute to reduce Russia's influence in Ukraine and affect Moscow's balance of power considerations, therefore potentially renewing the political struggles of the 2014-2021 period in Russia-Ukraine relations.

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