



THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND THE WEST?

Date: November 16, 2023

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KEY EVENTS

On November 16, 2023, Dr. Ibrahim Muradov presented *The Russo-Ukrainian War: What Does it Mean for Russia, Ukraine, and the West?* at this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were that Ukrainian society's push for a pro-Western policy has shaped its foreign relations, despite international reluctance to integrate Ukraine into Western structures; Ukraine's strong protest culture, especially in western regions, has significantly influenced its political direction and resistance to Russian dominance; and Ukraine developed a long-term strategy for economic, military and identity strengthening and this long-term strategy precipitated the full-scale invasion and forced the Kremlin to act before the strategy was complete.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Since Ukraine's independence, its civil society has increasingly been driving the Ukrainian government to democratize the country, which has resulted in a generally pro-Western foreign policy. Following the illegal annexation of Crimea and destabilization of Donbas, Ukraine has adopted a long-term strategy to bolster its economy, armed forces and national identity. The full-scale invasion was a result of this strategy, which would have strengthened the country and its relationships with allies beyond a surmountable challenge for Russia.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Muradov suggested that Ukraine is portrayed by scholars as a victim in the greater tensions between Russia and the West, noting that some blame NATO's increased reach in former Soviet republics for Russia's aggression. Several bodies of research claim that this expansion is an attempt by Western states to pull Ukraine out of Russia's sphere of influence and into that of the West. Dr. Muradov posits that these scholars are trying to look at the war in Ukraine as a symptom of greater tensions between Russia and the West, and, in doing so, are ignoring Ukraine's agency in the matter. However, he claimed, any research that ignores Ukraine's will in the matter falls short of properly explaining the war.

The international structure has been set up for Ukraine in a way that restricts its Western orientations: neither NATO nor the EU have welcomed Ukraine's membership within their organizations. Since its independence, Ukraine has been treated as a neighboring country or partner state; for example, former European Commission President Romano Prodi suggested that Ukraine was a viable candidate for EU membership in the same way that New Zealand was. The NATO journey for Ukraine was much more challenging as Germany and France blocked Kyiv's membership application in 2008 out of concern that it might result in Russian aggression.

Dr. Muradov expressed agreement with the scholarly sentiment that Ukraine's long-term invisibility on Western mental maps is largely a product of Russian political advocacy and highlighted the importance of considering Ukrainian agency in the matter. Ukrainians were not very active during the annexation of Crimea, for example, which made Russia's actions on the peninsula easier. Furthermore, as the West did not welcome Ukraine, Dr. Muradov argued that the country adopted a long-term strategy to rely upon its capabilities in countering Russian aggression before the full-scale invasion occurred. The country has also maintained pro-Western foreign policy, and Dr. Muradov suggested that this is largely due to Ukrainian society, which pushed the Ukrainian government to form more pro-Western policies since the early 2000s, especially after the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014.

A consistent factor in Ukrainian politics since the 1990s has been the country's protest culture, which is key in understanding the country's domestic politics. This culture resulted in western Ukraine holding more liberal, Austro-Hungarian viewpoints, while the eastern part of the country fell more under Russian influence. Examining the western part of Ukraine, Dr. Muradov suggested that of the first movements toward independence occurred in Lviv in 1989, during the Revolution on Granite in which protesters achieved one of their one main goals—to dismiss the then-Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian SSR, Vitaliy Masol. Dr. Muradov pointed to other protests, including 2000's Ukraine

Without Kuchma, and 2002's Arise Ukraine, which he suggested helped make the Orange Revolution of 2004 possible.

Dr. Muradov asserted that this illustrates the citizens of Ukraine are a main driving force behind Ukrainian politics and seek to shape and change governments when the desires of the majority are unfulfilled. Since the 1990's, Ukrainian society has been a major factor in shaping the country's politics, and protesters have successfully advocated for the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine as well as the decentralization of the country's power structure. This is in stark contrast with Belarus, another former-Soviet nation that stayed primarily under Russian influence.

To better understand the current war in Ukraine, Dr. Muradov suggested that one should look to 2014 in which the West did not react to Crimea, choosing to instead maintain the status quo with Russian relations. Ukraine was therefore forced to adopt a long-term strategy to regain its control of Crimea, and the country sought to stabilize its economy, strengthen its army, and consolidate the Ukrainian identity. This long-term strategy was not welcomed by the Kremlin, who hoped that President Zelensky would prefer cooperation with Russia, and Putin attempted to open a dialogue that would portray the conflict in Donbas as a civil war. However, Ukrainian society was largely against this, which prompted Zelensky to step back and refocus on the country's long-term recovery efforts.

Dr. Muradov proposed that this long-term strategy of bolstering the economy, army, and national identity of Ukraine was a driving factor in Putin's decision to launch a full-scale invasion as a successful invasion would be easier if these elements were weak. Though the West responded with an offer of evacuation to President Zelensky, his refusal and subsequent resistance to the invasion further bolstered the national pride and identity of Ukrainians and prompted Western leaders to cease considering Ukraine as an extension of Russia and rather as a potential ally.

Question and Answer

Are there means not yet utilized that foreign states could provide to assist and encourage agency within the Ukrainian population as a means of countering the Russian invasion?

The current support to Ukraine is already unprecedented. The international community, including Europe, Canada, and the United States is offering millions of dollars in aid and providing shelter for Ukrainians. But, if we think about whether it's enough, the West is still showing some hesitance with their support of Ukraine. For example, since the beginning of the war, Ukraine has been asking

for long-range missile systems, F16s, fighter jets and air defense systems, but the country is only receiving the requested equipment in very limited numbers. In the case of F16s, the country waited two years and launched its counteroffensive without air support. The United States sent over 31 tanks, while Russia has lost over 2000 tanks during the war. This suggests that Ukraine is still having trouble convincing the West that it can be successful in winning the war. There is space, though, for the West to increase its support.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Ukrainian society's push for a pro-Western policy has shaped its foreign relations, despite international reluctance to integrate Ukraine into Western structures.
- The country's strong protesting culture, especially in western regions, has significantly influenced its political direction and resistance to Russian dominance.
- Ukraine developed a long-term strategy for economic, military, and identity strengthening in response to Crimea's annexation and the West's ambivalent stance.
- This long-term strategy precipitated the full-scale invasion of the country, forcing the Kremlin to act before the strategy was complete.
- The West's unprecedented support has begun recognizing Ukraine as a potential ally, yet questions about the sufficiency and nature of further assistance remain.

FURTHER READING

Muradov, I. (2022). The Russian hybrid warfare: the cases of Ukraine and Georgia, *Defence Studies*, 22:2, 168-191, DOI: 10.1080/14702436.2022.2030714



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Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

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