

# Top Seven Things You Need to Know About Ukraine

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



Brief Analysis

## A video explainer on the war's causes, Putin's mindset, and the likely consequences if the West does not check his imperial ambitions.

**A**s the war in Ukraine escalates, many misleading notions about its causes and consequences have been circulating widely. To cut through this confusion and provide insight into Vladimir Putin's strategic intentions, Russia expert Anna Borshchevskaya—a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East—appears in this brief video explainer on seven key issues.

[WATCH THE VIDEO ON YOUTUBE \(HTTPS://YOUTU.BE/LDKVZWSRV3Q\)](https://youtu.be/LDKVZWSRV3Q)

## Transcript

**1. Ukraine is at the heart of Europe, not its periphery.** It is the second-largest country in Europe by area and seventh by population, with over 40 million citizens. This crisis will affect everyone.

**2. Vladimir Putin resents American primacy in world affairs.** He hates democracy and is threatened by it on his borders. Putin has ruled Russia directly or indirectly for over twenty years, manipulating the Russian constitution to stay in power while killing or jailing potential opponents. He has intervened to support dictators from Belarus to Syria to Venezuela. He wants to restore imperial rule in the former satellites of the USSR. In 2019, the Ukrainian people elected Volodymyr Zelensky to replace his Russian-supported predecessor. Putin invaded Ukraine to install a puppet in Kyiv and prevent the country from joining the pro-West, pro-democratic NATO alliance like other neighboring states have. But he also invaded Ukraine to erode the U.S.-led liberal rules-based global order; in this sense, his invasion is about more than Ukraine.

**3. Diplomacy did not work.** The leaders of the United States and European nations met directly with Putin to prevent war. The Russian president advanced positions that the West could not accept, chiefly that Ukraine would not be allowed to join NATO. Meanwhile, Russia used its veto as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to block any measure that would have stopped the invasion.

**4. Putin has been building up to this invasion for years and has grown increasingly brazen,** from invading Georgia in 2008, to illegally annexing Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, to intervening in Syria in September 2015. In the absence of strong Western pushback, Putin calculated that he could strike Ukraine with impunity. He perceived the West as weak and risk-averse. This winter, he amassed the largest concentration of firepower in Europe since World War II on Ukraine's borders. But that's not all. Moscow used all elements of state power—economic, diplomatic, informational, and military—to advance its objectives, destabilize Ukraine and create a false pretense for war. Simply put, Moscow, unlike the West, used a “whole of government” approach.

**5. Putin is taking advantage of Russia's military superiority to Ukraine and the West's risk-aversion.** Russia has the world's second-strongest army, while Ukraine is ranked twenty-second. Russia has about 4,447 nuclear warheads, while Ukraine has none. Under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal—the third-largest in the world—in exchange for Russia's promise to respect its sovereignty. Russia has violated that agreement and broken its promise to its neighbor. And now, on its own, the Ukrainian military will be overwhelmed by Russian forces.

**6. Putin privatized the country's major industries and gave them to his political supporters.** The United States and its allies have instituted economic sanctions targeting these oligarchs and major financial institutions to inflict pain on Putin's cronies. But in the buildup to the war, Russia socked away an estimated \$600 billion in foreign reserves to help it survive economic sanctions. Moreover, only about 16 percent of Russia's foreign exchange is now held in dollars, down from 40 percent five years ago.

**7. One final point.** Ukraine shares America's most cherished values of liberty. It is a true strategic partner to the West. Ukrainians are dying to uphold these values. Ukraine stands in contrast to Putin's vision of the illiberal world order he seeks to impose. Failure to help Ukraine now will land an enormous blow to our credibility and hurt our interests worldwide. Putin will never succeed in destroying Ukrainian identity. But this will not make up for the tragedy unfolding before our eyes. This will not end with Ukraine. We are now living in a new world. ❖

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