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## **Grievance, Fear, Greed or Survival? Comparing Alternative Explanations for Russia's Decision to Invade Ukraine in February 2022**

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# Grievance, Fear, Greed or Survival? Comparing Alternative Explanations for Russia's Decision to Invade Ukraine in February 2022



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## Introduction

At the time of writing (August 2024), the world is still captured by the war in Ukraine. This military conflict began as a minor proxy-war in the east of the country in 2014. After the beginning of the Maidan revolts in late 2013, the Russian president Vladimir Putin first annexed the Crimean Peninsula, and subsequently started supporting local pro-Russian separatists in the two easternmost provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk. This conflict had been dragging on in the background for almost ten years. On the now infamous date of February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022 however, the Russian Federation decided to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukrainian territory. Putin has termed this full-blown war a ‘special military operation’, as he had already done with the wars in Chechnya and Georgia before. It has so far led to unimaginable horror, death, destruction and suffering, the likes of which had not been experienced on the European continent since World War II.

The justification for this war as provided by the Kremlin is two-fold: first of all, the historical injustice that Russia has undergone by losing Ukraine as part of its territory after the fall of the USSR. Before the televised speech delivered on February 24<sup>th</sup>, Vladimir Putin had already given another lengthy speech on the 21<sup>st</sup> of February. In it he stated that:

“I would like to emphasise again that Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space. [...] Since time immemorial, the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians. [...] So, I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik Communist Russia. This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely hard on Russia – by separating, severing what is historically Russian land.”<sup>1</sup>

During the previous summer of 2021, Putin had published a 5000 plus-word treatise titled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”. In this essay, he laid the groundwork for the idea that the

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<sup>1</sup> President of Russia 2022.

Ukrainian state is really the result of undue historical processes, and that fundamentally, Ukrainians are the same ‘people’ as Russians, and that they share the same spiritual unity:

“First of all, I would like to emphasise that the wall that has emerged in recent years between Russia and Ukraine, between the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space, to my mind is our great common misfortune and tragedy. These are, first and foremost, the consequences of our own mistakes made at different points in time. But these are also the result of deliberate efforts by those forces that have always sought to undermine our unity.”<sup>2</sup>

Second of all, the invasion is legitimised by the threat of NATO expansion. The idea here is that NATO has kept expanding during recent years, and that this constitutes a major security threat to the Russian federation. This is also attested extensively in Putin’s statements:

“Even now, with NATO’s eastward expansion the situation for Russia has been becoming worse and more dangerous by the year. Moreover, these past days NATO leadership has been blunt in its statements that they need to accelerate and step up efforts to bring the alliance’s infrastructure closer to Russia’s borders.”<sup>3</sup>

Knowing more about this conflict is absolutely essential since it concerns one of the biggest geopolitical problems of the present day, having so far led to enormous numbers of casualties, refugees and material damage. A desire to understand the root causes of all of this misery is justified not only for the sake of knowing itself, but also to bring us one step closer to understanding how and why decisions such as the one to invade a neighbouring country are actually taken by one of the main geopolitical players of the current moment and probably the foreseeable future.

The Kremlin itself gives two clear-cut justifications for the ‘special military operation’. Upon closer examination however, one might have some qualms about the validity of these explanations. The historic injustice explanation for instance, cannot account for the

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<sup>2</sup> President of Russia 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

timing of the war: was the situation in February 2022 any more historically unjust than it was in 2005? This lack of explanatory power became painfully obvious when, during the 2024 interview of Vladimir Putin by the first Western journalist since the beginning of the war (Tucker Carlsson), Putin dodged this exact question time and time again, instead giving a lengthy presentation of revisionist Russian and Ukrainian history. The historic injustice argument also cannot explain why it was Ukraine that was attacked, and not any of the other territories that previously belonged to the USSR or the Russian Empire.

On the face of it then, it seems that the NATO explanation is a lot more plausible. It is certainly true that NATO has been expanding during the previous decades. Previously however, NATO expansion has not always resulted in military invasion by Russia, nor did there seem to be any serious military threats coming from NATO which were directed at Russia during the period immediately before the invasion. The ambiguity resulting from the insufficiency with which the official Kremlin-based justifications can explain the causes of the February 24<sup>th</sup> invasion leads us to consider the possibility that there are perhaps other explanations.

It is the ambition of this thesis to juxtapose all of the ‘big’ explanations for this conflict that have been put forth thus far, including both the scholarly literature and the Kremlin-output. Apart from the historical injustice explanation, which features mainly in Kremlin statements, the second Kremlin-based explanation – NATO as a security threat to Russia – is also widely attested in the scholarly literature. The idea that Russia felt threatened by NATO-enlargement, and therefore acted out of ‘self-defence’ by attacking Ukraine is represented by many big names in international relations, most notably Mearsheimer (2022), Dunford (2023) and Walt (2023).

Furthermore, a review of scholarly publications reveals that two more big explanations have been put forth: firstly the ‘land-grab’ explanation, most prominently represented by Hall (2023) and Johannesson & Clowes (2022). This explanation is centred around the idea that the Russia-Ukraine conflict (including the Crimean Annexation and the 10-year proxy war in Eastern Ukraine) are motivated by Russia’s desire for Ukraine’s land and resources.

Secondly, the ‘popular control’ explanation, represented by Ferraro (2024) and Popova & Shevel (2024). This comes down to the idea that losing control over one’s population can drive leaders to go to war. This is especially true in the Russian case, where the loss of popular control over a population in a neighbouring country that traditionally belongs to Russia’s sphere of influence is perceived as almost as big of a threat as over one’s domestic population.

There is one last explanation which has so far proven highly insightful for understanding why leaders engage in international conflict, but which has not been applied to the Ukraine war yet: the ‘elite rivalry’ explanation. This explanation states that leaders start and use international conflicts to diminish the risks coming from rival elites. I will attempt to construct this argument using primarily Galeotti & Artunyan (2024) and Osborn & Zufferey (2023).

When looking at the preceding overview of the different explanations attested in the scholarly literature and beyond, it becomes clear that the cause of the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine is not only a real-world problem, but also an academic problem. The question which this thesis attempts to answer then becomes: which of the five above-mentioned explanations has the most explanatory power for understanding the root cause of Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine on February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022?

The ultimate aspiration of this thesis is to shed more light on one of the most gruesome contemporary conflicts using the methodological rigour of process tracing. In the field of international relations, many authors write from their own perspectives, and interpret conflicts through an enormously variegated array of lenses. The explanations all have their own pros and cons, as well as their own history and tradition within the literature. It is the aim of this thesis to subjugate all of these rival explanations to a rigorous test, and to see which one of them is able to withstand this test the best, thereby allowing us to conclude which is the most plausible explanation for the full-fledged invasion of Ukraine starting in February 2022.

## Literature review

The main objective of this thesis is to find the most plausible explanation for Russia's ongoing full-fledged invasion of Ukraine. It is namely the case that there is a host of possible reasons which can be found in the literature on this conflict. This literature review identifies four plausible explanations: 1) historical grievance 2) NATO enlargement security threat 3) land- and resource grab 4) popular control. On top of this, it will propose a fifth plausible answer (elite rivalry) which can be identified in the literature on international conflict, and apply it to the Ukraine war for the first time.

### *Historical grievance*

The historical grievance explanation entails that a leader starts a war with the aim of reconquering previously lost territory which it considers to be rightfully its own. In the specific Russian case, when the USSR collapsed in 1991, the new Russian Federation formally lost the territory of Ukraine, which had been an integral part of the Soviet Union, and the Russian Empire before that. If we are to take Vladimir Putin's word for it, Ukraine is considered essential to Russian identity, both historically and spiritually. In his 2021 essay, he underlines how:

"I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. [...] Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people."<sup>4</sup>

Following from how essential Ukraine is to Russian national and spiritual identity, Ukraine has to re-join the ranks of the Russian State once again. According to the Kremlin's logic, and based upon the invasion that followed these statements, this would then allegedly be reason enough to invade the country.

The 'historical grievance' explanation has some clear strongpoints. First of all, it is a very commonplace and conventional reason given for historical invasions. This, combined with the fact that it aligns seamlessly with the narrative coming from the Kremlin directly, is reason enough to take it at face value for many writing about this conflict.

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<sup>4</sup> President of Russia 2021.

However, the explanation also has some serious drawbacks. Firstly, the explanation is predicated upon the (unverifiable) idea that the autocrat's personal ideology is leading in taking decisions, instead of pure pragmatism, which is generally what actually determines which decisions are made, even in Russia. Leader ideology or temperament as a scholarly explanation of state behaviour is generally not a sufficiently compelling model<sup>5</sup>, and it can at best be used as a 'null hypothesis' against which to test other explanations.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, the 'historic grievance' explanation cannot explain the exclusive focus on Ukraine, as opposed to other historically Russian territories. The modern Russian Federation is surrounded – especially on the European side – by national territories which used to be part of the USSR, and the Russian Empire before that. From the perspective of wanting to recuperate territory which was 'historically Russian' – it being utterly unclear which historical time period this refers to – Russia might just as well have invaded Poland, Estonia, Moldavia or Finland. As far as historical grievance is concerned, Putin furthermore appears to be inconsistent in his statements. In March 2014, he delivered a speech justifying the Crimean Annexation, also extensively drawing upon historical grievance as a legitimation. In it however, he vehemently denied that the Russian Federation intended to annex (other parts of) Ukraine as well:

“I want you to hear me, my dear friends. Do not believe those who want you to fear Russia, shouting that other regions will follow Crimea. We do not want to divide Ukraine; we do not need that.”<sup>7</sup>

However, the most important drawback to 'historical grievance' as an explanation for the Russian invasion is its absence in the scholarly literature. When we look at border disputes involving historical grievance during the last decades, we find that in the overwhelming majority of cases they have been resolved peacefully through the application of law and mediation.<sup>8</sup> Whether we look at China's border

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<sup>5</sup> For an example of the Ukraine War being explained exclusively based upon leader ideology, consult Harding 2022, 12–28.

<sup>6</sup> Maat 2014, 689.

<sup>7</sup> President of Russia 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Goertz et al. 2016.



compromises<sup>9</sup>, at the Arabian Gulf States effectively resolving their dispute with peaceful means<sup>10</sup> or at the EU playing an active role in the resolution of the Cyprus problem and the Slovenia/Croatia problem<sup>11</sup>, we find that during the last century, instances of border disputes leading to full-blown international conflict are extremely rare.

This renders the possibility that a large-scale international conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, is being waged solely on the grounds of historical grievance extremely implausible. All of the above, but most of all the lack of any serious precedents of exclusively historical grievance-based wars in recent scholarly literature, has led to the rejection of ‘historical grievance’ as a plausible rival explanation fit for scholarly analysis, and therefore it will not feature in the rest of this thesis.

### *NATO enlargement security threat*

The second explanation entails that Russia evaluated NATO’s eastward expansion as a great risk to its own national security, and therefore decided to invade Ukraine preventively as a kind of defensive move.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was founded in 1949, just after World War II, when it became clear that the Soviet Union would constitute the biggest threat to the Western bloc.<sup>12</sup> After the dissolution of the Soviet-Union, NATO remained in existence, eventually incorporating many countries that formerly belonged to the USSR, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in 1999<sup>13</sup>, and then admitting seven more former Communist states in 2004.<sup>14</sup> Initially, Russia’s stance towards NATO expansion seemed to have become a lot milder, but by the mid-2000s this goodwill between the two parties had vanished.<sup>15</sup> Today, NATO serves much the same purpose as it did during the Cold-War: an defensive alliance against potential Russian aggression.

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<sup>9</sup> Fravel 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Wiegand 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Hoffmeister 2012.

<sup>12</sup> For an extensive history of NATO, consult Andrews (2019).

<sup>13</sup> Wolff 2015, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Many well-known scholars of International Relations, most notably among whom are names such as Walt<sup>16</sup> and Mearsheimer<sup>17</sup>, have maintained that it is precisely this NATO expansionist agenda, directed from Washington<sup>18</sup>, that is making Russia feel threatened, as more and more former USSR states have joined the alliance.<sup>19</sup> As this hostile Western defence alliance advanced ever closer to the Russian Federation, having previously already incorporated the Baltics, which share a direct border with Russia, at some point Russia felt so threatened that they saw no other option than to launch a war in Ukraine<sup>20</sup>, in order to make sure that NATO would not be able to deliver a direct blow to Russia through Ukraine. Whether Putin was personally convinced of NATO constituting an immediate threat to Russia's security in early 2022, or that this belief was shared more broadly by the elite is unverifiable. Those who make this argument do not claim that the U.S. or Western Europe are directly responsible for Russia's eventual decision to invade or for its conduct on the battlefield, but rather that they created the circumstances leading Russia to go to war.<sup>21</sup>

This argument has a lot of strongpoints. Firstly, the fact that this explanation is centred around zero-sum power games is very much in line with the doctrines of realism, which is one of the most widely-supported and 'orthodox' schools of IR. We know that most Russian elite members also share this Hobbesian realist worldview, therefore making it plausible that they would start a war motivated by a perceived threat to their national sovereignty. Secondly, this explanation is very much in alignment with the narrative attested in Kremlin-output, such as speeches and public statements.

The explanation does however also have a number of weak points. First of all, NATO expansion has happened at many different points in time, even at Russia's borders (as mentioned before, with the Baltic States), but this was not always followed by a military

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<sup>16</sup> Examples of Walt putting forth his views on the Ukraine war are "The Morality of Ukraine's War is very Murky" (2023) and "Liberal Illusions Caused the Ukraine Crisis" (2022).

<sup>17</sup> Mearsheimer's most widely-known opinion piece on the current Ukraine war is "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War" (2022).

<sup>18</sup> Song 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Singh 2023, 126.

<sup>20</sup> Dunford 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Mearsheimer 2022, 14.

response. In 2008, there were talks about Georgia joining, which was immediately answered by Russia invading the country. In all other instances of eastward NATO expansion (Poland, Hungary the Baltics), a Russian military retaliation remained absent. Second of all, NATO expansion has been going on for a long time, and there did not seem to be any reason to believe that an attack on Russia was immanent before the invasion. Therefore, the February 2022 timing is difficult to explain by means of the ‘NATO security threat’ hypothesis.

### *Land- and Resource Grab*

This model explains wars as a result of a belligerent party’s desire for resources from the other party’s territory. National capabilities can be subdivided into three dimensions: military, industrial and demographic, whereby each of these dimensions constitute potential resources, contributing to these capabilities.<sup>22</sup> For a neighbouring rival, each of these dimensions’ resources could be of great interest, since they would strengthen their own position. More military material means that they will be stronger in battle, more industrial complexes means higher production capabilities and more human resources means more potential soldiers and more possibilities to expand the population.

Ukraine is known to be rich in resources in all three of these dimensions: it has large amounts of rare earth metals and minerals, natural gas as well as enormous amounts of grain and farmland and a population bigger than Poland. Establishing control over resources such as rare earth metals, coal, oil would be advantageous to Russia.<sup>23</sup> Conquering (parts of) Ukraine would also be beneficial in order to grab a hold of the reserves of natural gas<sup>24</sup> as well as the copious amounts of arable land which might be of interest to Russia<sup>25</sup>. This conquest would also significantly improve Russia’s position in the pre-war situation of interdependence with Ukraine when it comes to pipelines as well as revenue from gas.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Mesquita 1981, 102.

<sup>23</sup> Muggah & Dryganov 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Johannesson & Clowes 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Hall 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Lee 2017.

This explanation has as its strongpoint that it is old and therefore highly established and intuitive. It is plausible that parties wage conflicts over resources, if they think these resources would benefit themselves and are important enough to risk a conflict. Additionally, Russia's presence in Africa during the last decade has proven that it already has a history of extracting resources in return for providing certain services in conflict-torn areas.<sup>27</sup> If the country pursued this strategy in one conflict, then it is likely that it would do so in another too.

There are however also significant weak points to this explanation. First of all, the concept of 'resources' is so big that it is hard to work with. The mechanics of wars over resources might work completely differently depending on which resources one focusses on. For instance, there are reasons to assume that renewable resources (water, farmland) are less likely to result in conflict than non-renewable resources (oil, natural gas).<sup>28</sup> Second of all, the 'land- and resource grab' explanation is by far most often used in the civil war literature, and is relatively underrepresented in the international conflict literature<sup>29</sup>. This makes it hard to construct an argument for this explanation in a large-scale war of one nation-state against the other.

### *Popular Control*

This explanation has it that the desire to keep the population (both domestically and in the perceived 'spheres of influence') under control is the principal motivation to go to war. The current Russian government is autocratic and is therefore engaged in a perpetual struggle to maintain its power. Maintaining control over the domestic population is of vital importance for obtaining this goal. In these autocratic regimes, leaders are often drawn into internal conflict, which leads to economic underperformance. This economic underperformance subsequently leads to societal unrest. When societal unrest is high and the loss of office is looming, finding a reason to go to war over a certain part of disputed territory with

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<sup>27</sup> Galeotti & Arutunyan 2024, 141.

<sup>28</sup> Koubi et al. 2014.

<sup>29</sup> One of the most important exceptions to this rule is the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which many now believe was motivated by resources: Lehmann 2019, 431., Muttitt 2018. & Bonds 2013.

another nation might be advantageous.<sup>30</sup> According to this explanation in Russia, the declining popularity of Putin based upon the ever-decreasing economic performances during the 2010's would have been reason enough to deem the invasion of Ukraine an expedient way to create the 'rally-around-the-flag effect' which gets the domestic population back under control and helps the leader to stay in power.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, the Russian leading elite makes a clear distinction between two kinds of 'abroad': the 'near abroad' (most often including Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine) and the 'distant abroad' (everything else), as can be seen in the enormous amount of Russian influence on its 'near abroad' during the last two decades.<sup>32</sup> This 'near abroad' is considered to be an inalienable sphere of influence to Russia. Losing control over this sphere of influence is almost as catastrophic as losing control over one's domestic population. Starting an invasion – in this case in Ukraine – is believed to help to get the population back in check in this renegade 'sphere of influence'.<sup>33</sup>

As an explanation, the 'popular control' thesis is highly intuitive. Firstly, things such as popular support and economic performance being easily measurable means that accessing data which allows the researcher to make this explanation plausible is a feasible endeavour. Secondly, the idea of 'spheres of influence' and the catastrophe of their potential apostasy very much aligns with what we know about the political worldview of the Russian elite.

On the other hand, there are also downsides to this explanation. Firstly, since there are only few examples of rigorous research whereby the mechanisms of the 'popular control' explanation were made explicit enough so that they could be tested and possibly falsified, there are not many precedents to work with, let alone in the specific Russian case. Secondly, popular support is not easy to measure in autocratic regimes, let alone autocrats' perception of this popular support. This 'information problem' can sometimes make it hard to judge what autocrats' motivations may be regarding popular control.

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<sup>30</sup> Tir 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Ferraro 2024.

<sup>32</sup> Tolstrup 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Popova & Shevel 2024.

### *Elite Rivalry*

This hypothesis has not been examined in depth in the scholarly literature on the Ukraine war, but given its innovative nature and its promising results in explaining international conflict elsewhere<sup>34</sup>, I will nevertheless include it into this research.<sup>35</sup> The explanation posits that autocratic leaders can and do use international conflict to decrease the probability of being ousted from power by controlling potentially dangerous elite rivals. Many assume that autocratic leaders can do whatever they want, and are not accountable to anybody. This is a misconception. Unlike in democratic countries, autocrats are not constrained by a democratic electorate. However, they are held accountable by domestic elites.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, having control over the domestic elites is in the autocrat's best interest.

For autocratic leaders, rival elites, in particular military rivals, are a real danger. There is always the possibility of a coup d'état. This drives autocratic leaders to engage in various coup-proofing strategies. The most noteworthy strategy is counterbalancing, whereby the regular armed forces are accompanied by secret police units, personal militias or paramilitary forces.<sup>37</sup> Reshuffling people at key positions in the government is another such strategy.<sup>38</sup> However, these strategies often come at the cost of making the government and the military apparatus highly dysfunctional.<sup>39</sup>

In authoritarian regimes, transitions of power are rarely peaceful. When a change of political leadership is immanent, rival elites often become unruly, and mass political violence whereby elites lock each other in battle, with genocide and all kinds of terror and mass political violence becoming by-products.<sup>40</sup> When the actual power transition occurs, this is often accompanied by more than simply being ousted from office. In authoritarian countries, leaders often lose their entire financial and political legacy, and in many cases even their physical security or their life. It is therefore understandable

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<sup>34</sup> For a good example of the successful application of this hypothesis, consult Maat & Holmes 2023.

<sup>35</sup> In order to construct this argument, Galeotti & Arutunyan (2024) and Osborn & Zufferey (2023) will be used.

<sup>36</sup> Weeks 2008.

<sup>37</sup> De Bruin 2020, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Woldense 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Powell 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Maat 2020.

that leaders strive to postpone this moment of power transition for as long as possible, and that they engage in behaviours to control rival elites.

Engaging in international conflict can help reduce the risks associated with autocratic leadership.<sup>41</sup> Dangerous members of the elite are kept at a safe distance from the leader. Furthermore, leaders have a reason to strengthen their grip over the military. Finally, potential military rivals or coup plotters are too much involved in war-related activities and obligations to plan a coup d'état.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the outcome of wars can have a serious impact on leaders' tenures, even authoritarian ones.<sup>43</sup>

The 'elite rivalry' explanation has as its strongpoint that it explains something as big and impactful as war in terms of direct needs and benefits of individual people, instead of in terms of large, abstract and unfalsifiable geostrategic theories. Often, people do things out of direct, personal interest, and this explanation is centred around that principle.

On the other hand, there are also downsides to the 'elite rivalry' explanation. First of all, what constitutes 'elites' is not always precisely defined in the literature. It can, for instance, make quite a big difference whether one talks about inter- (between different elites) or intra- (within the same elite) rivalry. Secondly, the lack of transparency in authoritarian regimes makes it extremely hard to obtain reliable data on elite rivalry.

## Research design

As we have seen above, both in the official statements of the Kremlin and in the scholarly literature, there is clearly not one single answer to what drove Russia to invade Ukraine in February 2022. Apart from the already refuted 'historical grievance' explanation, three plausible answers can be distinguished both in the Kremlin output and in the scholarly literature combined: 1) NATO security threat 2) popular

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<sup>41</sup> Chiozza & Goemans 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Croco & Weeks 2016.

control 3) land- and resource grab. To these three, the 4) elite rivalry explanation will be added in this research.

This thesis makes use of both primary and secondary sources. Since it concerns events which have happened quite recently, some even less than one year ago, the scholarly secondary literature on these events can be quite sparse. Therefore, newspaper articles and online videos will be used as primary source material in addition to the academic material.

The methodology of this thesis is grounded in a comparison between expected evidence versus observed evidence. This method is part of process tracing, more specifically, the Bayesian logic, whereby one is able to update one's beliefs in the face of newly observed evidence.<sup>44</sup> By positing certain observable implications, and then verifying whether these implications can indeed be observed in the real world, the researcher is able to attach a relative degree of plausibility to each of the rival explanations, or refute them entirely based on what is found.<sup>45</sup> This ultimately has the objective of establishing a hierarchy of plausible answers, based upon their explanatory value.

There are different kinds of implications or 'tests', for each rival explanation. There are the 'hoop tests', which are essential to pass, but which do not add any special credibility to the theory. There are the 'smoking gun tests', which greatly increase the credibility, but which are not essential to pass. There are the 'doubly decisive tests', which are – if expected to be observed – necessary and make the theory extremely likely. Finally, there are the 'straw in the wind tests', which merely provide weak, circumstantial evidence, but if a series of these are observed, then this can increase the researcher's confidence in the theory.<sup>46</sup> What follows is a detailed explanation of the different observable implications for each theory, and their evidentiary consequences for the theory if observed or not observed.

### *NATO security threat*

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<sup>44</sup> For a detailed explanation of the philosophical underpinnings of this methodology, consult Bennet & Checkel (2014).

<sup>45</sup> For examples of the use of this methodology, consult Musgrave & Nexon (2018) or Maat & Holmes (2023).

<sup>46</sup> Bennet & Checkel 2014, 17.



The implications of this rival explanation are the following: 1) eastward NATO enlargement in the past also systematically led to belligerent responses, 2) eastward NATO enlargement at Russia's borders leads to a different response than not at Russia's borders, 3) there were signs of NATO planning a military attack on Russia in the period just before the start of the invasion in February 2022 and 4) additional eastward NATO expansion during the war is answered by Russia by moving extra troops to defend its borders there.

The first implication makes the explanation highly likely, but it is not necessary. If we observe that whenever NATO expands eastwards, Russia feels threatened and always starts attacking the possible member-country to be, we can be quite confident that this response is nothing out of the ordinary, and that the Russian government acts quite consistently in response to NATO expansion, which is then most likely to be behind the current Ukrainian invasion too. If this 'smoking gun' test is not observed, this does not rule out the explanation. The presence or absence of this implication is strongly expected to be observed, since data on international conflicts are easy to come by since they never go unnoticed.

The second implication, which is a 'doubly decisive test', is both necessary and makes the explanation – if observed – highly likely. Since the theory posits that Russia has a fear of being attacked or 'encircled' by NATO, and therefore started the Ukraine war 'preventively', it would be logical that NATO members at Russia's borders are much more alarming to Russia, and therefore incite a very different, and probably more aggressive, response than NATO members which do not share a border with Russia. If this is not observed, or if the contrary is observed, this reduced the likelihood of the explanation that the war started because of a NATO-country emerging at Russia's borders to almost zero. The data on this implication are expected to be found easily.

The third implication is a 'smoking gun test'. It might be that there were indications – perhaps in the Russian perception of things – that NATO was planning a military attack on Russia in the period just before the war. If this would be observed, then the likelihood of the explanation increases significantly. If this is not observed however, the theory does not need to be refuted, since other factors than direct

military attack could make NATO seem like a security risk to Russia.

The fourth and final implication is another ‘doubly decisive test’: if we find that during the war, NATO expands even further along Russia’s border and it immediately responds consistently with what it did in Ukraine, we can be almost completely sure that the cause of the Ukraine invasion was NATO. If not observed however, this is enough to refute the theory, since a further expansion during the war along Russia’s borders would logically have to be perceived as an even bigger threat by Russia, and therefore responded to in a similar way.

### *Popular control*

This explanation comes with the following observable implications:

1) the presence of a societal issue which makes the leader unpopular, 2) signs of immanent power loss by the elite, either domestically or in one of the ‘spheres of influence’, 3) a changing propaganda performance over time and 4) leaders focussing on prestigious, symbolic victories.

The first implication is a ‘hoop test’: the presence of a societal issue which makes the leader unpopular (domestically or in one of the ‘spheres of influence’) is necessary for this explanation to have validity. In this regard, we should think of severe economic underperformance, high levels of corruption, defeat in a war or other national humiliations. Even though observing this does not conclusively confirm the explanation, its absence is sufficient to refute it.

The second implication is a ‘doubly decisive test’. It is both necessary and an almost conclusive confirmation of the explanation. If – in the period shortly before the war – there are clear signs that the ruling elite will lose their power over the population, either domestically or in one of the perceived ‘spheres of influence’, we can be quite confident that this has at least played a role. If we do not observe this however, then this also entails a rejection of the explanation.

The third implication is a ‘straw-in-the-wind test’: if – among other things – we find that the propaganda performance changes drastically over time, especially if it becomes more ostentatious, dramatic or focussed on external enemies, this raises our level of confidence in the theory to a certain extent. If this is not observed

however, this does not greatly damage the theory, since propaganda is only one of the mechanisms used to ramp up support.

The fourth implication too is a ‘straw-in-the-wind test’: one of the things which leaders could do during a war to curry favour with the population is to focus on prestigious victories of symbolic, national importance. Observing this implication along with the others makes us more confident about the explanation. This is however by no means the only tactic that leaders could use, and its absence therefore does not constitute a conclusive rejection.

### *Explanation 3 (land- and resource grabbing)*

This explanation comes with the following observable implications: 1) presence of resources in the invaded country 2) presence of resources which the invader lacks 3) attempts are made to leave the resources intact and 4) resource-rich areas are prioritised in the attacks.

The first implication is a ‘hoop test’. In order for this theory to work, the copious presence of resources – in whatever form – is necessary. If observed, this does not immediately confirm the explanation, but if not observed this does immediately lead to its rejection.

The second implication is a ‘smoking gun test’: observing that the invaded country has resources which the invader lacks makes the explanation extremely likely, but not observing it does not constitute a rejection either. It could well be that the invading country has resources itself too, but that it nevertheless considers itself to be stronger if it had the invaded country’s resources too.

The third implication is a ‘doubly decisive test’. If the invasion takes place in such a way that certain kinds of resources are purposefully left intact because the invading power wants to use them itself, this raises our confidence in this explanation almost to the point of certainty. If, on the other hand, the invading power destroys potential resources indiscriminately whilst invading, this constitutes an immediate rejection, since this would undermine the primary objective of the invasion to begin with.

The fourth implication is a ‘straw-in-the-wind test’. The prioritisation of resource-rich areas (depending on whether the country has them and where they are located) could be an indication

for the veracity of the explanation. It could also simply be a coincidence that resource-rich areas are attacked first. This will have to depend upon the geography of the invaded country.

### *Elite rivalry*

This explanation posits the following observable implications: 1) the leader is ageing, 2) leaders attempt to strengthen their control over the military, 3) rival elites are required to engage in high-risk fighting

The first implication is a ‘smoking gun’ test. If we do find an ageing autocrat, the chances are very high that elites around the autocrat start to become unruly and possibly violent, as we know they do from other examples of elite rivalry across the world. If we do not find this, it does not disqualify the explanation either.

The second implication is a ‘doubly decisive test’. Nearly every case of elite rivalry involves an autocrat attempting to strengthen his grip over the military. This can include incorporating paramilitary units into the regular army, but also purges and coup-proofing strategies. Observing this greatly increases our confidence, and failing to observe it leads to a rejection.

The third implication is a ‘straw-in-the-wind test’: its observation makes the explanation somewhat more likely. Its absence does not lead to rejection. High-risk fighting for rival military units is one of the plausible ways to reduce rival elite threats, but it is by no means the only one.

Elite rivalry is arguably one of the hardest phenomena to obtain data on, since they concern highly classified state secrets. However, the above-mentioned implications are all observable products of rivalry between elites in authoritarian regimes.

## Analysis

### *NATO security threat*

The Kremlin has repeatedly claimed that the security threat posed by NATO’s increasing eastward enlargement is what drove the invasion. If we assume that this claim is true, and that this really is the driving factor behind the ongoing Ukraine war, then we would expect to see

most, if not all of the theory's observable implications as outlined in the previous section.

If Russia's invasion was exclusively the result of alleged NATO expansion towards the East, then we would expect to see belligerent responses in (almost) every case of eastward NATO enlargement. When we look at the historical data however, this is clearly not the case: since the end of the Cold War, NATO has indeed expanded. However, Russia's response to this was by no means consistently belligerent. In fact, until the Crimean Annexation in 2014, Russia and NATO even cooperated.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, in May 2002, when the Russian president was asked about the future of NATO-Ukraine relations, he merely replied:

"I am absolutely convinced that Ukraine will not shy away from the processes of expanding interaction with NATO and the Western allies as a whole. Ukraine has its own relations with NATO; there is the Ukraine-NATO Council. At the end of the day, the decision is to be taken by NATO and Ukraine. It is a matter for those two partners."<sup>48</sup>

This demonstrates that Putin's public attitude towards NATO's eastward expansion towards Ukraine has changed very dramatically during the last two decades. Not only does Russia's stance towards Ukraine's possible NATO membership not display any consistent belligerence, but the inclusion of other eastern European former USSR republics did not spark any military retaliation either. Just after the 9/11 attacks, within the context of a NATO intervention in Afghanistan to fight terrorism, Putin even helped the U.S. to establish military bases in the two former USSR republics of Kirgizstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>49</sup> It is therefore safe to conclude that not every instance of eastward NATO enlargement automatically triggered a military response. This in itself however is not sufficient reason to refute the theory.

It is namely the case that, if Russia fundamentally fears NATO at its borders – which is the essence of the NATO-security explanation of the current invasion of Ukraine – we would expect that Russia

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<sup>47</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2024.

<sup>48</sup> McFaul & Person 2022, 32.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 31.

responds differently, and likely more assertively, to NATO expansion which takes place at its borders as opposed to not at its borders. When we look at the historical data however, we do not see anything of the sort. In 1999, Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary joined the alliance, which did not lead to any Russian military response. Five years later, in 2004, another wave of accession followed, this time including the Baltic states, two of which (Estonia and Latvia) share a border with Russia. When Putin was asked by an American journalist about the possible accession of the Baltic states to NATO in late 2001, he merely replied:

“We of course are not in a position to tell people what to do. We cannot forbid people to make certain choices if they want to increase the security of their nations in a particular way.”<sup>50</sup>

Clearly, the idea of former USSR republics that share a direct border with Russia did not incite any kind of military response then. Admittedly, Russia did invade Georgia in 2008, after there had been talks about the country joining NATO. This however was probably much more related to the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, and the desire to undermine the Georgian democracy under president Saakashvili, whom Russia saw as a pro-American puppet.<sup>51</sup> Based on the historical data from the last two decades during which Putin ruled Russia, there is no reason to believe that Russia responded differently to NATO enlargement at its borders as opposed to further away from its borders.

Perhaps however, it was not NATO enlargement that was feared, but instead a direct military attack by the latter. In this case, we would expect to see enormous build-ups of military equipment at Russia’s border of the kind that we saw during most of 2021, before Russia itself invaded Ukraine. In reality, we do not see anything of the sort. Military involvement by Western powers, let alone NATO, in the period before the February 2022 invasion in Ukraine was very minimal, and apart from training Ukrainian soldiers, military support was kept at a very low level because European countries feared it

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 33.

would provoke Russia.<sup>52</sup> Two months before his death, the head of the Wagner mercenary Prigozhin, who used to be an ally of Putin, also stated that there was no reason whatsoever to assume that levels of aggression coming from Ukraine or NATO were any higher in February 2022 than usual, or that any of these two was going to execute an invasion of Russia in the near future.<sup>53</sup>

Maybe the ultimate test of the NATO security threat explanation is to see what Russia does if – during the war – NATO further expands along Russia’s borders. One would namely expect that Russia considers this an equally big threat as the allegedly immanent Ukrainian NATO membership. If we assume that the latter was the principal reason for full-fledged military invasion, then we would expect NATO expansion along Russia’s borders to be answered by a comparable invasion, or at least by something approximating a military response. Once again, we do not observe anything of the sort.

On the contrary, in 2022, when Sweden and Finland became candidate members, Putin said that Sweden and Finland’s potential future NATO membership did not constitute a threat to Russia, and that Russia would only respond (how he didn’t specify) if military infrastructure were bolstered in these countries.<sup>54</sup> Putin kept his word: when Finland joined in April 2023, and Sweden almost a year later in March 2024, no military response followed, despite NATO’s direct border with Russia being doubled. As a 2023 article from the ISW concluded:

“Putin didn’t invade Ukraine in 2022 because he feared NATO. He invaded because he believed that NATO was weak, that his efforts to regain control of Ukraine by other means had failed, and that installing a pro-Russian government in Kyiv would be safe and easy.”<sup>55</sup>

### *Popular control*

If the reason for the current Ukrainian invasion is the desire to win back popular control either domestically or in one of the self-declared ‘spheres of influence’, this would come with certain implications.

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<sup>52</sup> Hughes 2022, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Hird et al. 2023, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Faulconbridge 2022, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Bugayova et al. 2023, 1.

First of all, we would expect to observe a societal issue making the leader or ruling elite unpopular. In fact, we do observe this: in Russia in the form of economic underperformance, and in Ukraine in the form of Russian military aggression.

When Putin first came to office as president of Russia in 2000, Russia had been badly affected by the horrors of the 1990's: social unrest, weak leadership, inflation, hunger and a war in Chechnya all made this period into a national trauma in the collective Russian memory, often talked about as 'The Time of Troubles', referring back to the interregnum in the Russian empire between the House of Rurik and the house of Romanov (1598 – 1613).

Russia was longing for stability and economic prosperity after the 'wild capitalism' phase which the Soviet Union had experienced during the late 1990's under the reign of Boris Yeltsin (r. 1991 – 1999).<sup>56</sup> The results of Putin's economic performance were indeed highly satisfactory during his first two terms in office (2000 – 2004 and 2004 – 2008).<sup>57</sup> This had to do not so much with Putin's genius, as with the fact that he 'was in the right place at the right time', and despite the fact that Russia's economy grew significantly during his first two terms in office, it still belonged to the bottom one-third of economic growth numbers in former Soviet Republics not including the Baltics.<sup>58</sup>

In 2008 however, as the world was struck by the global financial crisis, Russia's economy was hit hard as well. This led to a sharp economic downturn. During the first two years of Putin's renewed presidency (2012 – 2014), the economy had only grown by a miniscule amount, such that by 2014, the output level was only slightly higher than in 2008.<sup>59</sup> During the period that followed, the Russian economic condition has progressively worsened, and there are reasons to assume that a desire to divert the population's attention away from this societal issue was behind the 2008 invasion of Georgia as well as the annexation of Crimea in 2014.<sup>60</sup> Highly remarkable too is the difference between Putin's popularity in early

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<sup>56</sup> Gregory 2018, 175.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>59</sup> Higher School of Economics 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Gregory 2018, 187.



2013, when 41% of Russians wanted to stay him in power, compared to 66% in 2018.<sup>61</sup> According to Matovski (2020), this has everything to do with the successful diversionary strategy behind the Crimean invasion and the hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>62</sup>

Thus there does seem to be reason to assume that the Russian population could have been discontent because of the leader's economic underperformance. National humiliations of the sort that Germany was subjected to in 1919 do not appear to be present in Russia, nor is there a significant defeat in a war, such as was the case after the Russo-Japanese war (1904 – 1905). We also do not have any incriminating statements in the style of the often-repeated statement of Russian Interior Minister Pleve who said the following shortly before starting a war with Japan: “What we are in need of is a short, victorious war to stem the tide of revolution.”<sup>63</sup>

Finally, not only domestically, but also in Ukraine, Russia's leadership has suffered a dramatic plunge in popularity, which has everything to do with Russian military aggression there. After the 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests, Russia annexed Crimea and has been supporting insurgency groups fighting a guerrilla-like war in the East of Ukraine ever since, until the beginning of the invasion. This Russian aggression is exactly the kind of societal phenomenon which has made the Russian elite unpopular. It is reflected in the polls by a markedly negative stance towards a Russia-dominated alliance among the Ukrainian electorate.<sup>64</sup>

The second implication posited by this explanation is the presence of signs of loss of popular control, either domestically or in one of the territories which are perceived as ‘spheres of influence’. In fact, we do see these signs, both domestically and in Ukraine.

Pavroz (2020) emphasises how Putin's public support base should not be overestimated, given its instability and ‘artificiality’ and the fact that it is often based upon manipulation and bribery. According to Pavroz then, it is highly likely that large-scale street protests will emerge in the near future as a result of the

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<sup>61</sup> Matovski 2020, 233.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 232–233.

<sup>63</sup> Claire 2000, 118.

<sup>64</sup> Popova & Shevel 2024, 178.

aforementioned economic underperformance.<sup>65</sup> In 2022, Frye et al. (2023) conducted yet another study, which demonstrates that the results obtained previously were likely subject to a phenomenon called ‘artificial deflation’, which makes results collected in indirect ways (such as with list experiments) seem lower than they really are. This leads Frye et al. to conclude that despite the war, Putin is still probably as popular as opinion polls suggest. Given Putin’s dwindling popularity, even in the official polls, this is probably alarming to the Russian elite.

However, Ferraro (2024) conducted an extensive, quantitative analysis of Russian popular street protests, along with an analysis of how external conflicts influence the leader’s popularity among other things. He concludes that it must be the rally-around-the-flag mechanism which is driving the war in Ukraine today, since the street protests were growing increasingly large, and the potential advantages of initiating military conflict for bolstering an autocrat’s approval rating are significant.<sup>66</sup> It appears that the signs of the possible loss of power by the ruling class are indeed observable in Russian society nowadays.

Apart from the domestic situation, we also see many signs of loss of popular support to the Russian regime in Ukraine. The Russian elite considers Ukraine to be a Russian ‘sphere of influence’ or ‘Greater Russia’, and according to this logic, Russia is incomplete without Ukraine being part of this ‘Greater Russia’.<sup>67</sup> Losing Ukraine to another geopolitical bloc such as NATO or the EU would, in the eyes of Putin, who is known to have a fundamentally realist, Hobbesian view of the world<sup>68</sup>, be a catastrophe.

During the past two decades, Ukraine has known numerous major popular uprisings and violent protests. Starting from the 2004 Orange Revolution, followed by the Euromaidan in 2013-2014, the population has made it clear that they see their future more in an alliance with a Western partner than an Eastern partner. According to Popova & Shevel (2024), Ukraine slipping away from Russia’s influence and transitioning towards a Western-oriented democracy

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<sup>65</sup> Pavroz 2020, 454.

<sup>66</sup> Ferraro 2024, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Casier 2023, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Gerrits 2015, 07:12 – 07:20.

means that the Ukrainian population is essentially diverging away from its traditional Russian overlord, which is highly threatening to Russia's sense of identity. A survey conducted in September 2014 showed that 59% of the Ukrainian respondents were in favour of joining the EU, as opposed to just 17% who favoured a Russia-led alliance, whereas the respective numbers in September 2013 were 42% (EU membership) and 37% (Russia-led alliance).<sup>69</sup>

Just a few days after Zelensky came to power in April 2019, Russia issued a decree with the aim of drastically simplifying the process of acquiring the Russian nationality in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and another degree which did the same across the entire Donbas.<sup>70</sup> From the Fall of 2021 onwards, Ukraine launched policy after policy – including an anti-oligarchising law, visa-free travelling and Europeanisation reforms which made trade with the EU explode – which distanced it increasingly further from Russia, which led to Putin eventually forcing this renegade province back into the 'Russian World.'<sup>71</sup> The evidence suggests that it is not the fear of NATO per se, but the idea of losing one of its most important 'spheres of influence' that made Russia invade. This can also immediately explain the timing of the attack, since Ukraine was rapidly slipping away from Russian control on every front in the period shortly before the war.

It is important not to confuse this with the historical injustice argument; the Kremlin wants to be able to rule over Ukraine because it sees it as its sphere of influence up to the present day. This is very different from simply being resentful about the loss of territory which is historically Russian. In the latter case, Russia might just as well have invaded Moldova or Armenia, which would arguably have been much easier to defeat. It is not so much about wanting to restore the former Russian Empire as it is about desperately holding on to the 'spheres of influence' abroad, and being able to exert political power over these countries, Ukraine being the most important one of them. The moment when this threatens to become impossible, the Kremlin attacks, as we saw with Georgia. This differs significantly from the idea that Russia simply wants to restore its former empire and the

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<sup>69</sup> Popova & Shevel 2024, 178.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 207.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 211.

historical injustice of being robbed of its territory. Contrary to the ‘popular control explanation’, which can explain both the timing and the exclusive focus on Ukraine, the historical injustice explanation cannot account for either of these.

The third observable implication concerns the nature of propaganda. Propaganda is one of the most powerful tools at the leader’s disposal. When a leader faces a crisis in popularity which might lead to loss of tenure, we would expect a significant change in the propaganda performance of this leader. In fact, in contemporary Russia we do observe a change in Putin’s propaganda performance: his propaganda has become increasingly dramatic and centred around the concept of foreign enemies.

The Russian State has always engaged in propaganda; an evaluation of the propaganda performance of Putin’s regime during the period 2000–2018 shows that, as Putin’s support is dwindling, his propaganda performances have become increasingly dramatic, centered more around presenting himself as a pillar of orthodoxy, tradition and a strong Russia whilst fighting against the enemy outside and within, whereas it was much more business-like, Soviet-nostalgic and friendly towards the West in 2000.<sup>72</sup> During recent years, online content-creators supported by the Putin-regime also increasingly decide the Russian media landscape, striving in particular to create ‘viral videos’.<sup>73</sup>

After the beginning of the Ukrainian invasion, the Putin regime has managed to preserve a relatively large support base by means of different techniques, most notably among which are a hybrid media system (a combination of television and the internet), tapping into national grievances and harnessing distrust of media in general, by propagating the message that one cannot trust any one narrative instead of trying to force one specific narrative unto the population.<sup>74</sup>

One of the most salient results of this increasingly dramatic propaganda trend of the last decade is the focus on nazism and Ukraine. By launching campaigns which portray the current regime in Ukraine as a bulwark of nazi’s within Russia and abroad, the Ukrainian invasion is legitimised domestically whilst at the same time

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<sup>72</sup> Burett 2020, 3.

<sup>73</sup> Fedor & Fredheim 2017, 161.

<sup>74</sup> Alyukov 2022, 1–2.

constituting an assault on the memory politics of the European Union.<sup>75</sup>

Finally, Krishnarajan & Tolstrup (2023) conducted a unique survey experiment one year before the war. This demonstrates, based upon analyses of Russian people's answers to scenarios of national threat, that Russian support for aggression against other countries would be significant, and that Putin therefore would have had sufficient reason to believe that his propaganda machine had been effective in controlling public opinion in favour of his Ukraine invasion. Putin's propaganda has not become more, but there does seem to be reason to assume that there is a change towards a more dramatic, anti-foreign propaganda performance.

The fourth and final implication concerns how the war is being fought. In the case of a diversionary war, the aim of which is to ramp up popular support, one would expect the leader to focus on obtaining prestigious, symbolic victories with great historical importance to the domestic population. In fact, in the Ukrainian invasion we see quite the opposite of this.

Instead of a focus on prestigious victories, during the spring of 2023, the Kremlin appeared to be hellbent on conquering Bakhmut, a place that has neither strategic nor symbolic significance.<sup>76</sup> This battle, which has raged on for many months and cost thousands of soldiers on each side, appears to be an example of the opposite of our implication, unless it had acquired some symbolic value during the war as a result of its sheer impenetrability and resilience. One could make the argument that the Crimean Annexation of 2014 was of significant symbolic value, as it gave Putin's domestic popularity a great boost. In the full-scale Ukrainian invasion however, there does not appear to be a great focus on conquests of symbolic significance.

### *Land- and resource grabbing*

Assuming that Russia invaded Ukraine because of the belief that Russia will be stronger with access to Ukrainian resources, we would expect to be able to observe the manifestations of certain implications.

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<sup>75</sup> Shiller 2023, 432.

<sup>76</sup> Peck 2023, 1.

The first of these is the presence of copious amounts of resources, natural or otherwise, in Ukraine. In fact, we do observe exactly this. According to the Ukrainian Geological Survey (2023), Ukraine possesses one of the largest lithium deposits in Europe, as well as being one of the ten countries with the largest proven reserves of titanium ores, and finally considerable amounts of non-ferrous metals. According to the OECD (2016) Ukraine is furthermore one of the leading producers of manganese ore and titanium sponge.<sup>77</sup> On top of this, Ukraine also has significant amounts of oil and natural gas.

The second implication is the presence of natural resources which the invading country – Russia – lacks itself. We do not find anything of the sort, since all Ukrainian resources are available in copious amounts in Russia as well. The Russian Federation itself is in possession of abundant natural resources, among which are oil, natural gas, forests and minerals, and it is highly successful at exploiting these.<sup>78</sup> It therefore seems unlikely that the Russian Federation conducts the invasion with the principal aim to rob Ukraine of resources which it itself has in abundance as well.

This however does not mean that Ukraine's resources could not be of any interest to Russia. According to Faiola and Bennett (2022), Russia does engage in mineral extraction in the occupied territories, but this has the objective of undermining the authorities in Kiyv during wartime, more than directly benefitting from the minerals itself.<sup>79</sup> Additionally, Johannesson and Clowes (2022) establish a direct connection between Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the export of gas to Ukraine and the European Union, whereby Ukraine's resource potential would be a threat to future Russian exports to Europe.

Finally, there is reason to believe that the Ukraine war is changing the dynamics on the energy markets. As far as resource-related motivations are concerned, at most, we can observe the circumstantial evidence that the war has a great impact on the resource market, leading to higher prices for many raw materials. Kurshid et al. (2023) found that the conflict is driving the prices of many critical metals needed for the energy transition. Similarly, Meng

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<sup>77</sup> OECD 2016, 145.

<sup>78</sup> Klyuev 2015, 303.

<sup>79</sup> Faiola & Bennett 2022, 1.

& Yu (2023) present three findings related to the oil and gasoline prices: 1) countries with a great dependence on crude oil are vulnerable to price changes 2) the Ukraine-war can increase gasoline prices by means of its effect on the price of crude oil and 3) the conflict can increase gasoline prices as a result of heightened inflation.

Some of the above could be advantageous for Russia, but there is too little direct evidence that resources are the root cause of the war. As Rod Schoonover, the former director of the Environment and Natural Resources Section of the U.S. National Intelligence Council said: “this may not be the main reason for the invasion, but undoubtedly Ukraine’s mineral wealth is one of the reasons why this country is so important to Russia.”<sup>80</sup>

The third implication which we would expect to observe if this invasion’s principal mission was to get control over Ukraine’s resources is that the Russian troops who execute the attacks actively attempt to leave the resources intact. Regardless of which resources we look at, this overwhelmingly appears not to be the case. During the attacks, an enormous amount of damage has been inflicted to Ukraine’s forests<sup>81</sup>, where a lot of the fighting takes place. Apart from that, large swathes of farmland have become so severely affected by the war<sup>82</sup>, particularly due to the large amounts of toxic chemical substances in the soil.<sup>83</sup>

In June 2023, we saw the Russians blowing up the Kakhova Dam in the river Dnipro without any reserve in order to sabotage the Ukrainian advances. More generally, the war is causing massive damage to Ukraine’s water infrastructure, most notably dams and reservoirs.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, the utter flattening of Mariupol, a city with great industrial potential, during the process of it being captured has also demonstrated that the Russian troops do not appear in any way to be constrained by orders to keep useful resources intact. The same goes for the Zaporizhian Nuclear Power plant, which was set fire to in August 2024, despite it being unclear who exactly kindled the fire.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Fant 2022, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Reese, 2023, 1.

<sup>82</sup> Nasibov et al. 2024, 1.

<sup>83</sup> Dzombak 2022, 1.

<sup>84</sup> Shumilova et al. 2023, 580.

<sup>85</sup> Guardian 2024, 1.

Finally, we have seen the Russian troops' relentlessly cruel way of dealing with local populations all over Ukraine, in the form of torture, rape and murder on a massive scale.<sup>86</sup> The Russians' behaviour on the battlefield so far renders the idea that Russia is waging this war primarily because of the added value of Ukraine's human capital extremely unlikely.

The fourth and final observable implication concerns the order of attack: we would expect resource-rich areas to be prioritised and therefore attacked first. In reality, this is impossible to verify with certainty. First of all, which areas should be attacked first according to this logic very much depends on which resources one would target. The following map demonstrates how different potentially interesting resources are distributed:

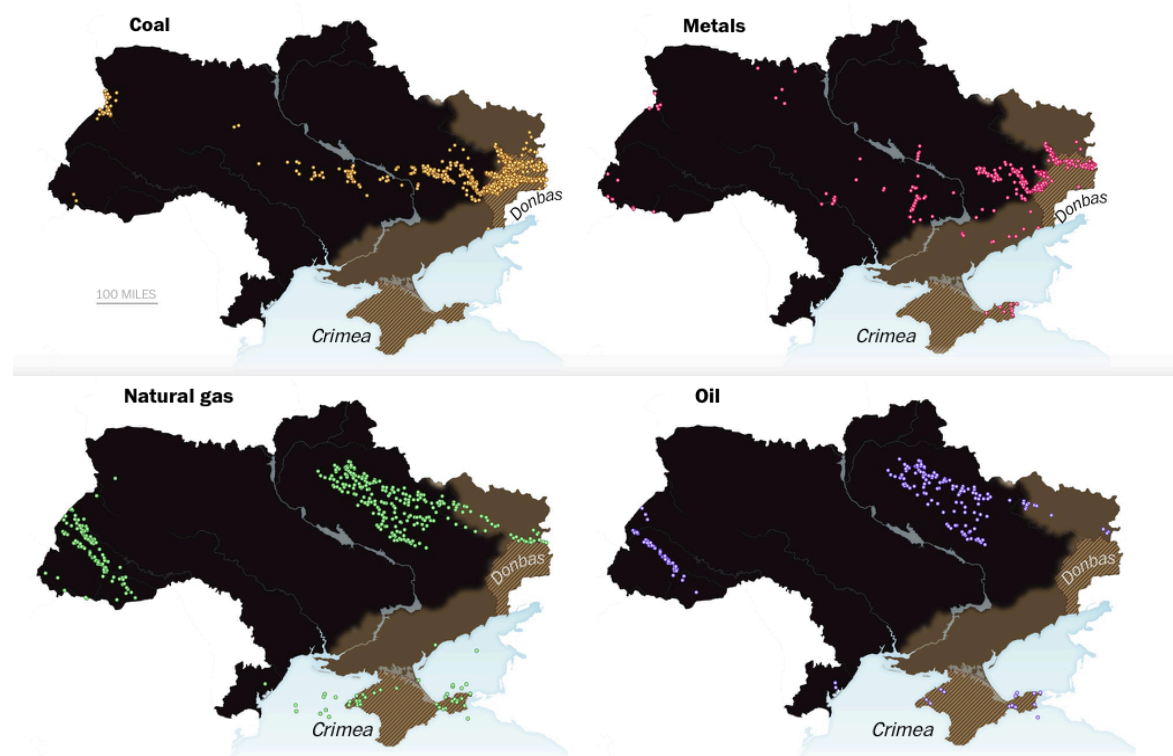


Figure 1: Ukraine's resource distribution. Adopted from SecDev analysis used by Washington Post (2022).

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/10/ukraine-russia-energy-mineral-wealth/>

As can be seen on these maps, only in the case of coal and metals do the occupied territories appear to coincide with the most abundant

<sup>86</sup> Lawlor et al. 2022, 1.



resource presence. As far as oil and natural gas are concerned, the invaded territories are mostly outside of the most densely concentrated resource-rich areas. This may be an indication that the Russian Federation is most interested in Ukraine's coal and metals, which would make sense considering the fact that it itself possesses natural gas and oil in copious amounts too. However, the evidence is not conclusive.

The attacks mostly proceed in line with what one would expect of an invasion executed from Russian territory. It just so happens that those territories closest to Russia are also the richest in metals and coal. Whether this is a matter of coincidence or causality is difficult to determine from the order of attack alone.

### *Elite rivalry*

The elite rivalry explanation entails that leaders initiate and use international conflicts in order to minimize the threat coming from rival elites. This idea comes with certain expected implications.

The first implication is an ageing autocrat before the war. In fact, we do find this, but this is not enough reason to suspect high levels of rivalry before the war. Usually, when a leader ages and approaches the end of his reigning period, rival elites become aware that the autocrat's end is near. This is when elites become unruly and start fighting amongst themselves. In order to consolidate power then, both autocrats and elite rivals are known to use mass political violence, especially against outgroups, as part of the process of consolidating power.<sup>87</sup> In Russia, we do find a president born in October 1952, which means that he was 69 in February 2022. By any standard, this is an ageing leader. However, he is not nearly as old as some other world leaders were while still in power, and before the war, there was no reason to believe that he would soon meet his end because of health or other issues.

In fact, mere days before the start of the operation, he had summoned his security council for a meeting where all of them had to give their opinion on the formal recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent republics. The fact that Putin dared to face those who were arguably the most politically powerful Russian individuals of

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<sup>87</sup> Maat 2020, 1.

that moment, and therefore potentially the most threatening elite rivals, demonstrates that he likely did not see any danger coming from his own immediate elite members. This included Sergei Shoigu, the minister of defence. In autocratic regimes, the military is known to be a major potential threat to the autocrat, which is why autocrats often engages in attempts to bring the army under their own personal control or maintain their own personal security apparatus outside of the regular military.<sup>88</sup> There is however no reason to assume that Putin's relation to the military was different in February 2022 than before. There is also no reason to assume that Russia's elites were unrulier than usual or more likely to stage a coup because of Putin being 69 in 2022.

Before the war, there were several paramilitary forces active in Russia, one of which (Wagner) would play a major role during the Ukraine invasion, both because of its significant role in battle and because of the insurrection which its leader Evgeniy Prigozhin started in 2023, and which looked for a moment as if it could be a coup d'état. It is however unlikely that Putin or anyone in the Russian elite considered Wagner to be a major threat to regime security before the war. This is due to the fact that Prigozhin never truly belonged to the Russian elite, but was instead at most a 'minigarch' whom Putin treated friendly at official occasions, but who nevertheless never truly belonged to Putin's inner circle.<sup>89</sup>

The second implication is an autocrat attempting to strengthen his role over the army. In fact, we do observe Putin and the elite attempting to strengthen their grip over the military in multiple ways, but this mostly starts during the war.

First of all, the autocrat's desire to strengthen his grip is exemplified by the great number of purges. In March 2022, one month after the beginning of the invasion, Putin gave 'his most Stalinesque speech to date', in which he announced a large-scale purification of Russia from all the 'scum and traitors'.<sup>90</sup> Immediately following this announcement, Putin purged the deputy head of Russia's National Guard, Roman Gavrilov in what appeared to be a

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<sup>88</sup> De Bruin 2020, 4.

<sup>89</sup> Galeotti & Arutunyan 2024, 72–73.

<sup>90</sup> Roxburgh 2022, 1.

large-scale purge of the Russian military.<sup>91</sup> In late 2022 then, he fired Eastern Military District Commander Colonel Mudarov, and Western Military District Commander General Kuzovlev.<sup>92</sup>

Intimately related to these purges is the practice of making the military coup-proof. Despite Russia's massive resources and supposedly stronger army, it has not managed to overrun Ukraine.<sup>93</sup> This is a result of a highly coup-proofed army, where lucrative financial deals, corruption, the establishment of military fiefdoms, counterbalancing and purges of disloyal officers led to a highly ineffective army.<sup>94</sup> In a video posted on Telegram on June 23, 2023, Wagner-chief Evgeniy Prigozhin also talks about this in great detail. He starts by stating that many of the current military leaders in Russia have no combat-experience whatsoever, and are therefore completely unfit to run the army:

“They [the elite] didn't give the army any combat experience. Many of those commanders would decorate themselves with these military distinctions of 'Hero of the Russian Federation' as if they were a New Year's tree. [...] Clowns, who for days on end, were doing else than anything but licking the asses of these generals. They all received these rewards, honours and decorations. The absence of rules, the absence of armaments and various other factors were encountered by the Russian army in February 2022.”<sup>95</sup>

Later in the video, Prigozhin specifically speaks about the coup-proofing in the military:

“He [Shoigu] ruined the most combat-effective part of the army. There was only a very small part of the army that was combat-effective. Because for years the army nurtured bootlickery, and any kind of active person was either leaving the army or prepared to do so immediately.”<sup>96</sup>

Paradoxically enough, Putin had been planning the invasion of Ukraine since 2021, but is now stuck in a stalemate, which is unlikely to end in the foreseeable future. This is due to the fact that Putin has

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<sup>91</sup> Kilner & Nicholls 2022, 1.

<sup>92</sup> Gomza 2023, 457.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 435.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> YouTube *Inform Napalm*, 2023.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

been effective in coup-proofing the army, but that this has been highly detrimental to its combat-effectiveness.<sup>97</sup> Testimony to the amount of reshuffling in the military personnel is that, by August 2023, when Wagner leader Prigozhin was assassinated, there had been no less than five different commanders of the war in Ukraine: Army General Dvornikov, Colonel General Zhidko, Army General Surovikin, Army General Gerasimov and Colonel General Teplinsky.<sup>98</sup>

Furthermore, after Prigozhin started voicing opposition, the ministry of defence had all paramilitary bodies sign an agreement that would incorporate them into the regular military. On June 10, 2023, the deputy defence minister Nikolai Pankov released a statement which required over 40 fighting bodies consisting of ‘volunteer organisations’ to sign an agreement by July 1<sup>st</sup>. This agreement would entail the formal incorporation into the Russian army, so that all paramilitary organisations fighting in Ukraine alongside the traditional military would obtain legal status within the ministry of defence of the Russian Federation.<sup>99</sup> The next day, on Sunday the 11<sup>th</sup> of June, Prigozhin released a statement that he would not be signing any agreement with Shoigu, since Wagner had already been ‘organically integrated’ into the Russian system.<sup>100</sup>

The third implication is that soldiers – especially those seen as potential rivals – are required to engage in high-risk fighting with high mortality rates. In fact, we see exactly this. Despite the fact that Wagner soldiers were not initially employed during the war because they were not trusted<sup>101</sup>, they would later play a pivotal role. In late 2022 and early 2023, the Kremlin became hellbent on conquering Bakhmut, the strategic, symbolic or military value of which remains unclear even to experts.<sup>102</sup> Wagner soldiers played an essential role in the extremely high-risk battle of Bakhmut, testimony of which are the thousands of Wagnerite deaths as a result. Apart from this, Wagnerites were, according to an increasingly vocally dissatisfied Prigozhin, also deprived of ammunition.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Gomza 2023, 437.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 457.

<sup>99</sup> Sonne 2023, 1.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>101</sup> Galeotti & Arutunyan 2024, 147.

<sup>102</sup> Peck 2023, 1.

<sup>103</sup> Galeotti & Arutunyan 2024, 165.

One might argue that it would not be likely that the Wagner Group would be entrusted with such a big responsibility if it were considered a potential rival elite. However, if getting rid of rival military elites is one of the decisive factors in this war, whether it be the root cause or just a convenient by-product, then the battle outcome is of inferior importance. In this new light, it would make perfect sense of the Russian government to want to conquer Bakhmut at all costs. It may well be that this small town with no more than 10,000 inhabitants before the war, became the subject of a disguised power battle between Prigozhin's mercenary army and his Kremlin opponents.<sup>104</sup>

Lastly, it is not impossible that that Prigozhin severely exaggerated the degree to which the Wagner group was deprived of the means of warfare, in order to camouflage their underperformance in battle.<sup>105</sup> The fact remains however that Prigozhin's opposition, whether sincere or not, became increasingly personal. By May 2023, Prigozhin was posting videos in which he scolded Russian defence ministers. This must have been extremely threatening for Russia's autocratic elite, and this as well as his June 2023 'march of justice' probably led to his premature death in the infamous August 2023 plane crash. It is unlikely that a fear of Wagner as an elite rival was of major influence to the decision to go to war in February 2022, but the dynamics of elite rivalry as known from other international conflicts have undoubtedly and demonstrably played a huge role in shaping the course of this conflict.

### *Discussion*

Although the 'historical grievance' explanation features in many narratives about this war, it has not been incorporated into the analysis of this thesis for a number of clear reasons. Firstly, it is predicated on a 'leader disposition' argument, which is unverifiable. Secondly, it cannot explain the timing and the exclusive focus on Ukraine. Thirdly and most importantly, historical injustice-based disputes very rarely

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<sup>104</sup> Osborn & Zufferey 2023, 307.

<sup>105</sup> Galeotti & Arutunyan 2024, 167.

lead to international conflict in recent history, and are therefore difficult to base a scholarly argument on.

None of the implications of the ‘NATO security threat’ explanation have been observed. We did not see consistent military aggression from Russia as a response to NATO eastward enlargement, nor did we see a difference between enlargement at Russia’s borders versus further away from Russia. We also did not find any NATO aggression just before the war which could explain Russia’s behaviour. However, the most essential reason to refute this theory is the ‘doubly decisive test’ of additional NATO expansion during the war, which should have been answered by the same kind of aggression as was unleashed in Ukraine, but which was not.

Of all the theories on the war’s root cause, the ‘popular control’ explanation is by far the most plausible. Three of its four implications were observed, most importantly the ‘doubly decisive’ implication 2. We found societal issues which make the leader unpopular domestically (economic underperformance) and in the ‘near abroad’ of Ukraine (military aggression). Most fundamentally, in Russia and in Ukraine we saw signs of immanent power loss by the Russian elite, in the form of uprisings, growing street protests and an increasing political divergence from Russia, exemplified in the Ukrainian rapprochement the West. This doubly decisive implication makes the explanation highly plausible. The propaganda performance became more dramatic and increasingly focussed on foreign enemies. Despite this being supportive evidence, this was not decisive for the theory’s plausibility. Finally, we did not see a focus on prestigious victories, which – being a straw-in-the-wind test – did not fundamentally undermine the plausibility.

The ‘land- and resource grab’ explanation has only yielded limited results. The ‘hoop test’ – the presence of resources – was passed, but the ‘smoking gun’ – resources which Russia lacks – was difficult to prove. Most importantly, the theory has been refuted because the ‘doubly decisive test’ was not passed: Russia does not conduct the attack in such a way that resources (whether human, farmland, forest or industry) are left intact, which we would suspect if resources were the invasion’s main cause. The straw-in-the-wind test

of Russia's order of attack being related to Ukraine's resources was also impossible to prove.

The 'elite rivalry' explanation has proven plausible in explaining the proceedings of the war, but it is unlikely to be its root cause. We did find an ageing leader, but he appeared to have his elite firmly under control before the war, instead of the latter being unruly and threatening. The autocrat did strengthen his control over the army, but despite this being a 'doubly decisive test', which makes the explanation significantly more likely, the tightening of his grip over the military only started after the war had already begun. This makes it unlikely that the war started because of elite rivalry. The third implication – rival elites required to engage in high-risk fighting – was observed too. This observation added to the plausibility but not crucially so. First of all, high-risk fighting for elite rivals is just one of many possible ways to decrease the threat. Second of all, we are not sure whether this elite threat existed before the war, let alone that it is its root cause. However, the observations do demonstrate that elite rivalry has considerable explanatory power for the dynamics of the conflict proceedings during this war.

## Conclusion

This thesis has looked at multiple rival explanations for the current Russia-Ukraine war using the rigour of process tracing. One of its ambitions has been to impose a clear separation between the different possible causes of the war, which is often lacking in popular narrative and therefore obfuscates the discussion. It has shown that, when formulating observable implications for the rival explanations, it becomes obvious that some of the commonly believed theories about how this war started are in fact highly implausible.

Consequently, we should be focussing more on explaining this war as a result of Russia losing grip on one of its self-declared 'spheres of influence', instead of blaming it on NATO expansion or Russia's alleged desire to restore the USSR or the Russian Empire. Historical injustice is undoubtedly genuinely perceived as such by the Russian elite, but as a scholarly explanation for the root cause of this conflict, there are too many things which it cannot account for. These

include the timing of the attack, the exclusive focus on Ukraine and the ambiguity of what Putin considers to be 'historically Russian'.

The most important thing we have learned is that it is not so much Ukraine itself, let alone its alleged 'Nazi-regime' or its potential future NATO membership, but instead the idea of Ukraine diverging away from Russia and becoming a more Western-oriented, democratic state that is alarming to the Russian elite with their idea of Ukraine as belonging to their 'sphere of influence'. Putin's dwindling domestic popularity demonstrates that it is not unlikely that, once Ukraine slips away from Russia's authoritarian control, his own population might follow and also pose similar demands for reform. This is the ultimate threat to the current regime's authority, and it is therefore likely to be the root cause of the invasion. On top of that, the war is likely a convenient reason to rally up support among an increasingly unsupportive domestic population.

This explanation is also historically verifiable: we can consistently link previous Russian military aggression to similar signs of popular dissent in Russian 'spheres of influence', as we saw with the invasion of Georgia and the Crimean Annexation after their respective Rose and Maidan revolutions. They can also be linked temporally to Putin's dwindling domestic popularity. Despite the fact that resources are unlikely to be the root cause, their potential utility to Russia should still be taken into account. While elite rivalry is also unlikely to be the root cause, its dynamics have shaped the war's proceedings to a great extent. This hopefully leads to increased emancipation of elite rivalry as a model for explaining international conflicts.

The most important suggestion for further research concerns data from sources which are not yet available due to the nature of the conflict and how difficult it is to obtain sensitive but potentially essential information from a closed authoritarian regime. For now, 'popular control' appears to be the most plausible explanation for the root cause of this conflict by far. However, this may change when new information would ever become available. This could be in the form of classified Kremlin documents, private diaries of army members or eye witness accounts of the behaviour of soldiers on the battlefield. It is imperative to keep a close eye on this war, to learn as much as



possible about Russia's motivations for initiating such conflicts, and to keep telling the stories of those who suffer.

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