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# Explanations of Russian Invasion to Ukraine: A Comparative Perspective <sup>(1)</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper probes a straightforward question: Why did Russia attack Ukraine in February 2022? Anchored in a comparative foreign policy perspective, the research provides a theoretical framework clarifying the external and internal factors of a state's foreign policy. External factors assume that a state's foreign policy is constrained by the structure of the international system from three unique theoretical lenses: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Internal factors assume that a state's foreign policy is a product of interactions among several institutions, interest groups, public opinion, and personals within its borders. The research concludes that the external factors explaining the Russian invasion of Ukraine are realist (geopolitics, energy super-state, and a great power status), constructivist (a shift in the Russian foreign policy trends throughout the last twenty years, from territorial integrity to the right of self-determination of all Slavic citizens in southern and eastern Europe), and liberalist rationales (energy versus sanctions as tools at the disposal of both Russia and the West). The research contends that internal factors explaining the Russian invasion of Ukraine are history and culture (Russian expansionist pattern), Russian strategic culture (a combination of conflicting orientations), Putin's regime and bureaucracies (his control over power and the support of the siloviki), Putin's cognitive system (Alexsander III's notions), and the public opinion and the church.

**Keywords:** Russian-Ukraine War, Conflict, Comparative Foreign policy

## التفسيرات المختلفة للغزو الروسي لأوكرانيا: منظور سياسة خارجية

### مقارن

### الملخص

تجيب هذه الدراسة عن تساؤل محدد وهو لماذا قررت روسيا شن هجوم عسكري على أوكرانيا في فبراير 2022 من منظور السياسة الخارجية المقارن. وتقدم الدراسة إطاراً نظرياً يوضح العوامل الداخلية والخارجية المؤثرة في السياسة الخارجية للدول كمدخل لتفسير السلوك الروسي تجاه أوكرانيا. تركز العوامل الخارجية في تحليل السياسة الخارجية الروسية تجاه أوكرانيا على منظورات ثلاثة: المنظور الواقعي والبنائي والليبرالي. أما العوامل الداخلية في تحليل السياسة الخارجية الروسية فتركز على المؤسسات، جماعات المصالح، الرأي العام، والأفراد. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى نتيجة مفادها أن

العوامل الخارجية (الجيوستراتيجية، الطاقة، ومكانة الدولة العظمى)، والبنائية (تحول في توجهات السياسة الخارجية الروسية)، والليبرالية (الطاقة في مقابل العقوبات) هي كلها تفسيرات متعددة ومختلفة للسلوك الروسي تجاه أوكرانيا. وتصل الدراسة كل هذه العوامل الداخلية والخارجية من منظور تحليل السياسة الخارجية المقارن كحقل مهم من حقول العلاقات الدولية سواء من منظور تاريخي للصراع أو من منظور ثقافي أو من منظور داخلي للمؤسسات الحاكمة في روسيا أو حتى من منظور فردي وتأثير القيادة السياسية الروسية في مجريات الصراع.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الحرب الروسية الأوكرانية، الصراع، السياسة الخارجية المقارنة

### Introduction

Political scientists are puzzled why Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022. This paper attempts to approach this inquiry from a comparative foreign policy standpoint, which links the field of international politics, the scheme through which actors interrelate with one another in the international arena, with the field of domestic politics, which scrutinizes the functions of the governments and the outcome of interactions among individuals, groups, and organizations within the state's borders. The research is centered on two key statements: the first claims that there is no one single explanation to the Russian decision to invade Ukraine; the second contends that an authentic explanation of the Russian invasion to Ukraine can only be illustrated by a mixture of internal and external factors, and that there is a kind of interaction between the internal and external factors that have caused the Russian decision to go to war in Ukraine.

Comparative foreign policy propositions posit that any foreign policy's justification usually consists of frequent factors which can be classified under two distinct types of explanations: those dealing with rationales outside the state, and those dealing with rationales inside the state. The first type presumes that the international environment is the sole explanation for states' foreign policy. To put it differently, external factors, such as the structure of the international system, the aspects of current international politics, and the behavior of other states, can direct the country to react in a particular way. The second type assumes that internal factors, such as types of the domestic political and economic regimes, interactions among citizens and groups within that regime, the government's structural organization, public opinion, and the leaders' personality, are the core

fundamentals to explain a state's foreign policy (Beasley R. K., 2017). The research is divided into three key sections: the first section puts forth the paper's theoretical framework (internal and external explanations of a state's foreign policy); the second section addresses the external factors that explain the Russian decision to wage a war against Ukraine; whereas the third section pinpoints the internal factors explaining the Russian decision to attack Ukraine.

### **Theoretical Framework: External and Internal Factors of A State's Foreign Policy**

This work embraces two leading methodologies in explaining states' foreign policy. The first methodology, the *case-study* approach, derived from the field of comparative politics. It is a useful approach to explain specific decisions in foreign policy through content analysis, analyzing speeches and writings of decision makers through which scholars can discover the leaders' operational codes and cognitive systems. The second methodology is the *role theory* which assumes that a state's foreign policy is a product of interactions between the external factors (others/the international system) and internal factors (ego/ how each state perceives itself within international politics). In other words, role theory states that the international system consists of numerous states, and each state is holding its own role. The actor that is embracing a role (behavior/expectations) is frequently referred to as "ego", while the other actors within the international community who react (appropriate or inappropriate role behavior) are usually referred to as "alter(s)." (Beasley J. S., 2017). Using these two guiding methodologies, the research maintains that external factors of states' foreign policy lie in the assumptions of the three leading schools of thought (realism, liberalism, and constructivism). While the internal factors of states' foreign policy rest in the leader's personality, bureaucracies, political regimes, and public opinion.

### **External Factors: Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism**

External factors presume that each country, irrespective of the nature of its political regime, its past, or its culture, exists within a global system that constrains its options and alternatives in foreign policy. This assumption originates from notions of international relations such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism (Beasley R. K., 2017). Realists assume that the milestone of international politics is anarchy, absence of a universal government globally, which forces all states across the world to embrace the self-help

principle and acquire military and economic power as the sole method through which they could survive and defend their boundaries in a hostile environment. According to realist presumptions, once the power of the hegemon relatively dwindles, rising powers may embrace defying positions in their foreign policy against the hegemon (Haas, 2017).

Liberalism maintains that interdependence among states sets boundaries and limitations on their foreign policy because the prosperity of one country depends heavily on the wellbeing of other countries. Therefore, when one country causes harm to another country, it is similarly causing harm to itself. In other words, getting into a conflict or a war between interdependent countries causes harm to both since it undermines both states' trade and market. Therefore, states that are mutually interdependent with must consider the high cost of war in their foreign policy. Constructivism argues that the international system is an outcome of the social interactions of states and shared understandings of them in global society. Those interactions and understandings create global norms of proper behavior that restrict the margin of movement in states' foreign policies. In other words, constructivism claims that states habitually stay away from breaching global norms, or taking illegitimate actions in international politics, because other actors may punish them or disgrace them (Graham, 2022).

By and large, external factors focus on characteristics of the international system that move forward or pull-out states toward specific foreign policy alternatives. Realism suggests that states driven by egotism strive to acquire military power and make as many alliances as possible, whilst fragile states succumb to other powerful states. Liberalism presumes that interdependence produces more cooperation among states and a willingness of fragile economies to submit to the forces of free-market economy. Constructivism maintains that international norms, constructed throughout time and history, constrain states foreign policy. All the three major perspectives contend that states' foreign policies are an outcome of their significance, positions, and interactions with other actors in international politics (Beasley 2017).

### **Internal Factors: Leaders' Personality, Bureaucracies, Political regime, and Public Opinion**

Theories that are explain states' foreign policy by looking into the black box of the state tend to suggest that internal factors, such as the type of the political and economic regime, interest groups, bureaucracies, leader's

personalities, and culture, are so much influential in leading the states' foreign policies into diverse directions even though they confront identical external factors. In other words, these theories recognize the conflict of interests and priorities among the various institutions, interest groups, public opinion, and persons within each state that produce diverse and sometimes irrational foreign policies. Hence, these theories are anchored in four major assumptions: the first claims that ideational factors, such as identity and history of the state, are as significant as the material factors in foreign policy, such as military and economic power. The second assumption contends that a leader's cognitive and operational code matters in defining the state's foreign policy alternatives. The third assumption is that bureaucracies within any state are decisive in determining the state's foreign policy options. The final assumption holds that the type of political system, whether authoritarian or democratic, accounts for the distinct foreign policies of the states in the international arena (Alden, 2017).

### **External Explanations Russian decision: Realist, Constructivist, and Liberal Perspectives**

From a realist perspective, there are three key explanations of the Russian invasion to Ukraine: geopolitical realities, Russia's turning into an energy super-state, and the restricting of international order. The first key explanation is derived from a geopolitical twist and turn. Russia is forced to project its power abroad to adjacent territories due to its geopolitical vulnerability. Russia has no natural mountains or forests to defend its massive mainland, which makes the probability of being effortlessly invaded extremely high. Such a sense of perceived danger fostered the belief within the Russian circles that expansion to adjacent zones is the only strategy for survival in a hostile environment. Consequently, the Russian's strategic orientation leaned upon inaugurating buffer-zones and backyards around the Russian territories through which it can defend its borders from a distance (Moisio, 2022). Against this backdrop, Russia perceived NATO's expansion to the east, through the prospect of its membership to eastern European countries, as an intrusion of the western powers in Russia's conventional backyards. Likewise, Russia considered that the western endeavors to bring about democracy and political freedom in the former soviet states as a tool to besiege and restrict the Russian power (Beasley J. S., 2017). Therefore, Russia launched a "pre-emptive" war against Ukraine based upon reasonable worries of a forthcoming external menace. Such a reasoning has been echoed

in John Mearsheimer's explanation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Mearsheimer argued that the war in Ukraine could have been avoided and Crimea and the Donbass could have been even now a part of Ukraine if NATO had chosen not to spread out to include Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2022). Henry Kissinger also claimed that Ukraine's survival relies heavily on being a neutral or a "bridge" country between the west and Russia. Kissinger contended that Russia has been pushed to invade Ukraine because the west refused to acknowledge Russia as a substantial power that has its own spheres of interests (Moisio, 2022).

The second key explanation is derived from Russia's growing into an energy super-state. Thirty years ago, Russia suffered a severe budget deficit and its economy rested on the American and European financial assistance. Therefore, the margin of movement of the Russian foreign policy in its traditional spheres of influence, during the 1990s, was extremely limited. However, due to the rapid increase of energy prices worldwide, the Russian economy has become less dependent on the West's support, and more flourishing. Such a change in the Russia economy, from being vulnerable and "dysfunctional" to a rising economy, has produced a more confident Russian foreign policy. Russia opted to use the new economic reality, being "an energy super-state", as a significant strategy to project its political influence worldwide. In other words, starting from 2005, the Russian foreign policy used "oil, gas, and energy transportation networks" to gain more influence, notably with the European countries and the former soviet states (J. S. Beasley 2017).

The third key explanation lies in Russia's yearning to restore its great power status and challenge the unipolar order set by Washington. The Russian defiance to the American world order materialized during the Russian military conflict with Georgia in 2008, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and reached its peak with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Shigeki, 2022). In other words, the Russian invasion of Ukraine exemplifies a decisive shift from a unipolar to a "multi-order" world. Simply, the international world has been divided into three distinct worlds, with different rules and conceptions. The first world is the American world, which relies on the liberal international norms and embraces democratic values and capitalism as a foundation of international order. The second world is the Chinese world, which is anchored in the Belt and Road initiative, and sticks

to the liberal international order but with a greater focus on issues of sovereignty and non-intervention. The third world is the Russian world, which does not align with the liberal international order, and embraces nationalism and military and economic power as a foundation in international politics and as a tool to create a 'Eurasian continent' made up of the former Soviet states (Flockhart, 2022).

Constructivists usually employ the "hall of mirrors" metaphor for describing the international system. According to this analysis, a state's foreign policy is an outcome of interaction between the "self" (how Russia perceives itself in the international order) and "others" (how Russia is perceived and treated by other actors in the international order). From a historical perspective, the identity of the Russian state (self) had been articulated *vis-à-vis* the West (others). Russia has always aspired to be recognized as a great power by the Western countries. Such an aspiration has always been escorted by a Russian belief of being intentionally isolated and marginalized by the West. Throughout the Russian modern history, there has been three significant schools of thought in its foreign policy. The first, 'Westernizers', considers Russia as an integral part of the western culture, and consequently it should align with the western values and norms. The second school of thought, 'Eurasians', defies the western norms and values, and points instead to the exceptionality of the Russian civilization and that all Eurasian land ought to be incorporated into the Russian sphere. The third school of thought, 'statists', contends that Russia is a great power, and the West must recognize such a reality, in which case any kind of interference to its buffer zones or backyards shall be deemed to be an existential threat to the Russian state (Beasley J. S., 2017). It can be argued that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is the product of a mixture of notions derived from the two latter schools of thought (Eurasians and statists); given that Putin and his inner circle (silo Viki) repeatedly emphasized the daydream of a united Eurasian world and the intolerance towards any existential threats to the Russian state.

Form a constructivist standpoint, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has nothing to do with a shift in Putin's ideas or attributes. It is rather overwhelmingly an expected result of a historical framework of interfaces between (the Russian policy of a frequent expansionism in the last two decades) and the West's response in Georgia 2008 and in Crimea in 2014). In other words, there has been a strategic shift in the Russian foreign policy from



focusing on safeguarding the “territorial integrity” of the Russian borders at the beginning of the 2000s to projecting the “right of self-determination” as a foundation for the Russian conquest in Georgia, Crimea, and now in Ukraine. Such a strategic change in the Russian foreign policy is attributed to the quick recovery of its economy owing to the rapid growth of oil and gas prices as well as the West’s weak response to the Russian war against Georgia in 2008 and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Shigeki, 2022).

From a liberalist perspective, wars among interdependent countries provide for a lose-lose situation due to the high cost that each country must pay. However, once the war began in February 2022, each side decided to utilize the tools at their disposal to raise the cost of war on the other side. While the Russians took advantage of their near monopoly of oil and gas against the European countries, the Western countries, Europeans, and Americans, resorted to impose unprecedented crippling sanctions on the Russian economy and the Russian elite, with a view to weakening Putin’s political and economic regime. While the Western sanctions might not be useful in the short-term, they are predicted to be very successful, in the long run, at fulfilling their target: undermining Russia’s military and economic power (Chyzh, 2022). From the Russian perspective, Moscow employs its leverage as “a Eurasian energy exporter” as a weapon system to blackmail the European countries by cutting gas deliveries whenever it chooses. However, this is but one part of the big picture, since one of the key explanations of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is that Russia is essentially pressing to have access to energy resources in Ukraine, to fill its resources gap, as well as to prevent Ukraine from being an apt competitor to the Russian energy resources in the future (Thompson, 2022).

### **Internal Explanations of the Russian War: Identity, Culture, Putin, Siloviki, Public Opinion**

The first internal explanation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine leans to history and identity. Historically, there has been a persistent pattern observed in the Russian foreign policy, which has always revolved around expansion into adjacent territories to the Russian mainland. The Russian expansionist pattern started as early as seven centuries ago, projecting its frontiers into Eurasia and other territories worldwide, and resulted in constructing a gigantic empire, populated with a host of races and nationalities, and made up at its acme sizing over “one sixth” of the globe. Throughout those seven centuries, the Russian identity has been formulated

by its constant seizure and invasion of neighboring territories with distinct cultures and ethnicities. Therefore, the Russian identity has been divided into two contradictory sets of feelings towards the West and Europe: the first is categorized as “Westernizers” which maintains that Russia fits into the European continent, and it ought to get along with the culture and values held by the European and Western nations, while the second set of feelings is characterized as “Slavophiles” which contends that Russia is a unique civilization that belongs to the Slavic culture and values, as opposed to the Western norms and values (Beasley J. S., 2017).

Against this backdrop, the Russian foreign policy has been formulated in the 1990s and the 2000s. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and, and the modern-day Russia’s inheritance of its legitimate responsibility and membership in global organizations, the Russian foreign policy, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, sought to incorporate itself into the Western institutions. However, such a Russian inclination to get integrated into the Western camp did not last for long, due to lack of support for the weak and vulnerable Russian state at that time, and the Russian feeling of marginalization by the western countries. Therefore, once Vladimir Putin came to power in 2002, the Russian foreign policy embarked on a brand-new tendency against the Western nations and sponsored multipolarity as opposed to the American unipolarity (Beasley J. S., 2017).

The second internal explanation to the Russian invasion to Ukraine is derived from Russia’s strategic culture, which is anchored in two key elements. The first is a deep-rooted feeling of “vulnerability” *vis-à-vis* the Western states. That vulnerability urges the Russian regimes, no matter who is in power, to create a “strategic depth and buffer zones” around its own boundaries as a defensive way against the fact that Russia lacks natural defenses on its borders, and a bad record of repetitive invasions by the Western nations throughout history, as well as a sense of a conspiracy embraced by Western powers to topple the Russian regime and the pro-Russia regimes in the former Soviet states. The second element of the Russian strategic culture originates in Russia’s sense of entitlement: a profound feeling that it has the right to be recognized as massive world power, combined with a prerogative of acquiring its own spheres of influence in its former Soviet states and in Eurasia mainland. Considering these two elements, Ukraine’s reorientation towards the Western camp is perceived by

the Russian political and military circles as an existential threat to its core interests and its position as a huge power; so much so that the Kremlin leaders described the “the Euromaidan revolution as a “Western-instigated coup” designed by the Western countries to get Ukraine out of Russia’s compass. They also believe that Ukraine’s membership in the European Union is tantamount to being a member in NATO. The Russian calculations of the situation rest upon the fact that annexing Crimea and seizing some southern and eastern parts of Ukraine would make it impossible for Ukraine to join NATO due to the rules of NATO that do not accept the membership of any country that is in “territorial or ethno-political” conflict (Götz, 2022).

The third internal explanation has to do with Putin’s regime and bureaucracies. It can be argued that the difference between a democratic country and a non-democratic country is comparable to the difference between driving a car with brakes and driving a car without brakes. The Russian regime, led by Putin, has no brakes to hold him back from launching a war because the powers of both legislative and judiciary branches are concentrated in the executive branch, particularly the Russian president. In addition, the powers of the Kremlin in foreign policy have been hijacked by the Russian security services, particularly the Federal Security Bureau (FSB) and Foreign Intelligence Service. Moreover, the ‘siloviki’, the most influential interest group in Russia, composed of working and retired personnel of the army, security services, and law enforcement corps, strongly back Putin’s beliefs and notions about the necessity of Russia’s resurrection as a great power once again in international politics (J. S. Beasley 2017).

The fourth internal explanation is attributed to Putin’s personality and leadership style. Putin and his inner circle of leaders believe in and adhere to the guidelines of their idol, Alexander III. Alexander III, as such, is a source of inspiration for Putin’s leadership since he succeeded during his time in power, as one of the tsars, to bring the Russian empire together. Alexander III believed that Russia is beset by its enemies, and that allies are eventually unfaithful to Moscow and therefore the only friend that Russia can count on is its own armed forces. Putin embraces Alexander III’s core ideas because he perceives the international environment as antagonistic and threatening to the Russian’s national interests. Not only does he rely on negotiations, alliances, or consensus as the most effective instruments in foreign policy, but

also holds that staunch belief in the Russian military power as the most successful mechanism to bring Russia back as a global power. It follows that, for Putin, no negotiation would be beneficial unless backed by the Russian military power (Shigeki, 2022).

The last internal explanation is more related to public opinion and the church effect. Though authoritarian regimes, such as the Russian regime, is not freely chosen by the people, the public opinion's attitude can yet restrain the regime in its foreign policy alternatives if they do not go in line with the public opinion's mood. However, most of the Russian people, nearly 60%, supported the Russian military invasion of Ukraine once initiated in February 2022. Anchored in the rally behind the flag effect tactic, the Russian regime utilized the Western sanctions, imposed on Russia by the United States and European countries, to ignite the nationalistic emotions and justifications to gain the Russian public opinion's support for Putin's leadership. Therefore, the support for the war by the Russian public opinion leapt up by 71-73% (Flockhart, 2022). According to the most recent public opinion polls, 78% of the Russian people support the Russian military operations in Ukraine (Shigeki, 2022). And to address the opposition voiced by some Russians to the war, the Russian regime has tightened up its grip on the mass media, and passed a new legislation, from the Kremlin, which authorizes the legal branch to send the opponents of the war into a labor camp for up to 15 years (Star, 2022). In addition, the Russian regime capitalized upon the Orthodox Church's, Patriarch Kirill, support to the war. Kirill justified the Putin's war against Ukraine, from a religious perspective, to stabilize what he described as a domestic "rebellion" by the Ukrainians against the homeland, Russia, and it is the holy obligation of the Russian government to "re-incorporate" the insurgent territories into the homeland (Kilp, 2022).

## Conclusion

From a comparative foreign-policy standpoint, ample explanations of the Russian invasion of Ukraine are a concoction of external and internal factors. Centered on two leading methodologies: case-study approach and the role theory, this paper contends that there are external explanations of the Russian decision to invade Ukraine from three unique theoretical insights: realism, constructivism, and liberalism. From a realist lens, three rationales guided the Russian conduct in Ukraine. The first rationale revolved around the geopolitical vulnerability of the Russian boundaries to any peripheral

belligerence, due to its lack of natural defenses on its borders, which prompted the Russian successive regimes to create buffer zones all around the Russian mainland as being Russia's first and foremost strategic defense line. In other words, Russia considered NATO's expansion to the eastern European countries, particularly Ukraine, as an incursion to its celestial sphere of influence, which follows that its attack against Ukraine is viewed as a reactionary endeavor to undermine the Western plans of actions. The writings of John Mearsheimer and Henry Kissinger lie under such a category of explanations. The second rationale stems from Russia's transformation from being a weak, dysfunctional, and vulnerable state in the 1990s into a robust economy and an energy super-state in the 2000s. Such a transformation prompted Russia to be more assertive in its foreign policy, whereupon the Russian regime chose to turn its resources, oil, gas, and energy transportation networks, into political mechanisms to exercise influence and boost its global status worldwide. The third rationale revolves around the Russian aspiration to defy the unipolar world, dominated by the United States, and to enforce its own world of Eurasia, sphere of influence, comprised of the former soviet states.

From a constructivist perspective, based upon the metaphor of the "hall of mirrors", there has been a mixture of Russian moods towards the Western powers: a desire to be acknowledged by the Western nations as a power to be reckoned, coupled with a feeling of being isolated and ignored by them. However, the Russian regime, in Ukraine crisis, embraced the 'Eurasians' conceptions that challenge the western standards and beliefs and the 'statists' conceptions which show zero-tolerance towards anything perceived as an existential threat to the Russian state. Therefore, the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be attributable to a strategic shift in the Russian foreign policy orientations throughout the past two decades, from territorial integrity of the Russian borders to the right of self-determination of all Slavic citizens in southern and Eastern Europe. From a liberalist angle, war is a lose-lose situation for the two contending sides (i.e., Russia and the West). However, each of the two sides has endeavored to raise the cost of war on the other. The western nations punched the Russian state through imposing crippling sanctions on the Russian economy and Russian political figures, and the Russian regime punched back by cutting energy supplies to European continent.

On the other side of the fence, the research contends that there are five essential internal explanations of the Russian decision to invade Ukraine. The first rationale has to do with the history and identity of the Russian state which had always relied upon expansion to adjacent territories, throughout seven centuries, to ensure the survival of the Russian empire. The second rationale is derived from the Russian strategic culture, which is a combination of a sense of vulnerability and a self-image in which Russia is viewed as a great power that ought to be recognized by the West. The third rationale is related to Putin's regime and bureaucracies. Putin controlled over the Kremlin and was backed by the security services and the siloviki that championed the revival of Russia as a great power again. The fourth rationale revolved around Putin's cognitive system which deeply counted upon the ideas of Alexander III, who assumed that Russia is encircled by rivals and that it should use its force as the only self-assurance for its survival. The last rationale attributes the Russian decision to the support shown by the greater part of the Russian public opinion and the Orthodox Church to the regime's military actions in Ukraine.

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