

Inside Vladimir Putin's Hall of Mirrors: How the Kremlin's Miscalculation of Western Resolve Emboldened Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Mikhail Polianskii 

Department of International Institutions, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF), Germany
Email: polianskii@hsfk.de

Abstract

Why did Vladimir Putin order the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, despite numerous warnings from Western countries about the consequences of such an action? This article argues that misperceptions about having the upper hand vis-à-vis Western countries, formed and proliferated among the Russian leadership, emboldened the Kremlin to launch the military invasion of Ukraine, assuming that the West would stand down in the face of the attack. Based on a detailed analysis of Russian elites' discourse through the theoretical lens of interdependence studies, this study demonstrates that Putin miscalculated Western resolve largely because of two key misperceptions. First, Putin's elites were convinced that the West was asymmetrically dependent on Russia, viewing it as a strategic resource that would tie the hands of Western and EU countries, eventually making them accept the outcome of the war. Second, the Kremlin believed that Ukraine occupied a secondary role in Western interests that would further limit the West's involvement in the conflict, as it would not risk exposing its dependence on Moscow for the sake of an issue that, in the Kremlin's eyes, was marginal to European and American security.

Keywords: war in Ukraine; misperceptions and conflict; Putin; Russian foreign policy

“In the early days of the war, one [Russian] official, told me that ... Americans will rush to beg us for peace.”

Defected former Russian Diplomat Boris Bondarev (2022)

Introduction

One of the most underexplored aspects in the academic debate regarding Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was the West's¹ failure to deter it, despite clear and unambiguous warnings. Consider ex-president Medvedev's (2022) claim at the infamous National Security Council session on the eve of the invasion. While supporting the decision to recognize the independence of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), he asserted that after some minor setbacks, as in 2008 after Russia's invasion of Georgia, Western states would “come to Russia and suggest resuming relations across the board” since “Russia means a lot more than Ukraine for the international community and our friends in the United States and the European Union.” (Security Council 2022). Re-reading these lines more than two years after the war began, one cannot help but ask why the Kremlin assumed that the West

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would seek to maintain its relationship with Russia, even though it appeared that Moscow no longer felt bound by any commitments. Understanding this miscalculation of Putin's elites can help uncover why Putin saw the war as a viable course of action. Answering this question would not only explain why US and European deterrence efforts aimed at preventing Russia's invasion proved largely futile, but also provide a better understanding of the strategic context in which the decision to launch the renewed invasion was made.

In this article, I argue that Russia's miscalculation that Western involvement would be minimal and predominantly rhetorical was strongly influenced by two key misperceptions. The first was the conviction that Western states were asymmetrically dependent on Russia, which Moscow believed could be strategically used to constrain the West's response. The second, related idea was that the West would abandon Ukraine in the event of an invasion, as it would otherwise risk exposing its "vulnerable" dependent position on Russia over an issue the Kremlin believed played only a secondary role in the West's core interests. This is not to say that the miscalculation concerning Western resolve was influenced only by these two misperceptions. The miscalculation about the readiness of Western countries to come to Ukraine's rescue most likely had many ingredients. Yet, the degree to which Russian decision-makers underestimated the West's resolve to defend Ukraine and the role that it played in the Kremlin's pre-war decision-making deserves particular academic scrutiny.

To underpin the argument analytically, I use findings from interdependence studies as well as insights from the literature on misperceptions in foreign policy decision-making. Broadly defining interdependence as a situation characterized by mutual dependence and reciprocal effects among international actors in spheres of mutual importance (Keohane and Nye 2012, 7), I show how interdependence, apart from its material dimension, was misperceived by the Kremlin as its own strategic resource and a liability on the part of the West. Through this lens, I demonstrate that Russia expected Western countries to exercise restraint out of self-interest, preferring not to expose an allegedly asymmetrically dependent position. Through this causal mechanism, interdependence contributed to the conflict by miscalculation, as its perceived effects led Moscow to pursue a riskier and more aggressive strategy than it would otherwise have done.

It is not my intention to assert that the misperceptions held by Putin and his elites regarding the impact of Western dependence were the sole reasons behind Russia's invasion. Situating this study in the broader discussion of the causes of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, I contend, however, that had Putin had a more realistic understanding of Western resolve, he would not have ordered the full-fledged attack on Ukraine as he did in February 2022. I also acknowledge that the run-up to the conflict, as well as its causes, cannot be fully understood without looking at the interactional dimension: Western countries' assessment of Putin's willingness to break off ties with the West should also be carefully analyzed, as it might have prevented them from taking Putin's escalation even more seriously (Lieven 2022). However, this article predominantly focuses on Russia's rationale, reserving the Western part of the story for future research endeavors. Moreover, since the motives and goals of the Russian leadership might have shifted since February 24, 2022, this article only addresses the question of why Putin launched the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Lastly, given the inherent limitations of attempting to draw lessons from current—and at the time of writing still ongoing—events, this article should be seen as a stepping stone for a larger discussion of the causes of and the broader lessons to be drawn from this war, rather than a definitive answer to the fundamental question of why Putin miscalculated Western resolve to defend Ukraine. Thus, due to the limited volume of available and reliable empirical data at the moment of writing, the article does not formulate a new theory but pragmatically uses an established theoretical framework to shed light on Putin's decision to launch the invasion.

The article is organized as follows. First, it situates the study in the broader literature of the Russian-Western conflict and presents a guiding theoretical framework that informs the empirical part of the article, demonstrating how interdependence and, most importantly, the perception thereof, can contribute to conflict by miscalculation. The article then briefly explains the

methodological approach, showing how examining the discourse of Russian elites can be instrumental in answering the research question. Next, I proceed to the main part of the article, where I show how the belief that Russia had the upper hand over the West due to the perceived asymmetric dependence dominated the Russian elites' discourse. In the next step, the article demonstrates how this misperception was further strengthened by the Kremlin's erroneous belief in the secondary importance of Ukraine at large, as well as the West in particular. The study concludes by recapitulating its main findings, followed by a discussion on the role of misperceptions borne out of the interdependence between Russia and the West at the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, and how this could be better embedded in the analysis of Russian foreign policy.

Situating Interdependence and Misperceptions in the Debates on Causes of Russia's Invasion

Vladimir Putin's decision to start the war in Ukraine in February 2022 baffled countless observers and analysts, becoming a matter of heated political and academic debates, with some even arguing that the Russian president might have gone insane (Malek 2022) and that no theory can ever explain Russia's offensive (Ganesh 2022). While acknowledging persisting challenges in the research of Russian foreign policy (Polianskii 2024), the majority of scholars have defied such a self-defeating position, offering critical insights into the driving forces behind Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

One prominent account suggests that Russia's international behaviour follows the necessary law-like regularities of great-power politics, and any major power when confronted with similar external pressures and opportunities would respond as Moscow did vis-à-vis Western attempts to expand its influence in Eastern Europe (Walt 2022). According to this school of thought, Russia aims to keep other great powers and their alliances, such as NATO and the EU, far away from its borders. Against the background of Ukraine's drift towards the West in recent years, the argument goes that Russia decided to stymie this development by military means (cf. Graham and Doris 2022).

Another prominent strand of literature argues that the causes of Russia's invasion are rooted in its neo-imperialistic ambitions. Scholars in this tradition suggest that Russia's invasion was motivated by Moscow's desire to reassert control over territories that were once part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, with Ukraine being the central element (Marples, 2022; Sasse, 2022; Götz and Staun, 2022). This view is supported by recent works from Alexander Etkind (2023) and Gwen Sasse (2023), which emphasize the historical, cultural, and economic factors driving Russia's expansionist policies in its neighbourhood. Furthermore, Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel (2024) similarly highlight the key role of Russia's "re-imperialization" as a way to prevent the growing regime and identity divergence between Russia and Ukraine, and the role that it played in producing the invasion.

Through the lens of regime dynamics, some analysts argue that Putin's actions were primarily driven by the need to secure his grip on power. According to this perspective, Putin saw the Maidan revolution of 2013, the annexation of Crimea, and the invasion of 2022 as ways to divert the population's attention from domestic issues and to bolster his own regime's stability against the backdrop of rising internal problems (McFaul and Person 2022; Gomza 2022). Michael Kimmage's recent book (2024), while acknowledging the Western mistakes of not taking Ukraine's concerns seriously, puts Russia's domestic political imperatives and the personalistic nature of Putin's regime front and centre in the discussion of the ingredients of Putin's eventual decision to go to war.

Finally, it is essential to note that some researchers advocate for a more integrated and eclectic approach to understanding Russia's foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine. These scholars argue that the causes of Russia's aggressive behaviour towards Ukraine are complex and should be examined at the intersection of internal affairs in Ukraine and Russia, their bilateral relationship, as well as their relationships with the West (cf. Kuzio 2017). Arel and Driscoll (2023), for instance, highlight the multifaceted nature of the conflict, blending geopolitical, imperialistic, and regime-centric

explanations of the growing conflict between Russia and Western countries, as well as the conflict in Ukraine in this context. D'Anieri (2023), in his turn, advances a three-pronged argument, contending that i) the security dilemma, ii) the impact of democratization on geopolitics, and iii) the incompatible goals of a post-Cold War Europe played a pivotal role in producing Russia's aggression towards its neighbor. A similar multi-causal view of the roots of the invasion is also observed in Hal Brands' recent edited collection (2024), which not only prominently discusses various domestic and international driving forces of Russia's aggressive foreign policy, but also elaborates on its broader implications on global instability and strategic rivalry.

While all the above-mentioned explanations address the crucial question of the goals behind Putin's invasion of Ukraine, no theory can claim to single-handedly account for Russia's aggression (Polianskii 2024). Without seeking to make a final call in this debate, my article turns to another, no less crucial question: why did Putin and his elites expect to achieve their goals with the invasion in the first place? In addressing this question, I argue that it is necessary to factor in the role of misperceptions at the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine. As I show in the following, misperceptions about the level of economic interdependence between Russia and Western countries in particular have played a significant role in producing the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. With this in mind, I briefly review the scholarly debate on the interrelation between interdependence and conflict, and how its misperceived effects can lead to war by miscalculation.

After the end of the Cold War, many believed that Russia's unprecedented level of interconnectedness with the West and its markets for energy exports would encourage Moscow's restraint. Yet, this increased economic interdependence has not turned out to be a panacea for maintaining peace in Europe (Haas 2022). What is more, apart from failing to prevent the relapse of Russian-Western confrontation, I argue that interdependence has in fact contributed to the increased belligerence of Russia vis-à-vis the West, as its effects have influenced Putin's elites' misperceptions in a decisive tension-producing manner in the late 2010s.

Early interdependence theorists posited that increased trade and interconnectedness would eventually procure peace in international relations. Sir Robert Angell (1969) was among the first to emphasize that the reduction of distance and difference would directly, though unintentionally, pacify world politics (cf. de Wilde 1991). This mechanism has been developed and discussed in both qualitative and large-N studies, becoming a matter of heated debate among International Relations scholars (cf. Barbieri, 1996; Dorussen, 1999). Proponents of the liberal school, for instance, argued that the prospect of inevitably high costs of terminating interdependence would prevent the involved parties from initiating direct confrontation (Gartzke, Li, and Boehmer 2001). In a globalized world, where the costs of disrupting relations have risen to prohibitive levels, any major conflict between highly interdependent states would be practically suicidal (Mastanduno 1999). States, liberals argue, would eventually come to recognize this and conclude that they can no longer afford wars (Mousseau 2019).

Realists, on the other hand, assert that interdependence leads to diametrically opposite outcomes and propose two central mechanisms. The first mechanism posits that interdependence produces not only new venues for cooperation but also numerous issues because of competition, which can eventually lead to conflict (Doyle, 2005; Maoz, 2009). For instance, Pevehouse (2004) finds that states with higher levels of economic interdependence experience more nonviolent conflict with their trade partners than with other countries. The second mechanism suggests that states, fearing losses in relative power through trade cut-offs, will scramble to reduce the vulnerability that dependency brings, which can also lead to increased tensions (cf. Gelpi and Grieco 2008).

Similarly, theorists within Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions view economic interdependence as a cause of conflict, as it creates tensions between developed and developing states. They believe that the economic relationships created through this interdependence are fundamentally exploitative, hindering the growth of poorer states and promoting the economic and political domination of the more developed states (Cardoso and Faletto 1979). In short, the literature on the interrelation of interdependence and conflict has not yet produced a definitive answer, and scholars tend to agree

that the net impact of economic interdependence on peace within a dyad is theoretically indeterminate (cf. Levy and Mulligan 2022). Depending on case-specific factors, situations of dependence can cut both ways (Copeland 2014; Mattlin and Wigell 2016). Below, I elaborate on a few of these factors, focusing on the strand of literature that posits that interdependence can indeed lead to more inter-state tensions.

Numerous scholars contend that interdependence can become a particularly lucrative source of power when there is a disbalance or asymmetry in trade activities. Since trade tends to produce reciprocal but rarely “perfectly symmetrical” effects of transactions, asymmetrical interdependence has become commonplace in international politics (Barbieri 1996). With economic and political globalization creating a dense web of international dependencies, asymmetries are argued to have resulted in numerous “security consequences,” and have increasingly been “weaponized” (Farrell and Newman, 2019, 2020; Gertz and Evers, 2020). Yet, there is no consensus on how exactly asymmetric interdependence can lead to conflict. Liberals argue that less dependent states are more prone to initiate conflict since they have less to lose from breaking economic ties (Aydin-Düzgüt, Balta, and O’Donohue 2020). However, realists maintain that the more dependent countries are likely to start conflicts as they try to escape the economic vulnerability that interdependence brings (Copeland 1996, 22). Wright (2013) develops this argument, asserting that asymmetric interdependence can potentially create a spiraling crisis cycle if one side attempts to exploit the other’s dependency, questioning its resolve to defend its interests in a crisis situation. In sum, as Copeland (2014) encapsulates the dynamic: “In any situation of asymmetrical interdependence, the high costs of war should give the more dependent state, state Y, a big reason to avoid war. But the less dependent state, state X, knowing Y’s desire to avoid war, has an incentive to coerce it into making concessions through the use of military threats.”

Russian-Western relations of interdependence² have frequently been described as asymmetric, but attempts to apply this strand of interdependence literature to this dyad have produced similarly mixed results (cf. Silva and Selden, 2020; Zheng, 2021). Specifically, several pundits have pointed out that Russia, due to its dominance in exporting natural gas to Europe, has obtained strategic leverage vis-à-vis importers of its raw materials and has used its energy resources as an instrument of political influence (Newnam 2011). Many emphasize that Russia indeed sees import dependence of individual countries as a bargaining chip in its geopolitical calculus, and uses dependence on critical energy sources as a weapon (Harsem and Claes 2013; Balmaceda, 2014; Krickovic 2015; Schmidt-Felzmann 2016). After 2014 in particular, Russia is argued to have been expanding its energy cooperation with Europe and others in order to later capitalize on its strong position, and erode Western solidarity with Ukraine (Gustafson, 2020; Kanet and Moulioukova 2022). Others, however, underline that the trade in natural gas has provided mutual benefits and dependencies, highlighting that the costs of a supply disruption to both the recipient and the supplier actually kept the parties from conflict (Casier 2011; Romanova 2012). Notwithstanding extant research on this topic, there is still little agreement on whether trade in natural gas with Russia provides it with a source of foreign policy power (Stoelzel, Chadwick, and Long 2023).

Drawing from the recent findings of interdependence studies and their practical application to Russian-Western relations, this article advances the argument that beyond the objective measurement of interdependence and its features, to understand the roots of interstate conflict, particularly between Russia and Western countries, one must go beyond the classic understanding of political or economic interdependence and examine the more intangible effects it produces. Special attention should be paid to how involved states can misperceive interdependence and its effects.

For the purposes of this article, I define misperceptions as the gap between the world as it actually exists and the world as it exists in the mind of the perceiver (Duelfer and Dyson 2011). Decision-makers have been found to regularly misrepresent the information available to them, leading to inaccurate inferences, miscalculations of consequences, and conflicts (Huddy, Sears, and Levy 2013). Given that misperceptions are quite common in foreign policy decision-making, and different causal mechanisms have been identified as to how they could lead to war (Jervis 2017;

Lieberman 2007), this article focuses on the strand of literature that demonstrates how interdependence-related misperceptions can potentially lead to conflict.

Recent findings in interdependence studies emphasize the need to explore the consequences of subjective perceptions on the outcomes of interdependence, as some argue that war and peace “critically depend” upon how leaders perceive interdependence (Jing et al. 2017). The traditional argument of interdependence theorists is that it reduces the likelihood of war driven by misperceptions. The suggested mechanism is quite straightforward: trade increases contact, communication, familiarity, and understanding, which in turn reduces the misperceptions that contribute to war (cf. Deutsch 1957). Increased contact is good for peace—contact reduces misperceptions, increases understanding, leads to a convergence of cultures, fosters formal and informal institutions to facilitate trade, and has spillover effects into other areas that lead to greater cooperation (Levy 2003). It has also been argued that interdependence decreases the possibility of misperceptions that lead to war because it creates additional channels through which resolve can be signaled (Levy 2003). Instead of rhetorical threats, parties can signal their resolve by sanctions and voluntary halts of trade flows, thus lessening the risk of escalation by mistake. Because economic sanctions are costly to the initiator as well as to the target, only states that are highly resolved will be willing to incur those costs and go to war (Morrow 2003).

But do these factors completely eliminate the possibility of war driven by misperception between interdependent states? I argue that interdependence cannot completely solve the problem of eliminating ambiguity. What is more, as I show in the following, interdependence can, in fact, magnify ambiguity, especially if the conflict constellation includes more than two parties. As Levy (1983) suggests, misperceptions about third-state involvement have frequently been found to be a reason for wars by miscalculation. Specifically, he argued that if the likelihood of third-party intervention in a conflict and its anticipated impact on the conflict’s trajectory significantly influence the expected costs of war, any misperceptions concerning this variable could contribute to the outbreak of war. Moreover, failure to comprehend that third states may interpret a non-interventionist stance in a given conflict as harmful to their interests can exacerbate such misunderstandings (Levy 1983, 92). This is a critical moment to consider in examining the roots of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, as the Kremlin underestimated Western resolve precisely because it believed that defending Ukraine would not be an issue where non-intervention would be harmful to their core interests (cf. Kupchan 2022).

In short, apart from its material dimension, interdependence should also be seen as a more intangible phenomenon that leaders tend to misperceive, from which they draw incorrect conclusions. Specifically, if the conflict involves more than two interdependent actors, the probability of misperceptions rises dramatically due to the added complexity. Situations of interdependence are prone to give rise to misperceptions, leading one of the parties to miscalculate the resolve of the other side and adopt a more aggressive strategy than it would otherwise have employed. In the next section, before proceeding to the empirical analysis, I will show how examining the official discourse of Russian elites can help us track misperceptions about interdependence to understand one of the central causes of the war in Ukraine in 2022.

Methodological Approach

The study employs discourse analysis as its primary methodological approach, a method frequently utilized in foreign policy research (cf. Hansen and Waever 2001; Neumann, 2008). Specifically, this paper places the perceptions found in official Russian discourse at the forefront of the study. It assumes that official rhetoric and the perceptions driving it are crucial constructs for understanding specific foreign policy decisions (Herrmann and Keller, 2004, 560). While official discourse is often seen as masking reality in authoritarian states like Russia, it also reveals the interests and motives of decision-makers (Waever 2001). As asserted by Duffy and Frederking (2009), official statements

not only express genuine beliefs, but when continuously repeated over time, they form patterns of practice that later justify concrete decisions and policies.

As briefly introduced in the paper, the focus primarily lies on statements made after Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 up to February 2022. Post-war outbreak evidence is included, but mainly limited to explanations of the war's origins. Given the president's pivotal role in the Russian political system, his statements carry significant weight. These speeches primarily originate from official sources such as the President of Russia's website, major newspapers (for example, the *Rossiskaya Gazeta*), and other leading news outlets that provide Russian decision-makers with a platform to articulate their perspectives (TASS, RIA Novosti, etc.). These statements are triangulated by analyzing secondary sources authored by reputable Russian and Western scholars and commentators on Kremlin decision-making, providing further insights into the rationale and considerations of the Kremlin. This diverse array of resources is justified by the principle that "discourses should be accessed at many different points" (Neumann, 2008).

Discourse analysis further holds great promise for understanding the interplay between interdependence and conflict, as this paper argues that it is not solely the objective level of interdependence that defines this relationship but, rather, the (mis)perceptions thereof. Accordingly, if we are to study the misperceptions that have contributed to Russia's decision to start the war, looking closely into the statements³ of Russian decision-makers seems methodologically justified. Existing empirical research in Russian foreign policy also underscores the necessity of studying quotes from Putin and Russian elites to track their (mis)perceptions. Fyodor Lukyanov (2022), chief editor of the *Russia in Global Affairs Journal*, highlights that Putin has been notably candid about his intentions and beliefs regarding Ukraine, which are particularly evident in his article on "The Unity of Russians and Ukrainian People" (Putin, 2021a); this foreshadowed the rhetoric used to justify the war. While acknowledging that the Kremlin engages in targeted propaganda both domestically and internationally, dismissing Putin's entire communication strategy as pure deception seems far-fetched. Despite criticisms of his morality and worldview—like Merkel's assessment that he lives "in another world" (quoted in Weber 2015)—Putin often publicly expresses his genuine convictions (Laruelle and Limonier 2021). Therefore, decisions based on these (mis)perceptions should not come as much of a surprise. If Putin genuinely believed Western countries were asymmetrically dependent on Russia and indifferent towards Ukraine, it logically follows that he expected minimal Western intervention in the conflict.

However, focusing solely on Putin's statements could be misleading, as the attack on Ukraine required broader support among Russian elites and, without the "militarist consensus," in their ranks, the attack on Ukraine would not have been possible (Stratievski 2022). Therefore, beyond direct statements from Putin, this analysis incorporates the broader discourse of Russian elites³—individuals who have been entrenched in Russian power structures for decades—who interpret, contextualize, and reinforce the signals and ideas emanating from the president (Bashkirova, Litikova, and Smeltz 2019). Including the discourses of Russian elites and their (mis)perceptions is essential, as they constitute a key audience for Putin's war rhetoric, shaping and endorsing these (mis)perceptions within Russian society.

In sum, this study focuses on the (mis)perceptions held by Putin and the Russian political elite, as reflected in their statements leading up to the invasion, to elucidate why they miscalculated Western resolve to support Ukraine. While it does not pinpoint the exact origins of these (mis)perceptions, the study aims to demonstrate that Putin and his elites actively propagated misconceived ideas that significantly influenced the decision to launch the war. Future historians, with access to archival materials, will delve deeper into other dimensions and roots of Putin's misperceptions that drove his decision to go to war.

If this analysis holds true, it suggests that had Putin and his elites possessed a more realistic perception of Russian-Western dependence and Ukraine's importance to Western interests and thereby Western resolve to sever ties with Russia, the invasion might have been averted or at least mitigated. Conversely, compelling evidence that Putin and his lieutenants were fully aware of

Western resolve yet proceeded with the attack despite these warnings would undermine the main argument advanced in this article.

Empirical Part: Russia's Fatal Misperceptions

The central argument of this contribution posits that the Russian leadership significantly misjudged Western resolve to defend Ukraine before February 2022, a miscalculation that was profoundly influenced by their belief in the West's asymmetric dependence. To substantiate this claim of misperception, I present concrete evidence that the Russian leadership, despite obtaining ample information suggesting strong Western resolve, ultimately disregarded it and decided to proceed with their war plans. The premise is that, despite available information indicating a robust Western commitment to Ukraine's defence, the Russian leadership chose to discount or ignore these indicators due to the entrenched belief in Western dependency, which played a pivotal role in the escalation toward the renewed invasion.

Russia's full-scale incursion into Ukraine in February 2022 brought about an unprecedented sense of unity in the West. Yet, it would be an exaggeration to state that Western resolve to defend Ukraine from renewed Russian aggression only materialized with Russia's attack in February 2022. Despite Russia's extensive contacts with the far-left and increasingly popular far-right political forces inside numerous European governments (cf. Fagerholm 2024), EU and NATO member states were resolute in forming a united front in support of Ukraine long before Russian tanks rolled over the Ukrainian border in 2022.⁴

In this vein, during the Munich Security Conference in 2022, on the eve of the invasion, Western countries forged a robust coalition to support Ukraine in case of an attack (Plokhly 2023, 236). As a result, when Putin declared on February 21, 2022 that he was abandoning the Minsk Agreements and recognizing the "independence" of two unrecognized states in Donbas, sanctions began to roll out. The United States and the EU swiftly agreed on sanctions targeting nearly 400 Russian individuals and institutions, which included banning Russian access to EU and US capital markets and prohibiting the trade in Russian State Bonds (Bown 2023). Shortly thereafter, the German government halted licensing for the \$11 billion Nord Stream II natural gas pipeline, a project Berlin had previously been reluctant to terminate (Länder-Analysen 2023).

All these steps, taken before Russian tanks and troops crossed the Ukrainian border on 24 February underscore that Western resolve to counter Russian aggression was significantly higher compared to 2014 when Russia caught the West off guard with its annexation of Crimea. Prominent Russian security experts, such as the Director of the Russian International Affairs Council, Ivan Timofeev (2022), noted this shift in Western resolve prior to the invasion, believing it would deter Russia from invading. Leading figures within Russia's "systemic liberals," including Central Bank head Elvira Nabiulina and Sberbank CEO Herman Gref, reportedly advised Putin in the days leading up to the war, cautioning him about the potentially disastrous impact of Western sanctions on the Russian economy (Seddon and Ivanova 2022).

In short, despite the uncertainty regarding the exact scope and form of the Western response to the Russian attack, which some experts argue was intentionally ambiguous (cf. Drezner 2022), Western decision-makers were resolute in their decision to stand by Ukraine's side in any event. This suggests that, even in the counterfactual scenario of less resolute and successful Ukrainian resistance to Russian invaders, there were strong indications that the West would not have accepted the *fait accompli* as it did in 2014. Moreover, in the event of a complete takeover of Kyiv by Russian forces, the West would likely have supported Ukrainian resistance from unoccupied territories. The fact that Western countries were even considering establishing an exile Ukrainian government in Poland in the early days of the war supports this hypothesis (Bertrand and Atwood 2022).

However, the question remains: Why did the Kremlin ultimately dismiss all of these signals, despite several prominent members of the Russian political and intellectual elite publicly warning against such a step? The following section addresses this question by demonstrating how deeply

ingrained misperceptions about Western alleged dependence and its perceived effects on Western policies towards Ukraine were, and how, as a result, they prevented the Kremlin from taking Western warnings more seriously.

Misperception of Western Asymmetric Dependence on Russia

The belief that Russia is indispensable for Europe and that Europe is politically inert has arguably been ingrained in Russian elites' worldviews for several decades (Kurnyshova and Makarychev 2022). One of the most illustrative examples of this perception came from Putin in 2010 when addressing a German investor forum, he remarked: "I don't understand; how will you heat your houses? You do not want [natural] gas, you do not want to develop nuclear energy. Where will you get your heat from then? From firewood? But even for firewood, you will need to go to Siberia." (Translated from Putin 2010.) Despite remaining heavily dependent on revenues from energy exports and high-tech imports from the West even after 2014, the Kremlin was evidently convinced that the West is inevitably dependent on Russia and, therefore, would not risk exposing its vulnerability.⁵ As I discuss below, this conviction largely stemmed from the perception of the asymmetric nature of their mutual dependence.

Less than a month before the war broke out, Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, stated in an interview that severing relations with Russia "would be detrimental to Western interests," implying that the West would be ill-advised and likely reluctant to impose threatened sanctions in the event of a Russian invasion (Lavrov 2022a). Similarly, Vladimir Dzhubarov (2022), First Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council Committee on Foreign Affairs, asserted that if the West did impose sanctions, they "would be shooting themselves in the foot" and would finally understand "who is more dependent on whom (*kto ot kogo bol'she zavisit*)." These statements from senior Russian politicians betray their misperception that, even in the event of a Russian invasion (which both publicly ardently denied as a possibility), the West would refrain from serious actions due to perceived greater negative consequences for their own interests than for Russia's.

Russian elites were further convinced that Western states would avoid involvement in the conflict because isolating Russia would destabilize not only their own economies but also the entire Western-led global order. Prominent Russian analyst Andrey Kortunov suggested that in the event of a Russian military attack on Ukraine, Western sanctions would likely not exceed what Russia had previously experienced, as harsher sanctions "would destabilize the global financial system, which the Biden administration is not interested in" (Kortunov 2021). Therefore, Russian decision-makers not only overestimated their own significance to the West and the broader international community, as evidenced by the overwhelming condemnation of Russia's invasion by the UN General Assembly shortly after the war's outbreak (UN News 2022).

Furthermore, the Kremlin's belief in Western dependence, and thus the expectation of a limited response, was driven by its perception of previous Western reactions to Russian aggressions. Admittedly, parts of this calculation were not completely unfounded. Despite enduring a 2.5 to 3 percent annual GDP loss due to sanctions post-2014 (Åslund and Snegovaya 2021), the backbone of Russia's economy—the oil and gas sectors—largely remained intact (Rutland 2022). One of the leading Russian sanctions experts, Ivan Timofeev (2021), while deeming a war scenario as rather unlikely, asserted that the political and economic consequences from Russia's previous invasions (Georgia 2008, Syria 2015) "were quite insufficient," so the Kremlin did not see any "major constraints on a new military campaign." This demonstrates that Russian elites could not imagine that fully annexing Ukraine and installing a pro-Russian government in Kyiv could have provoked a much stronger response from the West than during previous military campaigns.

Moreover, the Kremlin was convinced that even if Western states responded with economic sanctions, Russia had the necessary buffer to withstand the storm. Through programs such as import substitution (*importozameshenie*), Russia was progressively reducing its dependence on Western countries, bolstering the perception of economic resilience. Russian finance minister

Anton Siluanov declared shortly before the war, “We have a financial shield in the form of gold and forex reserves, budget surplus, and ... low debt. The Western attempt to punish us for annexing Crimea failed,” (quoted in Ostroukh and Korsunskaya 2022). Similarly, Prime Minister Mishustin reported to Putin on the eve of the invasion that “[Russia] has been preparing for months for a potential response,” talking at length about the resilience of the Russian economy, stating that all possible risks are “thoroughly reviewed (*riski horosho prorabotany*),” alleging that the Russian economy was watertight against any Western sanctions and restrictions (Security Council 2022). Indeed, Russia’s dissociation from the Western economic and political system had been ongoing for decades, demonstrating Moscow’s readiness to continue this path (Polianskii 2021). In early 2022, the Central Bank of Russia conducted a “stress test” with major financial institutions, preparing them to manage new economic restrictions and disconnection from SWIFT (Prokopenko 2022). Yet, no expert or politician foresaw the scale and speed of the actual Western response and its ramifications for the Russian economy.

Lastly, heightened self-confidence was reinforced by the perception of growing Western dependence on Russia (Meister 2019). Despite a sharp decline in trade after the initial wave of sanctions following the annexation of Crimea, with overall exports decreasing by 28 percent from 2014 to 2015 (Giumelli 2017, 1070), overall economic relations between Russia and the West gradually returned to near-normal levels in subsequent years (Polianskii 2022). This trend was interpreted in Russia as a necessary step by the West to support the competitiveness of their companies globally, despite geopolitical tensions. Additionally, many Russian businesses and state enterprises engaged in profitable projects with their Western counterparts, generating substantial tax revenues for European states. Even after Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine, Russian companies—at the peak, around the mid-2010s—owned about three percent of the firms registered in the EU, further reinforcing the Kremlin’s belief in its own indispensability (Movchan 2016). Putin and his advisors were convinced that Western companies, trapped in the country in case of Russia’s isolation, would dissuade the West from taking strong action against his aggressive policies. The fact that none of the approximately \$300 billion of Russian national reserves deposited in Western countries were repatriated (or moved out of Western reach) serves as a clear indicator of Putin’s confidence that the West would refrain from significant actions (Hueiling 2022). Putin’s strong reaction to the freeze of these reserves underscores his false sense of impunity, as he remarked, “it’s robbery! [...] our American friends are quite simply sawing off the branch they are sitting on!” (Putin 2022a).

In summary, Moscow’s (mis)perception of Western asymmetric dependence on Russian resources was deeply embedded in Russian elite circles leading up to the February 2022 invasion. The Kremlin believed that while Russia’s dependency on the West had been minimized, Western vulnerabilities had increased. This faulty perception about the nature of interdependence with the West further persisted due to previous underwhelming Western responses to Russia’s aggression, fostering misplaced certainty among the Russian leadership regarding likely Western reactions.

Misperceptions about Ukraine and its Importance to the West

As noted above, interdependence theory asserts that interdependence should facilitate mutual signaling of interests in specific issues and resolve to defend them. Coupled together, these factors are believed to decrease the chances of a war driven by misperceptions. Accordingly, one could assume that Russia should not have miscalculated the importance of Ukraine being defended by the West, and thus should not have started this war. Yet, given that the interdependence theory has traditionally focused on dyads of states rather than more complex arrangements, the question of how mutually dependent actors perceive the effects of interdependence when a conflict concerns a third country has been frequently overlooked. Against this background, this subsection elucidates how signaling between interdependent actors works in multilateral settings, and how it can eventually lead to war driven by miscalculation.

Russian decision-makers were convinced that the West would not defend Ukraine out of fear of exposing its dependent position and that it would eventually adapt to a new status quo. Two factors drove this (mis)belief. First, the Kremlin was sure that Ukraine was not “important enough” for the USA and its European allies, and the latter would choose Moscow over Kyiv out of self-interest. Secondly, Moscow was convinced that the West realized Ukraine and its geopolitical positioning were a “matter of life and death” for the Russian regime, as Putin put it on the morning of the invasion (Putin 2022a). Thus, even if the West were to respond in some way to Russia’s invasion, Moscow believed the United States and European states would not be willing to pay a higher price than Russia, viewing Putin’s actions as protecting Russian core national interests (cf. Stanovaya 2022).

As briefly mentioned above, the (mis)perception that Ukraine is not “important enough” for the United States and its European allies was profoundly shaped by Russia’s previous experiences with the West, especially in the sphere of energy trade (Bugajski 2006). In the Kremlin’s eyes, Western countries frequently ignored Ukraine’s interests in favour of upholding interdependence with Russia. The most vivid example was the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project, signed in 2015 after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of hostilities in Donbas, which would bypass Ukraine and eliminate Russia’s dependence on Kyiv in gas transportation to Europe. Russian elites widely believed that when the moment of truth finally arrived, the West would acquiesce to Russia’s demands and eventually abandon Ukraine, as in 2015 with the Minsk Accords.

Furthermore, as one Russian ex-intelligence officer argues, Moscow’s hopes were pinned on “the prospect that the energy crisis in Europe would force the EU into talks with Moscow” (Frolov 2022). Russian decision-makers expected that, against the backdrop of rising energy prices and the domestic instability that comes with it, Western governments would not risk endangering the political situation in their home countries over a state that is not even formally part of trans-Atlantic institutions. Just consider Putin’s words in October 2021 during price spikes in European gas markets: “You see what is happening in Europe, there is hysteria and confusion in the markets. Why? Because no one is taking the green transition to renewable sources of energy seriously” (Putin 2021b). What Russian elites largely misrepresented, however, was that Western governments would face far greater domestic risks and criticism if they abandoned Ukraine and did not follow up on the very concrete warnings they delivered in late 2021 and early 2022. Moscow therefore failed to see that non-intervention and failure to help Ukraine defend its sovereignty would do far more harm to Western interests than losing Russian oil and gas shipments.

Apart from the economic dimension, the Kremlin was further convinced that Ukraine was also of secondary strategic interest to the West and that, similar to Russia, Western capitals viewed Kyiv as a bargaining chip in European affairs. This belief was continuously emphasized by Russian decision-makers long before the onset of the 2022 invasion. For instance, in his infamous article about the “unity” of the Russian and Ukrainian people, Putin wrote in the summer of 2021 that Western powers instrumentally used Ukraine to create another “anti-Russia project” (Putin 2021a). Similar messages were continuously spread by other Putin lieutenants in the run-up to the 2022 invasion. For instance, at his annual conference at the end of 2021, Sergey Lavrov asserted that “Russia’s wishes should be more important for Europe than Ukraine’s” (Lavrov 2021), later adding that in a “hybrid war” with the Russian Federation, the West “does not really need Ukraine,” and that it is “expendable material” for Western powers (Lavrov 2022b). On the eve of the invasion, one of the leading Russian diplomats posted at the UN argued along similar lines, asserting that “Western countries only use Ukraine as a pawn to achieve their geopolitical interests” (Strizhizhovskiy 2022). These quotes not only demonstrate an absolute dismissal of Ukraine’s agency but also, most importantly, reflect the prevailing view among Putin’s elites that if Russia pressured the West strongly enough or offered a more attractive alternative, it would abandon Ukraine without further consideration.

For Moscow, the question of Ukraine and its geopolitical positioning was a matter of the utmost importance, which the West fully recognized. For instance, despite condemning Putin’s “criminal

policy of provoking a war” and calling for President Putin’s resignation, retired Colonel-General Leonid Ivashov claimed that “Europe does not really want ... to meddle in our Slavic quarrels” (Ivashov 2022). Moscow assumed that, after numerous crises and disruptions in Russian-Western relations over Ukraine, Brussels and Washington would acknowledge that Moscow was resolute in its pursuit of its dominance over Ukraine and would eventually step aside. The Kremlin was therefore prepared to pay a disproportionately higher price than the West if push came to shove (Istomin, Neklyudov, and Sushentsov 2022). Even if the West were to respond in some way, Moscow believed that the costs it assumed the West could inflict would be acceptable in exchange for what it construed as protecting Russia’s core national interests.

Lastly, the misperceptions regarding not only Ukraine’s importance to the West but also Ukraine’s sovereignty as such, played an important role in producing Russia’s renewed invasion in 2022. This becomes particularly evident when one revisits public appeals from 2014 onwards by Russian decision-makers, which contain continuous allegations that some Western countries were plotting to organize Ukraine’s partition. After the outbreak of the war in February 2022, Putin asserted that Poland could not wait to “take back the Western territories, which Ukraine received after World War II” (Putin 2022c). The Secretary of the National Security Council at the time, Nikolay Patrushev, similarly claimed that Poland would use the turmoil in the neighboring country to “occupy the Western part” of Ukraine (Patrushev 2022). Similar speculations were voiced by former Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky and Russia’s Ambassador to the EU, Vladimir Chizhov. Given the sheer volume and frequency of these absurd allegations produced by Russian elites, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that these misperceptions about Western neglect of Ukrainian statehood existed in the Kremlin long before the outbreak of the war, and were deeply ingrained in the decision-making process.

Owing to such a blatant dismissal of Ukrainian agency, it comes as little surprise that the Kremlin grossly underplayed Ukrainian military capacities and its resolve to fight against Russian invading troops (Driedger and Polianskii 2023). While hard evidence regarding war-related decision-making inside the Kremlin remains elusive, several plausible reasons are discernible for this critical misperception. First, prior to February 2022, Russian armed forces had only one significant battle encounter with the Ukrainian army, in 2014, which at the time was vastly under-equipped and disorganized. Drawing from those lessons, Russian commanders likely assumed that Ukrainian resistance to a multi-directional invasion involving combined forces would similarly be minimal and that its defenses would collapse within days.

Second, the Russian leadership vastly overestimated its own capabilities to conduct modern warfare in the 21st century, while simultaneously underestimating Ukraine’s adaptability to engage in such conflicts. Reflecting on limited war campaigns, such as in Syria in 2015, the Russian command may have wrongly assumed that it could swiftly suppress enemy air defenses and achieve air superiority, facilitating seamless ground operations. The failure of Russian air forces (VKS) to disable Ukraine’s air defenses and the significant combat losses incurred in the initial weeks of the war underscore how the Russian General Staff’s overconfidence in their tools exacerbated poor judgement in the Kremlin (Cranny-Evans and Kaushal 2022). Lastly, and relatedly, the Russian leadership likely overestimated the efficiency and reliability of its intelligence services within Ukraine during the war preparations. Many believed not only that the Ukrainian population would welcome Russian “liberators” and that Russian agents in the country would disable Ukraine’s defenses when the invasion commenced (cf. Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg 2022).

In summary, when faced with the choice between Russia and Ukraine after the invasion, Moscow was confident the West would prioritize its interests over Kyiv’s, fearing exposure of its supposedly vulnerable position on an issue that (allegedly) few in the West cared deeply about. Coupled with a general disregard for Ukrainian sovereignty and a significant underestimation of the importance of defending Ukraine for the West, it is unsurprising, as Daalder and Lindsay (2022) put it, “Putin would have assumed that the West would respond to a [renewed] Russian invasion of Ukraine with harsh rhetoric but not much more.”

Conclusion and Discussion

With the benefit of hindsight, it is evident that Putin's attempt to "call the perceived bluff" of the West has spectacularly failed (Bahenský 2022). To the shock of Russian decision-makers, Western countries interpreted Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a direct threat to its core interests (Gould-Davies 2022) and swiftly implemented extensive economic and political sanctions against Russia. The USA and the majority of European states followed through on their threats, imposing a range of unprecedented economic sanctions, including the exclusion of most Russian banks from the global SWIFT system (The Economist 2022). Never before has a permanent member of the UN Security Council been "unplugged from the world economy" so swiftly, as Russia became the most heavily sanctioned country globally soon after the invasion (Manning 2022).

While the Russian economy did not collapse under the weight of multifaceted Western sanctions, and as of the present moment appears to be weathering financial crises better than many analysts predicted (Disney 2023), its future prospects are far from optimistic (Prokopenko 2024). Despite establishing alternative supply routes for strategic goods and partially offsetting the loss of European energy markets by selling oil at reduced prices to countries like China and India (Abb and Polianskii 2022), returning to pre-war export volumes of strategic commodities remains exceedingly challenging due to limited logistic capacities.

Beyond the economic impact, Western governments significantly expanded military aid to Ukraine, bolstering the Ukrainian armed forces and compelling Russian forces to largely shift from offensive to defensive positions, abandoning their initial plans (Marples 2022, 214). Internationally, Russia has faced increasing international isolation,⁶ with even its closest allies and neighbors distancing themselves from Putin and his decision to initiate the war. The level of support for Ukraine has surpassed nearly all predictions made by Russian officials prior to the war, prompting President Putin to liken it to "a declaration of war" by the West and its allies (Putin 2022b).

This article aims to illustrate how misperceptions stemming from situations of interdependence can escalate into inter-state conflict. Russia's misrepresentation of Western asymmetric dependence, coupled with the belief that defending Ukraine was a secondary concern for the West, decisively contributed to the miscalculation of Western resolve and emboldened Russia to launch its invasion in February 2022. These misperceptions were driven by the core notion that interdependence could serve as strategic leverage for Russia to coerce the West into limiting its response and eventually accepting the outcomes of what Russia anticipated would be a short military campaign, akin to the Crimean operation of 2014. Admittedly, this analysis merely scratches the surface of why Putin decided to initiate a full-scale attack on Ukraine, laying the groundwork for further debates on the role of interdependence calculations in the war's causes.

By believing the West was more dependent on Russia than vice versa, the Kremlin likely fell victim to its own propagated myths regarding European irrelevance and the purported artificiality of Ukrainian statehood, potentially shaping its foreign policy decisions on these fundamental misperceptions. If this interpretation holds true, however, it suggests that more explicit Western warnings in late 2021 and early 2022 would probably not have altered the Kremlin's assessment of Western resolve. These entrenched beliefs and misperceptions within Russian decision-making circles would likely have led the latter to interpret heightened Western apprehensions as further evidence of the West's fear of abruptly severing ties with Russia and, perhaps, moving on with their war plans even faster.

Looking ahead, it is imperative to delve deeper into the interrelation of interdependence and its effects on the decision-making processes in interstate conflicts, against the backdrop of the West's evolving strategy of decoupling and "de-risking" from nations like China. While economic interdependence was once seen as central to Western global dominance, the Russian case demonstrates that efforts to preserve economic ties at any cost may not always prevent conflict. In fact, attempts to maintain economic interdependence can inadvertently heighten tensions, as Russian elites increasingly viewed Western dependence as a strategic asset influencing their war-related decisions. While

complete decoupling and eliminating dependence across entire systems may not always be feasible without viable alternative structures, it is crucial to acknowledge that misperceptions surrounding interdependence can potentially escalate rather than mitigate conflict.

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Notes

- 1 For the purposes of this article, albeit recognizing certain restrictions coming with it, the term “West” is defined as NATO (without Turkey) and EU member states. Although this might be seen as too broad an interpretation, it corresponds both to the understanding of the term in Russian foreign policy studies (Tsygankov 2007) and in broader academic literature (Neumann 1999).
- 2 This study uses this term with regard to Russian-Western relations as it is commonly employed in the academic literature on Russian foreign policy analysis (Sushentsov and Ofitserov-Belskiy 2019).
- 3 I use the notions “Putin’s elites,” “the Kremlin,” “Moscow,” and “Russian leadership/decision-makers” interchangeably.
- 4 For instance, in late January 2022, 8,500 US military personnel in Poland were placed on heightened alert status, and, starting in February 2022, the United States deployed additional forces to the Ukrainian border. The United States also relocated a Stryker squadron from Germany to Romania in February 2022, adding 3,000 personnel to Poland (Graff et al. 2023). Furthermore, the US Cyber Command was deployed to Kyiv in early December 2021 to assist Ukraine in defending against Russian cyberattacks. In terms of military aid, the United States significantly enlarged the spectrum of lethal aid to Ukraine, including such items as helicopters, anti-tank systems, coastal patrol boats, sniper rifles, reconnaissance drones, radar systems, and air defence systems. On the eve of the invasion, numerous Western countries also intensified their engagement in training programs for the Ukrainian Armed Forces and organized a series of joint military exercises in Ukraine and neighboring states (Lanoszka and Becker 2023).
- 5 Arguably, Russia was actually more dependent on the West than the other way around. For instance, Russia accounted for roughly 10 percent of the EU’s trade balance in the pre-2014 period, while the EU’s share in Russia’s trade fluctuated around 50 percent at the same time (Tajoli 2022).
- 6 More than 140 UN member states condemned Russia’s invasion in two General Assembly resolutions (in 2022 and 2023), while only 2 percent supported Moscow. By comparison, almost 12 percent of UN member states supported the Soviet Union’s 1979 invasion of Afghanistan (Gould-Davies 2022).

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