

# National Interest as a Catalyst for the Russian-Ukraine War and the Humanitarian Crisis in Donetsk

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Accepted: 1/7/2024

Published: 2/6/2024

**Abstract:** Pro-Western Ukrainians organised a revolution that led to the removal of pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich from office in 2014, sparking the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. Similarly, the Russian invasion of the Crimea peninsula, a territory owned by Ukraine, signifies a strong political gesture that has been the casus belli of the war between the two nations, arising from a complex historical background, the struggle to build a national identity, and political power. The war shows no signs of abating and has continued to drive humanitarian crises across the country, especially in the Donetsk region. The intense hostilities and fights have left over 17 million people, representing 40 percent of the country's population, in urgent need of humanitarian assistance and protection. In the Donetsk region, the hostilities have resulted in the deaths of many civilians, including women and children, the internal displacement of millions of people, and the destruction of critical infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, electricity, and water supply systems. Therefore, this paper employs the power theory to explain how Russian military actions, motivated by its national interest, led to war in Ukraine and ultimately resulted in the humanitarian crisis in the Donetsk region. The paper relied on the time series research design, which utilized the documentary method of data generation. Content analysis was used. This paper found that the actions of the Russian military in Ukraine led to the humanitarian crisis in the Donetsk region. The paper recommended that Russia should pursue its interest in Ukraine through diplomatic means and cooperation, not military actions leading to the humanitarian crisis in the country, especially in Donetsk.

**Keywords:** *War, Humanitarian Crisis, Invasion, Internal Displacement, Destruction*

Publish by IJAH 2024.

## INTRODUCTION

The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine is leading to a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, especially in the Donetsk region, because the cities of Donetsk are the most attacked region and have the highest number of civilian casualties, internal displacement, and destruction of infrastructure. The Donetsk region comprises 52 cities, including 28 of regional significance, with a population of 4.3 million people, and it is equally the most important industrial centre of the country, ranking second in terms of contribution to Ukraine's GDP (9.7%) (Department of

Statistics, 2014). In 2014, pro-Western Ukrainians organized a revolution that led to the removal of pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich from office, triggering Russian military actions in the country (Atnadu & Halilu, 2023).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991, the newly independent republics of Ukraine and Russia maintained ties, and Ukraine agreed in 1994 to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and dismantle the nuclear weapons in Ukraine left by the USSR (Yahaya,

2023). In reciprocity, Russia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) agreed in the Budapest Memorandum to uphold the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Barbaro et al. (2022) posited that in 1999, Russia signed the Charter for European Security, which reaffirmed the inherent right of every participating state to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance.

Consequently, after the Soviet Union collapsed, several former Eastern Bloc nations joined NATO, partly due to regional security threats such as the 1993 Russian constitutional crisis, the War in Abkhazia (1992–1993), and the First Chechen War (1994–1996) (Yahaya 2023, p. 115). Russian leaders asserted that Western powers had promised not to expand NATO eastward, a claim that is subject to dispute. However, the above declaration led to Euro-first protests and a revolution organized by pro-Western Ukrainians, resulting in the removal of pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich from office in February 2014 (Barbaro et al., 2022).

As a result, Russian soldiers, without insignia, took control of strategic positions and infrastructure in Ukraine's Crimea and seized the Crimean Parliament. Russia has organized a controversial referendum, which resulted in Crimea joining Russia. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the war in Donbas began in April 2014, with the formation of two separatist quasi-states backed by Russia: the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. Russian troops were involved in the conflict (Yahaya 2023). There were the Minsk agreements signed in September 2014 and February 2015 in a bid to stop the fighting, but ceasefires repeatedly failed due to a dispute over the role of Russia. Normandy Format members France, Germany, and Ukraine saw Minsk as an agreement between Russia and Ukraine, whereas Russia insisted Ukraine should negotiate directly with the two separatist republics (Yahaya, 2023).

The Russian invasion of the Crimea Peninsula, a territory owned by Ukraine, represents a strong political signal that has been the *casus belli* of the war between the two countries, emanating from a complex historical background and the struggle to build a national identity and political power (Amadeo 2020). This is because the annexation of Crimea led to a new wave of Russian nationalism, with much of the Russian neo-imperial movement aspiring to annex more Ukrainian land, including the unrecognised Novorossiia (Vladimir, 2021). Similarly, Putin's 2014 speech after the annexation of Crimea was a *de facto* "manifesto of Greater-Russia Irredentism" (Vladimir, 2021). This is because in July 2021, Putin published an essay titled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," reiterating that Russians and Ukrainians were "one people." Vladimir (2021) contends that the most dangerous scenario for the future of Europe and the global order is one in which the

Ukraine war sets the stage for a direct military confrontation between NATO and Russia. Vladimir (2021) posits that multiple pathways could lead to such an outcome, such as NATO deciding to escalate its involvement in Ukraine by attempting to implement a no-fly zone or other forms of direct intervention. On the other hand, Russia could inadvertently strike a NATO member's territory through vague targeting or erroneous identification of friend and foe, prompting countermeasures from the alliance, as Russia has already attacked targets close to the Polish border (Yahaya, 2023). This scenario could lead to the initiation of direct war, either air-to-air or air-to-ground, in Ukraine's border regions, resulting in a recurring cycle of strikes and counterstrikes that could escalate the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, particularly in the Donetsk region.

In 2021, Putin refused offers from Zelenskyy to hold high-level talks, and the Russian government subsequently endorsed an article by former president Dmitry Medvedev arguing that it was pointless to deal with Ukraine while it remained a "vassal" of the Black Sea (Hernandez, 2022). Consequently, in March and April 2021, Russia began a major military buildup near the Russo-Ukrainian border, followed by a second buildup from October 2021 to February 2022 in both Russia and Belarus (Yahaya, 2023). Although officials of the Russian government frequently denied plans to invade or attack Ukraine, including government spokesman Dmitry Peskov on November 28, 2021; Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov on January 19, 2022; Russian ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov on February 20, 2022; and Russian ambassador to the Czech Republic Alexander Zmeevsky on February 23, 2022 (Nikolskaya & Osborn, 2022).

However, Nikolai Patrushev, the Russian Chief National Security Adviser, believes that the West has been in an undeclared war with Russia for years. This belief, along with Russia's restructured national security strategy published in May 2021, which states that Russia may use "forceful methods" to thwart or avert unfriendly actions that threaten the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, provide ample evidence that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is imminent (Morin 2022).

However, a deeper analysis reveals that national interests drive great power competition in the war between Russia and Ukraine. This is because the pursuit of national interests sometimes clashes with the broader goal of promoting global security and cooperation. Therefore, finding a balance between national interests and international cooperation is problematic in international relations (Keohane, 2008). Several factors, including historical tensions between Ukraine and Russia and disagreements over Ukraine's relationship with the West, drive the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. This is because Russia has argued that it is protecting the rights of ethnic Russians in Ukraine and defending itself

against what it sees as Western encroachment on its borders (Owens, 2023).

Therefore, the involvement of international actors in the war between Russia and Ukraine reflects the complex geopolitical dynamics at play, with different nations and organisations pushing for their interests and agendas.

Bezzubko (2021) and Graceffo (2023), scholars and social commentators, view the war as a continuation of the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. This rivalry has now evolved into a rivalry between the United States and the Russian Federation, as great power competition necessitates the establishment of an international order and the formation of coalitions, alliances, and blocs. As a result, this paper examines how the pursuit and protection of national interests account for the Russian military actions in Ukraine, which led to the war and the humanitarian crisis in the Donetsk region of Ukraine.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Military action and humanitarian crises

Military actions and humanitarian crises often intertwine, creating complex and challenging situations that demand careful analysis and response. This study explores the relationship between military actions and humanitarian crises, drawing upon relevant literature to provide insights into their dynamics. Darcy and Hofmann (2003) argued that conflict and violence, often precipitated by political, ethnic, or religious tensions, can lead to widespread displacement, loss of life, and humanitarian emergencies. Conversely, Slim (2004) argues that humanitarian crises can also provoke military interventions, either to provide aid or as part of broader geopolitical strategies. Hilhorst and Bankoff (2004) asserted that the use of force, whether through conventional warfare or asymmetric tactics, results in casualties, destruction of infrastructure, and disruption of essential services such as healthcare, water, and food supplies. The targeting of civilian populations, deliberate or indiscriminate, further compounds the suffering, leading to widespread human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law (Slim, 2004).

Collaborating with Slim's argument, Macrae and Leader (2000) posited that the provision of aid in the context of humanitarian crises arising from conflict requires careful negotiation with armed actors, adherence to humanitarian principles, and innovative strategies to reach affected populations. From the point of view of Ferris (2011), military actions can impede humanitarian access, either through direct attacks on aid workers or restrictions on movement imposed by warring factions, according to Ferris (2011). Military actions can have long-

term consequences for humanitarian situations, shaping the trajectory of crises. This is why Barnett and Prins (2006) stressed that protracted conflicts, fueled by geopolitical interests or deep-rooted grievances, prolong human suffering and hinder efforts at reconstruction and recovery. Fast (2005) notes that the perception of humanitarian interventions as military objectives, or the militarization of aid, can erode the neutrality and impartiality of relief efforts, thereby eroding trust and complicating the delivery of assistance.

Gent (2005) argues that the complex interplay between military actions and humanitarian crises requires integrated approaches that recognise the interconnectedness of political, security, and humanitarian dimensions. Bradley and Loughnan (2010) submit that coordination between military forces, humanitarian actors, and diplomatic efforts is essential to minimise harm to civilians, facilitate humanitarian access, and work towards sustainable peace. Lischer (2005), on his part, noted that efforts to address the root causes of conflicts, including poverty, inequality, and governance failures, are fundamental to preventing and mitigating humanitarian crises in the long term.

Scholars such as Lister and Kesa (2022), Murphy (2022), Rodionov and Balmforth (2022), Ratcliffe et al. (2022), Pitta (2022), Kirby and Guyer (2022), Yayaha (2023), Nikolskaya and Osborn (2022), Hernandez (2022), Atnadu and Halilu (2023), Morin (2022) and Rashid Manzoor (2023) among others have argued that the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, leading to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, especially in the Donetsk region is caused by factors such as the recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics (some pro-Russian separatists in the eastern region of Ukraine) by the Russian government, the desire by Russia to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, disagreements over Ukraine's relationship with the West, protection of the rights of ethnic Russians in Ukraine, prevention of western incursion on Russian territories, the quest by Russia to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO, and removing multinational forces from NATO's Eastern European member states.

Several factors, including historical tensions between Ukraine and Russia and disagreements over Ukraine's relationship with the West, drive the war, according to Rashid Manzoor (2023). This is because Russia has argued that it is protecting the rights of ethnic Russians in Ukraine and defending itself against what it sees as Western encroachment on its borders. The war between Russia and Ukraine has drawn in many international actors, including the United States, the European Union, and NATO, which have imposed economic sanctions on Russia and provided military and economic aid to Ukraine. This explains why Manzoor (2023) posited that the Russian-Ukraine war has drawn in numerous

international actors, each with their own interests and motivations. Largely, the involvement of international actors in the war between Russia and Ukraine reflects the complex geopolitical dynamics at play, with different countries and organisations pushing for their interests and agendas. (Manzoor, 2023)

Graceffo (2023) further argues that the actions of third parties, both state and non-state actors, further complicate the Russian-Ukraine war. For him, the involvement of NATO (representing 31 nations), the European Union (27 countries, including some overlap with NATO), the G7 (whose members are all part of NATO or EU), as well as other U.S. allies, such as Japan and Australia, increases the likelihood of the war escalating into a World War. Therefore, the outcome of the war will determine which of these alliances holds power and which actors will participate in the resulting international order. The Western/United States side of the conflict contains many of the world's largest and most developed nations, all of whom have supported the UN condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Manzoor, 2023). The Western allies have been providing weapons, money, logistic and technological support to Ukraine, and in addition, 30 of these nations are participating in economic sanctions against Russia (Graceffo, 2023). According to Graceffo (2023), although Russia has no direct allies in the ongoing war, it has relied on Minsk and Belgrade, and Belarus has been involved militarily. Similarly, China is Russia's somewhat ally, although the two nations do not have a defence agreement; however, since the war began, China has become Russia's largest trading partner and financial patron, and India, an officially nonaligned country, has continued to purchase crude from Russia since the beginning of the war in February 2022, and India's trade with Russia is now the largest it has ever been (Graceffo 2023).

### Gap in Literature

Upon reviewing the existing literature on the role of national interest as a catalyst for the Russian-Ukraine war and the humanitarian crisis in the Donetsk region of Ukraine, it becomes clear that scholars have not examined how Russia's pursuit of national interest influenced its military actions in Ukraine, thereby contributing to the humanitarian crisis in the Donetsk region. This serves as our point of departure and contribution to knowledge.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The power theory, a branch of the realist theory of international relations, served as the foundation for this paper. Power theory incorporates various schools of

thought exploring the nature, distribution, and influence of power in international politics in different contexts. Leading proponents of power theory include classical realists such as Thomas Hobbes (1651), Niccolò Machiavelli (1532), and Hans Morgenthau (1948). Others are structural realists like Kenneth Waltz (1979), John Mearsheimer (2001), and Alexander Wendt (1987). Power theory posits that competitive self-interest among sovereign nation-states drives international politics, with each state striving to actualize its defined national interest through power. The theory assumes that power is the primary motive force in international relations, driving states to pursue security and expansion. Power theory focuses on practical strategies and national interests, overlooking moral considerations (Realpolitik). The theory also argues that the international system is anarchical; therefore, nations seek to maintain a balance of power to prevent any single actor (state or non-state actor) from dominating the system (balance of power). Thomas Hobbes emphasises the "state of nature" as one of anarchy and competition for power, leading to social contracts and states seeking security (Hobbes, 1651). Niccolò Machiavelli, on his part, views power as essential for rulers to maintain order and achieve national interests, sometimes through ruthless means (Machiavelli, 1532). Hans Morgenthau argued that states act primarily in self-interest, driven by power considerations in an anarchical international system (Morgenthau, 1948).

Kenneth Waltz, a structural realist, introduced the concept of the "structure of the international system" (anarchy), arguing that the structure of the international system (anarchy) influences the state's behavior and power dynamics in international relations (Waltz, 1979). Another structural realist, John Mearsheimer, stressed the offensive realist standpoint, where states prioritise survival and seek to maximise their relative power, leading to conflict (Mearsheimer, 2001). Structural realists also argued that unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar systems influence how states interact and pursue power in the international system (the polarity of the system). Alexander Wendt (1987) advocated for "constructivism," arguing that shared international norms and institutions shape state identities and interests, influencing power distribution and cooperation among states in the international system (social construction of power) (Wendt, 1987).

### Applicability to the Russian-Ukraine War

This paper employs power theory to explain the relationship between the Russian-Ukraine war and the humanitarian crisis in the Donetsk region of Ukraine. This framework delves into the hidden dynamics, examining how the structure of the international system (anarchy),

power as the primary motive force in international relations, driving states to pursue security and expansion, and the focus on practical strategies and national interests, overlooking moral considerations (*realpolitik*), contribute to the activities of the Russian military in Ukraine, leading to the humanitarian crisis in the Donetsk region of Ukraine, and how the interests of international actors intensify the war between Russia and Ukraine, resulting in the destruction of infrastructure in the Donet

Therefore, power theory provides a valuable lens for analyzing the dynamics of the Russian-Ukraine war and the resulting humanitarian crisis in Ukraine's Donetsk region. This is because power theory highlights the stark power imbalance between Russians and Ukrainians. Russia possesses significantly more military, economic, and political power, allowing it to influence the war's terms and control resources. This asymmetry manifests in settlement expansion, restrictions on Ukrainian movement, and limited self-determination. Indeed, understanding domination and resistance through power theory illuminates the dynamics of domination and resistance between Russia and Ukraine.

In line with the basic assumptions of the theory, particularly the competitive self-interest among sovereign nation-states to actualize their national interests defined in terms of power, power theory is a valuable framework to explain the actions of the Russian military in Ukraine as it relates to the desire to prevent western incursion on Russian territories and also prevent Ukraine from joining NATO.

Similarly, by analysing international influence, power theory helps explain how the roles of external actors like the United States and the international community—their political and economic support for Ukraine, alongside limited pressure for accountability—contribute to the power imbalance and perpetuate the war. Therefore, power theory serves as a valuable framework for understanding the Russian-Ukraine War, particularly the role of international actors in intensifying the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, resulting in the destruction of infrastructure in the Donetsk region of Ukraine.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The pursuit of national interests, while seemingly a rational act for individual nations, is a significant driver of conflict in the anarchical international system. This explains why the Russian government's pursuit and protection of national interests have led to military actions in Ukraine, including attacks, bombardments, airstrikes, and destruction of critical infrastructure. This has resulted in a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, particularly in the Donetsk region. For instance, the Donetsk region has endured continuous Russian military bombardment, colossal destruction in these areas, active fighting, and

the annihilation of critical infrastructure, resulting in a life-threatening situation for millions of Ukrainians. Similarly, in the Donetsk region, intense aggressions between the Russian forces and Ukrainian military have resulted in the killing of civilians, injuries to thousands of people, displacement of millions of people, and damage to critical infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, electricity, and water supply systems, leading to a humanitarian crisis (Humanitarian Situation Report, 2023).

The massive destruction of civilian infrastructure by the Russian military has made life extremely difficult for millions of people and has severely disrupted critical services in Ukraine, especially in the Donetsk region. Again, persistent attacks targeting energy systems, schools, hospitals, homes, and businesses have not only stripped children's access to schools but have also rendered hospitals unworkable and interrupted livelihoods. For instance, about 11 million Ukrainians need water, sanitation, and hygiene assistance; 14.6 million require health assistance; and 11.1 million need food and livelihood assistance. The war also disrupted the Ukrainian economy, with more than 5 million people losing their jobs (Loft & Brien, 2023). The war has also left invisible scars, exposing millions to enormous trauma. Nearly 10 million people in Ukraine are at risk of acute stress, anxiety, depression, substance use, and post-traumatic stress disorder, according to the World Health Organisation's report (2024).

The Donetsk region has recorded around 50% of all reported conflict events in Ukraine since the beginning of the war on February 24, 2022. The war has caused significant damage to infrastructure and further increased humanitarian concerns for civilians in the affected areas. For instance, Russia's war on Ukraine has forced millions of people to flee their homes, resulting in one of the fastest-growing displacement crises in recent history. Currently, displacement affects about 17.3 million of Ukraine's 44 million people, either internally within the country or abroad, especially in Eastern Europe (Loft & Brien, 2023). Similarly, Russian forces have attacked, destroyed, or converted schools and classrooms into military bases throughout the war, severely hindering access to education. For instance, the escalation of the war has affected access to quality education for 4.3 million school-aged children, representing 70 percent of the estimated child population in the country (Ukrainian Ministry of Education, 2023). Since the war began in February 2022, bombardment has damaged or destroyed over 3,000 education facilities across Ukraine, according to the Ministry of Education of Ukraine. Additionally, the invasion in the Donetsk region has resulted in over 16,631 civilian deaths and over 11,660 injuries, primarily among children and women (HRMMU, 2023).

Similarly, between February 2022 and May 2024, about 17 million Ukrainians needed humanitarian assistance with multiple problems of water supply, food,

support to repair their houses, medicines, and medical supplies to make sure their hospitals continued running (UNOCHA, 2024). In March 2023, the World Bank, the Government of Ukraine, the EU, and the UN estimated that the cost of reconstruction and recovery in Ukraine stood at US\$411 billion. This is 2.6 times the country's estimated Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for 2022. Since the start of the war in February 2022, 60% of Ukraine's power plants have suffered damage, according to estimates from the World Bank and UN Development Programme. The World Bank predicts a decline in Ukraine's GDP to 29% in 2022, and an increase in the budget deficit to approximately 27%, excluding grants and aid from outside Ukraine. Poverty also increased from 5.5% to 24% of the population, pushing 7 million people into poverty (World Bank, 2023).

According to the Ukrainian Ministry of Temporarily Occupied Territories report (2024), most of the damaged buildings in the Donetsk region are residential (7158). Also affected were objects of road transport infrastructure (36), trade establishments (31), general educational institutions (27), health care facilities (21), preschool institutions (13), gas supply facilities (8), vocational schools (7), physical education and sports facilities (3), cultural institutions (14), objects of road infrastructure (36), industrial facilities (19), trade institutions (31), and objects of other spheres (66). In total, there are 7403 facilities.

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