

## Sasse, Gwendolyn: *Russia's War Against Ukraine*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2023



Milan Varda

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science, Belgrade

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### Corresponding author:

Milan Varda

### Correspondence email:

[milan.varda@fpm.bg.ac.rs](mailto:milan.varda@fpm.bg.ac.rs)

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Gwendolyn Sasse's newest book, *Russia's War Against Ukraine*, tackles the greatest European war since World War II in an easily readable manner and compact format. A well-renowned scholar in ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe through analyzing background causes, gives a convincing explanation of why this war was likely to happen, in addition to exploring the flow of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict since 2014. Sasse claims that increasing authoritarianism, neoimperialism, and memory politics in Russia have made the Russian war against Ukraine a likely occurrence. This likelihood has been greatly amplified by Ukraine "leaving" Russia through democratization, westernization, and the creation of civic national identity.

The book is effectively divided into two parts, the first exploring the causes of the war, and the second focusing on the progress of the war and its consequences. Chapter 1 is an introductory chapter that outlines how the strengthening of Russian authoritarianism and neoimperialist narratives, the omnipresence of memory politics in Russia, the formation of civic national identity in Ukraine and Ukrainian democratization that have led Ukraine away from Russia, as well as incoherent Western policies towards Russia have made the war a likely occurrence. Chapter 2 explores the regional divisions in Ukraine since its independence and the long road towards the creation of the civic national identity. Chapter 3 gives a special focus on how protests since 1991 (with special emphasis on Euro-maidan) have led to societal transformation and mobilization that have, in turn, intensified the democratization process and the formation of the civic national identity. Chapter 4 engages with Russian ever-increasing authoritarianism and neoimperialism and how that has led to a more militant Russian approach towards Ukraine. In the second part, the author explores the progress of the war and its consequences. Chapter 5 is dedicated to what the author dubs the first phase of the war, the annexation of Crimea in February and March 2014. Chapter 6 is devoted to the second phase of the war, the War in Donbas since April 2014. Chapter 7 is focused on the events right before and since the 24th February 2022 invasion, while Chapter 8 is concerned with the current and probable consequences of the war. The book ends with the outlook which, in addition to summarizing the work, ends in a sur-

prisingly positive manner, with a poll that shows how more Ukrainians have become hopeful about the future after the invasion, than prior to it.

The main aim of this book is to explain the structural causes of the war (p. 5), as well as how these background factors shaped the war through its three phases. The author finds the root of the conflict to exist at least since Ukrainian independence in 1991, if not before. She presents how Ukrainian democratization, westernization, formation of civic national identity, and popular mobilization have led Ukraine away from the old/new empire. These developments, while benign on their own, have made this war a very likely occurrence because of the rising authoritarianism and the empowerment of neo-imperialist narratives within Russia. The author makes a conscious decision not to examine the role of Putin as the "catalyst" of the conflict and focuses on its long-term origins (p. 133). As such, this book contributes to recent literature that claims that this is not Putin's War, but actually Russia's War, akin to Jade McGlynn's recent work (2023). However, what is unique to this approach is its focus on Ukraine, namely how internal developments within Ukraine led it away from Russia towards the West, and how this escalated the conflict and increased the likelihood of a 2022 invasion. By focusing on background causes, the author shows that this conflict would have been likely, even with someone else than Putin at the helm of today's Russia.

While the focus on background causes does make a strong argument that this is Russia's war, including Putin's formative effect on the background causes in the analysis would have been of great benefit as he is more than just a catalyst. He has had a strong effect in shaping the background causes that the book analyzes. Indeed, authoritarianism has been rising since Yeltsin (p. 56) and neoimperialism can be traced to before Putin's presidency, back to Primakov's tenure at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Kuchins and Zevelev 2012, 153-154), but they have increased during Putin's tenure. Similarly, memory politics, a background factor that has empowered neoimperialism in Russia, is largely a product of Putin's attempts to strengthen his grip on power (Khapaeva 2016). Similarly, framing Ukrainians as Nazis has been largely the result of Putin's leadership during Euromaidan, as Putin's speeches started labeling Ukrainian protestors as Nazis in 2014 (Rossolinski-Liebe and Willems 2022). Without this framing, the 2022 invasion would have been less likely, and the same could be said about war crimes like the one in Bucha. While the book's focus on background factors is legitimate, including Putin in the analysis could strengthen the structural argument because of Putin's major role in the formation of the memory politics that has made the 2022 invasion much more likely.

However, the greatest contribution to the public understanding of the Ukraine conflict in this book is its ability to combat propaganda with facts. Russian propaganda has had a great effect on the West in recent years, as it has exploited political divides that have even managed to affect presidential elections (Helmus et al. 2020). During the war in Ukraine, Russian propaganda has also taken effect on some of the mainstream US media and figures, like FOX News and Tucker Carlson (Klepper 2022). As such, intended or not, fact-based deconstruction of propaganda is of great service to the public understanding of the conflict. A good example is the debunking of Russian propaganda about Nazis leading Ukraine after 2014, where the author clearly shows that, while the extreme right has been present during the Euromaidan protests, it could only garner a mere 5% of the vote in the first post-Maidan elections (p. 72). Similarly, the author debunks myths about Khrushchev "gifting" Crimea to Ukraine, by showing the economic reasoning behind this decision of 1954 (pp. 78-80). However, by no means is this book biased towards Ukraine or the "West". For example, it criticizes Germany's incoherent policy of combining sanctions with increasing energy trade (e.g. continuing the work on Nord Stream) after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (pp. 13-14), as well as the Ukrainian government for not investigating the May 2014 violence in Odesa (p. 84).

In general, *Russia's War Against Ukraine* is an easy-to-read, fact-based book that is bound to uncover numerous causes behind the Russian War against Ukraine, albeit somewhat limited by the lack of inclusion of Vladimir Putin's role in shaping memory politics in the analysis. This is a great read not only for those interested in this war but also for those who are interested in recent internal developments in Russia and Ukraine.

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