
The Policy Implications of Russia's Genocide in Ukraine

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Amid Rwanda's brutal, society-wide slaughter in 1994, U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher [retorted](#) to a reporter, "If there is any particular magic in calling it a genocide, I have no hesitancy in saying that." This off-the-cuff remark revealed a serious policymaker oversight in understanding how the presence of genocidal ideology in a given context fundamentally changes the policy options available. Given the severity of violence caused by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—and the Western and other assistance committed—diagnosing Russia's violent aims must be one of the key preoccupations for policymakers today. This memo underscores the policy relevance of applying existing comparative genocide studies research to the Russia-Ukraine war.² Globally, contexts with credible allegations of genocide are among the world's most chaotic, politicized environments. Along with massive human suffering and rapidly changing dynamics, new analytic technologies have increased the data points available for analysts, [contributing](#) to a form of information overload. In such contexts, empirically-grounded social science frameworks prove invaluable by [focusing](#) policymaker attention on the most important dynamics for decision-making.

Accordingly, I first apply these frameworks to Russian perpetrator behavior in Ukraine, contributing a social scientific approach to organizing the mounting evidence of a Russian genocide in Ukraine. Distinctive in pattern and intent, genocides are distinguishable by their destructive purpose waged against all victim population segments. Arguing that the most effective policy responses for halting genocide are built on these variances, I apply comparative genocide research to discuss the: 1) networks of actors carrying out Russia's genocide, 2) the process of cascading radicalization, 3) the historical precedent that genocides only end in total victories, and 4) the moral and analytic value of labeling Russian violence a genocide.

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² While I focus my analysis on this context, this framework could also be applied to other regional contexts (e.g., Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia), as well as historical regional analysis including the Chechen Wars.

Analyzing Russia’s Genocide in Ukraine

Inferring Opaque Intentionality

Logistical hurdles notwithstanding, the Kremlin’s August 25th [announcement](#) of planned increases to Russia’s armed forces signaled an enduring military commitment to the devastation of Ukraine. Operating in parallel, Russian state messaging continues its dehumanizing characterizations of Ukrainians, while concerns remain high that Russia is [preparing](#) another attempt at further offensive campaigns. The overlap of Russian capacity for violence with an expressed appetite for it (i.e., the presence of both [motive and means](#)) has been [well-documented](#) since the full-scale invasion began. Still, despite enormous suffering, analytic assessments of genocide are not explicitly linked to victim tolls or the scope of the damage. Rather, as I have [noted](#) elsewhere, “genocide is a process with specific dynamics that arise from its perpetrators’ intention to extinguish a group.” Pioneering figures like Raphael Lemkin [named](#) it the “crime of crimes” as it willfully targets a group’s most basic right to exist.

Due to differing perspectives and mandates, the interpretive details—and operational definitions—of genocide have been contested across [fields](#) like politics, law, activism, and academia. Experts [debate](#) issues linked to its measurement and nature, yet major consensus flags two major questions that [indicate](#) genocide in real-time: First, are all segments of the population targeted? Second, is the *destruction* of the group—not simply severe repression or battering—guiding the purpose and logic of the violence? Drawing from the past thirty years of genocide research, I created corresponding [proxy variables](#) that elicit opaque perpetrator motivations and [disaggregate](#) categories like “intent” over time and space:

Table 1: Proxy Variables, Intended Purpose of Violence

| | Intended Purpose | Proxy Variable: Future-Orientation | Proxy Variable: Violence as Communicative [Violence used to send messages of fear or intimidation] |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| GENOCIDE | *Destruction | *Perpetrators cannot envision a future that entails co-existing with victims. | *Little to no communicative violence |
| MASS DIRECTED VIOLENCE | *All other violence falling below destruction *Repression *Non-destructive harm (e.g., injuries) | *Perpetrators can envision a future that includes their victims in a submissive role. | *Extensive evidence of communicative violence |

Table 2: Proxy Variables, Intended Targets of the Violence

| | Intended Target | Proxy Variable: Logistics of Violence | Proxy Variable: Pursuit of Victims |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|--|--|
| GENOCIDE | *Unqualified Group Selection | *Coordinated <i>and</i> Systematic *Not ad hoc | *Pursuit (even when inconvenient) over time and across distance. |
| MASS DIRECTED VIOLENCE | *Qualified Group Selection | *Possibly coordinated and systematic *Possibly ad hoc | *Little to no pursuit across time – killing may take place in single instance. *Little to no pursuit across distance – victims selected on criteria of convenience. |

Source: Kristina Hook, “Pinpointing Patterns of Violence: A Comparative Genocide Studies Approach to Violence Escalation in the Ukrainian Holodomor,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 15 (2), 2021, pp. 10-36.

Russia’s Destructive – Not Just Repressive – Motivations

The specific narratives promoted in Russia’s non-free media space illuminate influential stakeholders’ internal logic for violence in Ukraine. These statements begin at the top of the governmental hierarchy, with Russian President Vladimir Putin continuing to [insist](#) that it is a “historical fact” that Ukrainians are “fundamentally one people” with Russians as late as October 2022. Putin’s statements that the Ukrainian people are intrinsically identical to Russians and separated only by arbitrary circumstances perpetuates the erasure of the Ukrainian national group, a protected category [under](#) the United Nations genocide convention. On January 15, 2023, Putin further characterized the military situation in a broadcast interview, [stating](#), “There is a positive dynamic. Everything is developing according to plans. I hope that our fighters will please us more than once again.” These comments came hours after one of Russia’s largest attacks against civilians – a deadly missile attack against a nine-story residency block that killed and wounded scores in Dnipro – as well as after eleven months of [documented](#) atrocity crimes by Russian forces in Ukraine.

Such violent sentiments that deny Ukrainian national identity are reiterated by prominent Russian politicians at the local and national levels. Moscow City Duma Deputy Andrey Medvedev called for the “liquidation of Ukrainian statehood in its current form,” [stating](#), “the Ukrainian nation does not exist. It is a political orientation.” Former Russian Federation President Dmitry Medvedev has become increasingly known for his violent bombast, ranging from [calling](#) Ukrainians resisting Russian occupation “cockroaches” to [suggesting](#) that Ukraine will not exist on maps in two years.

Significantly, influential figures have continued with calls for violence even in the wake of large-scale civilian targeting in Ukraine. After extensive attacks on Ukraine's civilian infrastructure in October 2022, member of the Russian State Duma Andrey Gurulyov [characterized](#) the conditions created by Russian attacks as "impossible to survive. There is no heating, no water, no sewer, and no lights. You can't cook food, no place to store food, there is no way to transport the food." After demonstrating his grasp of the toll of Russian attacks on the Ukrainian people, he affirmed them, stating, "All of this is quite effective. I suppose this should be continued. This will produce a very good effect."

Beyond state actors, this rhetoric is echoed by other media sources, indicating the spread of these sentiments in official and nonofficial messaging. The Russian television channel Tsargrad [responded](#) to the August car bombing of Darya Dugina by stating, "We and Ukraine cannot continue to exist on the same planet. It is impossible to coexist with infernal evil," directly echoing the proxy variables identified above. In each of these statements, this expressed unwillingness to coexist—even with Ukrainians in a subdued role—indicates *destructive* genocide purposes rather than harshly *repressive* future conceptions of Ukrainians (i.e., a scenario where Ukraine's national sovereignty is undermined but not its citizens' fundamental existence or organically-derived national identity).

While eliminationist language is surprisingly [frank](#) in Russia's case, these proxy variables further clarify if genocidal actions (*actus reus*) overlap with genocidal motives (*mens rea*). As [other experts](#) and I covered [elsewhere](#), the combination of multiple perpetrator behaviors collectively indicates a pattern of genocidal violence targeting the Ukrainian national group. Some Russian behaviors explicitly [correspond](#) to the United Nations Genocide Convention criteria, such as the mass [deportation](#) of approximately [1.9 million](#) Ukrainian civilians with Russian confirmation of at least 307,423 Ukrainian children [fast-tracked](#) for Russian adoption. Although precise statistics will continue to be verified as the war continues, these figures indicate significant patterns of violence. Applying proxy variables clarifies more subtle details, such as the increased coordination required by full-scale genocide, emphasizing the importance of pre-February Russian bureaucratic [planning](#) for filtration camps and judiciary changes designed to legalize trafficked Ukrainian children [in](#) Russian homes.

A focus on future orientation also underscores the dual significance of Russian killing with violent, coerced Russification—echoing longstanding Kremlin historical [precedent](#). Through this lens, the internal logic of [torturous](#) filtration camps—designed to weed out those [deemed](#) by perpetrators to be "irredeemably Ukrainian" from those who can be forcibly Russified—take on more sinister undertones than other repressive forms of internment camps. Similarly, extreme violence [against](#) children (who pose little military threat) and rape with [stated](#) motivations to disincentivize future births also indicate the intended destruction of Ukraine's future generations. Finally, coordinated Russian efforts

at population control—through [pursuing](#) victims and [preventing](#) their flight—believe explanations that land or looted goods would satisfy Russia’s ultimate destructive aims.

Effective Policymaker Responses to Russian Genocidal Intent

Targeting Genocide’s Multifaceted Networks

The proxy variables described above not only highlight what is happening but *why*. This distinction is needed for effective policy responses that tackle the root causes of violence rather than purely treating its symptoms. With genocidal targeting detected in Russia’s violence against the Ukrainian national group, other established findings from the genocide studies field should shape policymaker messaging and decision-making.

One sobering implication is that this cruel, complex social phenomenon requires a veritable village to achieve. History will remember President Vladimir Putin as a notorious war criminal, but he has yet to pull one trigger in Ukraine. Like other genocides, large numbers of “ordinary” Russians [participate](#) in raping, torturing, deporting, and killing civilians and soldiers. This reality necessitates that global leaders [eschew](#) more comfortable descriptions of Russian violence as “Putin’s war,” as German Chancellor Olaf Scholz did as late as August 10, 2022.

Instead, five key roles must be explicitly addressed by policymakers and analysts alike in formulating appropriate responses to Russia’s criminal genocidal behavior:

- 1) *Direct perpetrators*—including Russian soldiers and warfighters.
- 2) *Organizers*—including Russian bureaucrats, occupation authorities, military recruiters—planners and advisors, [passport](#) consular officers, children’s services who participate in deportations, etc.
- 3) *Authorizers*—ranging from the strategic level of Putin and security service elite through commanders [authorizing](#) genocidal battlefield directives.
- 4) *Enablers*—especially Russian [religious leaders](#) and dehumanizing [state media](#) commentators who routinely call for Ukrainian extermination.
- 5) *Bystanders*—who may not approve but do not intervene.

Anticipating Cascading Radicalization

This final category—bystanders—is often neglected in current conversations of Russian genocide yet plays a central role in perpetrating cycles of violence. Historically, genocides do not occur when a specific number of killers emerge but rather when key architects like Putin become surrounded by a passive critical mass that grows [convinced](#) that violence is required or even just permissible. Studies show that processes of “cascading radicalization”—operating as a form of genocidal social contagion—can [entrap](#) millions in one of these five roles. Worldviews shift, psychological construction of the victims as

sub-humans [occur](#), and cruelty is [rewarded](#). The perpetrator society routinely blames the victims for their own suffering, as [seen](#) in Bosnia denialism and, more recently, with [socially accepted](#) Russian [disinformation](#) that Ukrainians bomb themselves.

Even more dangerous, [signs](#) of moral reorientation in broader Russian society are occurring. Violence against Ukrainians is [transforming](#) from unfortunate-but-passively permissive to actively “ethical.” Dmitry Rogozin, the former head of Russia’s space agency, exemplifies this trend, justifying “putting an end” to Ukrainians by [calling](#) them “an existential threat to the Russian people, Russian history, Russian language, and Russian civilians...so let’s get this over with. Once and forever. For our grandchildren.” As these harmful transformations occur in Russian society, they create unpredictable, unstable dynamics that even authoritarian architects like Putin can no longer control. The radicalization unleashed in a perpetrator society can entrench and prolong Russian societal dynamics that have been [termed](#) “defensive consolidation.”

Understanding End-Game Scenarios

Historical data [demonstrate](#) that genocide perpetrators are willing to incur greater inconvenience and pay greater costs in their pursuit of annihilation. Research further [indicates](#) that genocides only end in [total](#) victory: either perpetrators achieve their destructive aims or the victims successfully fight back, often with outside help. This historical pattern [suggests](#) that comments from former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, who stated that Russia would continue its war even if Ukraine formally renounced NATO aspirations, are not empty posturing.

Unlike other forms of brutal wars, genocide’s specific totalizing aims combined with profound social changes in perpetrator societies support policy stances that no “snap-back” changes between Western governments and Russia are currently possible. Russian ceasefire overtures must be greeted with suspicion. These delays allow perpetrators to consolidate their control and violent intentions to erase the Ukrainian national group through killing and coerced Russification. Some governmental representatives continue to call for a cessation of weapons to Ukraine, most recently German SPD figures who erroneously [termed](#) this an alternative *modus vivendi* with Russia. With Western weapons Ukraine’s only major option to halting an ongoing genocide, policymaker messaging must ring out more loudly that Russia is not ultimately after Ukraine’s land but rather its people.

Embracing Truth in an Age of Disinformation

The stark reality of genocidal end-game scenarios must spark faster supplies of heavy weapons for Ukraine to reclaim control over its population, particularly from large economies whose military aid has lagged behind capacity, including Germany, France, Spain, and Italy. Russia’s genocidal aims also require greater transparency and action

from more of the 152 signatories of the UN Convention, which [obligates](#) signatories to *both* prevent and punish genocide. Moreover, the United Nations itself must address this topic more forcefully.

With the UN created in the aftermath of the Nazi Holocaust yet now constrained by Russia's veto power on the Security Council, this institution has suffered credibility issues linked to Russia's full-scale invasion. Although UN efforts have seen successes (such as the Black Sea shipping agreement [involving](#) the UN, Turkey, Russia, and Ukraine), other notable failures have [raised](#) pointed questions about the emerging international order and the UN's influence. Critics note that two members of the UN Security Council are credibly accused of genocide: Russia (externally against Ukraine) and China (internally against the Uighurs).

Instead of brushing off such questions, the UN can regain moral leadership and political capital by explicitly addressing the Genocide Convention's applicability to Ukraine and its signatories' obligations. A more visible genocide response effort must also include more explicit [condemning](#) language, an in-country [visit](#) by the Special Advisor for Genocide Prevention, revision of erroneously labeled deported Ukrainians in Russia as "[refugees](#)," and long-term institutional presence, including possible UN peacekeepers, in Ukraine.

The reality of genocide also expands the international community's obligations to Ukraine, including by Middle Eastern and African nations whose [reactions](#) have been more muted. Although some countries and scholars have [recognized](#) Russia's actions as genocide, many Western governments and international advocacy organizations also lag behind. With Ukraine long overshadowed by Russian narratives, these actors must participate in regional decolonialization efforts by listening to local voices and locally-informed scholarship. More than simply asserting truth over disinformation, understanding Russia's genocidal aims, networks, and end-game scenarios will lead to more effective policy analyses, messaging, and responses to this urgent emergency.