

MYTHS & **FACTS**

ABOUT RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE



MYTH: NATO expansion provoked Russia's war against Ukraine.

FACT: Russia's war on Ukraine is a continuation of Russia's centuries-long policy of treating Ukraine as a vassal state to be subjugated.

Russia already shares a border with NATO that is over 1,500 miles long, which is about 300 miles longer than Russia's border with Ukraine. Finland's recent accession to NATO increased Russia's border with NATO members by over 800 miles and was met with limited protest from the Kremlin.

Russia's sensitivity to any desire by Ukraine to join or partner with NATO shows that Putin does not believe that Ukraine is a separate state entitled to choose its own alliances and associations. Russia first invaded Ukraine in 2014, before which a minority of Ukrainians supported their country joining NATO. Thus, Russia's initial invasion and occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donbas region accelerated Ukraine's turn away from Russia.

Putin uses invented fears about NATO and the EU encircling Russia as part of his propaganda campaign to indoctrinate the Russian people into supporting him and his foreign policy built around brutal conquest.

MYTH: Eastern Ukrainians speak Russian and voted to become part of Russia, therefore the war is an issue of self-determination.

FACT: Many Ukrainians speak Russian because, during the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, elites promoted Russian language and culture and repressed Ukrainian and other national identities and languages.

Following the full-scale invasion, many Russian-speaking Ukrainians have tried to use the Ukrainian language more often. Even so, speaking Russian does not necessarily translate to support of the Russian state.

The areas of Ukraine occupied by Russia are lawless zones in which freedom of speech, religion, and association outside of the Russian state and church have been crushed. Russian occupying authorities routinely use physical and psychological torture on the population and force Ukrainian citizens to take Russian passports to carry out daily activities. No expression of Ukrainian identity is permitted, including education in Ukrainian and even the open use of the Ukrainian language.

Putin has consistently used sham referenda to justify his violent occupation of Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine, which have disproportionately suffered throughout this war. In Crimea in 2014, after Russian soldiers had already taken control of the peninsula, occupation authorities contrived a “referendum” to join Crimea to Russia. Under these coercive conditions, no residents of Crimea had a truly free choice. In 2022, Putin declared the annexation of four areas of Ukraine based on referenda in which Russian forces coerced Ukrainians to vote, sometimes door-to-door in the presence of armed Russian soldiers.

MYTH: Zelensky is not a legitimate president, so Ukraine needs to hold elections immediately.

FACT: Ukrainians elected President Zelensky in 2019 in elections that international election monitors deemed free and fair.

The president's term lasts five years, but Ukraine has not been able to hold elections since Russia's full-scale invasion. In Ukraine, elections are constitutionally prohibited under martial law. The democratically elected parliament (Rada), not the president, imposes martial law. Deputies across party lines have overwhelmingly approved extending martial law since February 2022. (The parliament votes to extend martial law every 90 days.) Across political affiliations, too, Ukrainians are not in favor of attempting to hold elections at this time.

Holding free and fair elections in Ukraine during wartime would be nearly impossible due to widespread bombing targeting civilians, Russia's occupation of about 20% of the country, and the logistical challenges of polling internally displaced people and refugees around the world.

The question of legitimacy should rather be put to Russia, which has not held an election widely considered free and fair in decades. Vladimir Putin has been president or prime minister since 1999. Putin used his control over Russia's rubber-stamp parliament to change Russia's constitution; he extended presidential terms from 4 to 6 years with possibility of a second term, then reset the clock so he could continue to rule until 2030.