

## Ukraine Maps Tell a Different Story Than Putin's Claims by Zoltan Grossman abridged from Common Dreams Feb 28, 2022

As a geographer who has studied and taught about interethnic conflict around the world, and as a U.S. citizen with family roots in East-Central Europe, I've always read the stories told in the maps.

These two maps show how Putin got it wrong, and miscalculated in launching his war against Ukraine.

In Ukraine's past presidential elections, the electoral map would almost perfectly match the language map. Pro-Russian politicians would win the red region, Ukrainian nationalists would win the yellow region, and they'd split the difference in the orange region.

But in the 2019 election, something different happened, shown on the bottom map. **Fed up with corrupt politicians of both ethnic groups, voters overwhelmingly chose Russian-speaking Jewish candidate Volodymyr Zelensky as president, in a rebuke to both Ukrainian and Russian ultranationalists.** Zelensky actually did better in the Russian-speaking region (in dark green), and his opponent only won in the immediate Lviv area (in light orange).

But here's the thing: how can Putin convince Russian-speakers to help topple a president who they voted for in larger numbers than Ukrainian-speakers did, over a candidate backed by voters in the most Ukrainian nationalist region? How does that make any sense as a way to fight Nazis? Perhaps because Zelensky doesn't adequately play the role of bogeyman, Putin has to topple him.

The antiwar protests in Russia are remarkable and unprecedented, but what's really notable is the lack of support for Putin's war from Ukraine's Russian-speakers, whom he's supposedly "liberating" from the fascist thugs. It's notable that even Russian state TV can't engineer a scene of ethnic Russians welcoming the army, which was so easy to show in Crimea only eight years ago.

It's actually Putin's invasion that could confirm his self-fulfilling prophecy, by elevating the far-right militias in western Ukraine, and convincing more Ukrainians that they need to join NATO. That might be exactly what Putin wants, because he can continue to use Nazis and NATO to frighten the Russian people into following his will. Just as Russian and Ukrainian ultranationalists reinforce each other's messages of hate, Putin's aggressions and NATO expansions feed off of each other's messages of military might.

This region of Eastern Europe is marked by unresolved historical trauma, including past imperial invasions, Stalin's Holodomor (Great Famine) of 1932-33

that claimed 3.5 million Ukrainian lives, and Hitler's war of 1941-45 that claimed at least 25 million lives throughout the Soviet Union. Everyone fears a confrontation between the nuclear-armed powers of Russia and United States, which would be in nobody's interest, especially Ukraine.

Putin and his oligarchs run a shaky Russian economy, and his first goal is to stay in power. Like many western leaders, he sees the path toward xenophobia and war as the way to control his own people with fear. Yet it seems that now both Russians and Ukrainians are starting to lose their fear, and beginning to think of standing up to empire.

