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Ukrainian-Russian relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union

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Abstract: *Russia's war against Ukraine has drawn researchers' attention to Ukrainian-Russian relations. Since the fighting started, a large number of publications have appeared trying to explain what was happening in Ukraine from different perspectives. A historical approach is used in the article to find the answers to two questions; were there ever any chances for good neighborly relations to develop between Ukraine and Russia, and could these relations have led differently than to the military invasion in 2022? The analyses of official documents, statements and speeches of Russian officials, book contents, articles, research in Russian scientific publications and periodicals, and sociological research results lead to the conclusion that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a logical continuation of the policy that Russia has pursued towards Ukraine since the collapse of the Soviet Union.*

Key words: Ukraine, Russia, Ukrainian-Russian relations, the collapse of the Soviet Union, War

Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine has been going on since February 2014, when it took control of the Crimean Peninsula; and annexed it shortly thereafter. Then, in spring 2014, Russia staged a war in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas. Russia's latest major attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022 has fully focused the world's attention on relations between the two countries.

A large number of publications have appeared aiming to explain what was happening in Ukraine from different perspectives. These publications tried to explain the events in Ukraine both in terms of theories of international relations¹ and in terms of the reasons that prompted Russia to start a war against Ukraine.²

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¹ Drezner, 2022; Walt, 2022.

² Dickinson, 2022; Masters, 2022.

The authors of the article used a historical approach to determine whether there were ever any chances for the development of good neighborly relations between Ukraine and Russia and if these relations could have led to another outcome than the 2022 military invasion.

Official documents, statements and speeches of Russian officials, books, articles, research in Russian scientific publications and periodicals, and the results of sociological research were collected and reviewed. Due to the methods of synthesis, analogy and abstraction the generalized material was accumulated to allow formulation of the article's conclusions.

This article uses words and phrases such as “the annexation of the Crimea,” “the Russian military invasion,” “the Russian aggression” and others that are similar. Such terminology has been used by other international organizations, for example the United Nations,³ in classifying Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Alternatively, the Russian political leadership and the Russian media keep talking about a “legitimate referendum” on the accession of Crimea in 2014, a “civil war” in Ukraine since April 2014, accuse the West of “provoking a Russian attack on Ukraine,” and call the large-scale war against Ukraine since February 2022 a “special military operation.”

Results

Treaties with Russia and Crimea

Since the very beginning of Ukrainian independence, Russia has questioned the existing borders between the two countries. On August 26, 1991, two days after the adoption of the Independence Act of Ukraine, a threatening statement by the Russian presidential spokesman appeared. It said that in case of the termination of the union relations (with the other Soviet republics within the Soviet Union), Russia reserves the right to revise the borders.⁴

On May 21, 1992, during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, the Parliament of the Russian Federation adopted the resolution that questioned the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The Resolution of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR of February 5, 1954 “On the transfer of the Crimean region from the Russian SFSR to the Ukrainian SSR” recognized the transfer as having no legal force. It was proposed to resolve the issue of Crimea through interstate negotiations between Russia and Ukraine with the participation of Crimea and on the basis of the will of its population.⁵

However, this resolution came in opposition to the Treaty of November 19, 1990 between Ukraine and Russia, in which the parties renounced territorial claims to each

³ UNGA 2014, 2022.

⁴ Kuchma, 2003: 12.

⁵ OIPLI, 2021.

other, recognizing the borders that were established between the two states during the times of the USSR.⁶ B. Yeltsin, who held the position of Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic at that time, signed the agreement on behalf of Russia.

Eventually, Ukraine and Russia officially recognized each other's borders and confirmed the inviolability of the existing borders between them in 1997 by signing the Treaty of friendship, cooperation and partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation.⁷ By the Treaty between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on Ukrainian-Russian state border of 2003, the Ukrainian-Russian state border was fully coordinated on the map.⁸

The Crimea peninsula in the last document was defined as one that belongs to Ukraine. At the first sight, these documents demonstrated the victory of common sense in Russia and its rejection of territorial claims to Ukraine. However, it should be noted that the 1997 Agreement was signed almost simultaneously with the agreement (two days later) that regulated the basing of the Russian fleet in Crimea. Indirectly, the treaty from 1997 recognized the existence and preservation of Russian influence in Ukraine. The parties made a commitment to coordinate their positions and actions in the international arena. The foreign ministers pledged to meet at least twice a year. Ukraine and Russia pledged not to conclude any agreements with third countries directed against each other. Subsequently, Moscow repeatedly on own choice (e.g. Ukraine's approach to EU) referred to these provisions accusing Ukraine of treaty violations.

It is worth emphasizing that after signing the 2003 Treaty the President of Ukraine signed the Agreement with Russia on the creation of the Common Economic Space (CES). Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Ukraine were to have formed this space. Although in this case the Border Treaty was preceded by the Agreement on the SES, Russia ratified it only after Ukraine had ratified the Single Economic Space Treaty in 2004. Consequently, we can conclude that the process of recognizing Russia's borders in both cases was tied to certain requirements for Ukraine. In the first case, it was a Russian military presence in the Crimea, and, in the second case, the entry of Ukraine into the Single Economic Space. The SES was for Russia, first of all, a geopolitical project that aimed to consolidate its influence on the territory of the former Soviet Union. The same goal was pursued by another integration project in the post-Soviet space – the Customs Union, established by the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). Russian researchers confessed that the EurAsEC Customs Union had primarily a political goal.⁹

⁶ VRU, 1990.

⁷ VRU, 1997.

⁸ VRU, 2004.

⁹ Suzdaltsev, 2010.

So, the RF has repeatedly emphasized that Ukraine-European Union (EU) free trade deal would pose a major threat to Russia's economy. It is worth reminding that the EU has taken unprecedented steps by allowing Russia to negotiate with Ukraine on the Association Agreement. But, as it turned out, Russia was not interested in agreement. Its main objective was to prevent the signing of a free trade zone between Ukraine and the EU, which is an important goal of the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement. In 2015, the European Commission even had to release a statement that denied all myths about the EU-Ukraine Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) Tripartite Talks on the EU-Ukraine DCFTA 2015, an agreement on a free trade area between Ukraine and the EU.¹⁰

Ukraine in Russian publications

Russia has an abundance of publications devoted to the prospects of relations with Ukraine. The vast majority of them stressed that the West (United States of America (USA), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), EU) was not interested in the successful development of Ukraine. These players, in the opinion of Russian researchers, viewed Ukraine exclusively as a tool of confrontation with Moscow. Russia, according to one of these researchers, suffered in this struggle the greatest geopolitical defeat for all time of its post-Soviet existence. He argues that the annexation of Crimea somewhat eased but did not entirely compensate for this defeat.¹¹

The reaction of Russian society to the annexation of the Crimea and the war in the East of Ukraine was quite predictable. The seizure of Crimea was seen as a victory over the "aggressive West", which tried to set up "NATO bases in Crimea".

One of the supporters of this approach argued that "the Ukrainian project will necessarily collapse", making parallel with German Democratic Republic artificially created by the Soviet Union.¹² Less radical views focus on proving the idea that "only" a certain part of modern Ukraine, and not all of it historically belongs to Russia.

Even the prominent Russian writer and (1970) winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature Alexander Solzhenitsyn became an active propagandist of such ideas. Interestingly, that in his book *The Gulag Archipelago*, which exposed the communist dictatorship in the Soviet Union, he respected the desire of Ukrainians to have their own independent state. In this work, the Nobel laureate emphasized that after the Soviet system was imposed on Ukrainians in 1918-1920, the Bolsheviks falsely promised Ukrainians for next 15-20 years that Ukraine could become fully independent and separate state in any time she wished (this right was officially enshrined the Constitution of the Soviet Union). However, as Solzhenitsyn emphasizes, when Ukrainians

¹⁰ EC, 2015.

¹¹ Tchernega, 2015.

¹² Smolin *et al.*, 2014: 127-140.

tried to make their country actually independent at the end of the World War II, they were declared “Bandera” (referring to S. Bandera, who fought for the independence of Ukraine) and began to be captured, tortured, executed and sent to the concentration camps. Then Solzhenitsyn explained that the “Bandera” were Ukrainians who were fighting during the entire war against Hitler for their independence, and he proposed to give Ukrainians the right to decide their own future.¹³

It is worth underlining that modern Russian politicians, television propagandists and other media constantly and intentionally use the word “Banderivtsi” as a synonym to “fascists” or the similar combined term – “Banderivtsi-fascists.” It seems like a tradition of Russian society to treat all Ukrainian historical figures who fought for Ukraine’s independence from Russia as traitors and to criticize their deeds witheringly.

Over the years, the position of Solzhenitsyn significantly changed. His new statements about Ukraine were actively used in anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. In the work *Russia in Collapse* (published in 1998) he wrote about Ukraine as an artificial state. Although the Russian writer did not call for a violent rejection of Ukrainian territories, his thoughts were actively replicated in Russia at all levels by politicians and cultural leaders. Some similar sayings are “Not all Ukraine in its current formal Soviet borders is really Ukraine,” “When Khmelnytsky (the leader of the national liberation war of Ukraine 1648-1654) added (in Solzhenitsyn’s interpretation) Ukraine to Russia, Ukraine accounted for only one fifth of its today’s territory.”¹⁴

The fact that the Nobel Prize winner, a world-famous writer, has expressed such ideas turned them into a powerful propaganda weapon against Ukraine. Interestingly, when “Khmelnytsky added Ukraine into Russia,” Russia was Moscovia, and its territory did not make up half of today’s RF. The Crimea, which Russian propaganda calls the original Russian territory, obviously, was not part of it.

Most modern European borders, as well as the borders of Russia, were formed during numerous conflicts, wars and compromise agreements. This process had lasted for centuries. Any step towards revising these borders will inevitably lead to new conflicts between states. Civilized countries have already realized that there is only one approach: forget historic strife, look into the future, and build good-neighbourly relations with other countries based on the principles of international law.

Russians believe in the myth of Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian single ethnic roots. President Vladimir Putin repeatedly brings forward this myth, and other Russian authors enthusiastically support this falsehood. In the “Political Bestseller” series, we can see the assertion that “Ukrainians are the same Russian people, the same sons and daughters of Russia,” “we have no right to give up part of our people, Russian

¹³ Solzhenitsyn, 2010: 41-42.

¹⁴ Solzhenitsyn, 1998: 78-79.

Ukrainians, to slavery and allow them be destroyed by the United States and NATO countries,” “Ukraine is Russia, its main part.”¹⁵

Another example of this approach is the article titled *Russia and Ukraine: Two Related People, One Fate*. It is clear from this title, that the author believes that Ukraine’s future is connected to Russia forever. As a result, he concludes that Russia and Ukraine will “inevitably live together” and that all the current turmoil between the two countries will eventually be forgotten.¹⁶

Similar talk in Russia about “brotherly peoples” is carried out to persuade people in Ukraine and Russia that Ukraine is not a different country but only an integral part of Russia (a significant part, at best). Hence, the Ukrainian lands should remain firmly under Moscow’s control and have, of course, no right for independent existence.

Some Russian sources of information, at first glance, disseminate opinions on the future of Ukraine that may not look so aggressive and unfriendly. However, the essence and the main purpose of such publications follow the above-mentioned logic. They predict the end of Ukraine’s existence in modern frontiers and its disintegration as a state. For example, in one publication, the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies suggested some significant diversity of Ukrainians in terms of civilizational identity will make Ukraine a territorially unstable state that may not be able to guarantee its citizens a decent standard of living and peaceful coexistence with its neighbours. The authors predict the growth of interregional contradictions, which under certain circumstances may lead to the beginning of the process of the disintegration of the Ukrainian state. As a result, Kyiv has no choice but, in the author’s opinion, to expect a federalization of Ukraine. This, in turn, will either change the quality of relations between Ukraine’s regions and the central government in favor of greater compliance of its policies with the real population’s needs and attitude or create a mechanism for a civilized “divorce” of regions in order to start different state projects without internal military confrontation.¹⁷

Even before 2014, the Kremlin demanded “federalization” as an instrument of the splitting and destruction of Ukraine. The Ukrainian reform in the sphere of local self-government and decentralization of power is continuing. A significant portion of power, resources and responsibilities have been transferred from the central executive authorities to local self-government bodies. The reform is changing the quality of the relationship to the better between the regions and the central government in Kyiv, and has nothing to do with Russia’s fake “federalization” of Ukraine which was intended solely to weaken cohesion between the regions as much as possible.

Russian mass media actively promoted the narrative that in Ukraine, there are groups of people with highly different civilizational identities. The main idea behind

¹⁵ Petukhov, 2008.

¹⁶ Chesnokov, 2016.

¹⁷ Nemensky, 2017.

such allegations is to convince the public that the East of Ukraine tends to support Russia, while the West is moving towards the EU. Some differences between East and West of Ukraine really exist, as they do, for example, between the South and North of Italy. But these Ukrainian differences are not the basis for a confrontation, not to mention an armed confrontation. Russia has been distributing “horror stories” about “fascist” unrest in the East of Ukraine for years, fuelling ethnic, religious, social hatred and hostility. Unfortunately, some Ukrainian politicians, who influenced the emotions of ordinary Ukrainians, actively helped Russia while using anti-European, anti-Western and anti-American rhetoric. Usually, this activity intensifies during election campaigns. But even under such circumstances, when the then President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich was about to sign the Association Agreement with the EU in 2013, the situation in Eastern and Southern Ukraine remained calm and stable despite Russia’s increasing informational and economic pressure.

The results of the study (conducted in 2013 and partially in early 2014), carried out by the German Bertelsmann Foundation (Bertelsmann-Stiftung) together with the Warsaw Institute of Public Policy, showed that only 5% of respondents in the East and 13% in the South of Ukraine supported the idea of independence of certain Ukrainian regions. More than 70% of respondents refused to become Russian citizens regardless of proximity of their location to Russia.¹⁸

In July 2014 (after the annexation of the Crimea by Russia and the start of its “hybrid war” in the Donbas), the Moscow-based Institute for Strategic Studies released a report devoted to events in Ukraine.¹⁹ Here are some of the statements made in this document – “The Ukrainian crisis is a culmination of the former course of the West towards Russia,” “In Ukraine, traditional American goals are being realized: gaining of rights for American companies to exploit Ukrainian energy resources, the establishment of external control over finance, foreign and domestic policy, and the country’s armed forces.” The report states that the history of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU is a vivid example of a provocatively demonstrative withdrawal of the EU from its own principles and norms in relations with Russia. The authors concluded that the implementation of the Agreement would lead to multibillion-dollar losses for the Russian and Ukrainian sides, to the collapse of large Ukrainian industrial enterprises, to the decline in Russian-Ukrainian trade and to large-scale unemployment. In their conclusions, the authors of the report reached the bizarre point that they accused the EU of violating the principles that were established in 1648 by the system of treaties of the Peace of Westphalia.

The Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (like most of the Russian think tanks and media) considers the events in Kyiv on February 21-22, 2014, as a *coup d’état* despite

¹⁸ Zholkver, 2014.

¹⁹ RISS, 2014.

the fact that at the time of Yanukovich's escape from Kyiv in February 2014, all security-related ministries, services and agencies were controlled by his appointees. To call the simple escape of the president, who was evading responsibility for the crimes committed (120 people dead on the Maidan), a *coup* is not only incorrect but also a deliberate distortion of the factual events. Russia felt that it was losing influence on Ukraine, so it annexed Crimea and unleashed hostilities in the East of Ukraine.

The Russian Institute for Strategic Studies has published many other materials that do not hide its hostility towards Ukraine with the aim of undermining its reputation on the international scene. The Institute tried very hard to prove that Russia was not involved in the tragedy of the Boeing 777 airliner of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 that was shot down over Ukrainian territory controlled by Russian-backed militants on July 17, 2014, using a Russian-supplied *Buk* air-defence system. All 298 people who were on the plane were killed. The Russian Institute intended to put the responsibility for this tragedy onto Ukraine despite obvious evidence. But Russia, in fact, has acknowledged its involvement in this mass murder by blocking an UN Security Council decision to establish an international tribunal to investigate this crime.

A "process of denazification" of Ukraine, which Putin declared one of the tasks of his invasion of Ukraine in February 2022²⁰ and which is constantly repeated by the Russian media, was described already in 2017 in the publication *DeNAZification of Ukraine. A Land of Unlearned Lessons*.²¹ Some theses extracted from the publication, such as "Ukrainian Nazism is built upon the Ukrainian language as well," "denazification involves, among other things, a change of political elite," "due to manifestations of mass hatred, hysteria, feelings of superiority Ukraine greatly overtook the Third Reich," "sooner or later, Ukraine will face a denazification procedure, as happened in Germany after the end of World War II," "there was an absolutely criminal leadership" in Kyiv, etc., illustrate this author's position more than clearly.

It would be a mistake to claim that there were no publications in Russia recognizing the right of Ukraine and the Ukrainian nation to exist. However, such cases were rare, and their authors needed to have real courage to express such opinions. One such publication belongs to Dmitry Trenin, who wrote after the illegal annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas that the formation of independent Ukraine and Belarus is a normal and natural process, which is conditioned by the logic of the development of neighboring peoples. It would be better if Russia understood and accepted this rather than to try to "return Ukraine" at all costs or to "keep Belarus" in its orbit at any cost. He concluded that Ukraine's withdrawal from Russia is not the result of an internal conspiracy or an outburst of external forces, but a consequence of the process of

²⁰ Putin, 2022.

²¹ Gasparyan, 2017.

the formation of a Ukrainian political nation that is radically different from official views.²²

Russia persistently tries to persuade that the West, not itself, is to be blamed for Russia's attacks on Ukraine in both 2014 and 2022. In one of his interviews, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov once again named the causes of the annexation of the Crimea and the intensification of the war in the East of Ukraine – the NATO enlargement policy, the EU policy, or, more precisely, the Eastern Partnership policy, which, in the opinion of the Russian official, is based on an ultimate choice between a Russia or Europe associated future.²³ Interestingly, he gave the interview to a Serbian news agency. At the same time, Serbia is an example of how relations with the EU do not prevent a European country to maintain the same level of relations with Russia and benefit from free trade regime with the EU and Russia. In the Serbian case Russia has no concerns. Yet Ukraine in a similar situation has faced brutal pressure, blackmail and threats. Moscow demanded Ukraine to abandon its European aspirations in favor of Russia's "integration" projects in the post-Soviet space (which would have automatically meant subordination to or even inclusion in the geopolitically motivated Russian "superpower" agenda). Meanwhile, the Ukraine–EU Association Agreement explicitly states that it does not prevent the creation of free trade areas with other countries, and the document does not "promise" Ukraine EU membership.

Announcing the start of a "special military operation" in February 2022, Putin, not for the very first time, condemned NATO's expansion eastward that brought its military infrastructure closer to Russia's borders. He also stated that expansion together with continuing military development of Ukraine was unacceptable for Russia.²⁴

From the Russian point of view, as well as its followers, the West should recognize Ukraine as Russia's "area of influence" and allow Moscow to take control over it. For example, in one publication, the author suggests the U.S. should agree that some part of Ukraine will return under Russia's rule. This, according to the article, would make Moscow an American ally, or at least a benevolent neutral, and could be a good counterbalance to both Iran and China with whom Russia competes in various ways.²⁵

Sometimes the persistence of Russian propaganda produces results. From time to time, allegations of Western guilt on events in Ukraine appear in publications. One example of such an approach was an article by John J. Mearsheimer.²⁶ He explicitly stated that the crisis in Ukraine was not caused by Russian aggression but by

²² Trenin, 2017.

²³ Lavrov, 2018.

²⁴ Putin, 2022.

²⁵ Shlapentokh, 2014.

²⁶ Mearsheimer, 2014.

a geopolitical response to the actions of the U.S. and the EU. His main arguments touch upon the aforementioned expansion of NATO and EU to the East and the West's support for the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine on the Maidan in 2013-14. Likewise, he considered the power change in February 2014 in Kyiv as a "coup". Mearsheimer considered Putin's actions of taking the Crimea and destabilization of the situation in Ukraine as easily understandable geopolitical actions because Ukraine refused to give up its move towards the West. Mearsheimer believed that such a principle of international relations, as a matter of self-determination, is abstract, that Kyiv is not actually entitled to independently define its foreign policy and decide for itself who will be its allies. Consequently, such logic advocates that Ukraine has no right to exist as an independent state. This is exactly what Russia is trying to achieve in its relations with an independent Ukraine. Mearsheimer's statements are nothing more than a "scientifically" dressed-up repetition of Kremlin propaganda.

Interestingly, in 1993, the same Mearsheimer urged not to force Ukraine to abandon nuclear weapons, because it could prevent a Russian-Ukrainian war. Recognizing the history of Russia-Ukraine bad relations, he concluded that an independent Ukraine would help to create a stable order in Europe.²⁷ So, as we see, the views of a respected researcher eventually underwent a significant transformation as a result of propaganda to become completely in line with the views of the Russian president, whose attitude to Ukraine during this time remained unchanged.

Even Pope Francis suggested that Putin was waging the war against Ukraine because of NATO's enlargement and that the Western attitudes toward Russia had prompted President Putin to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.²⁸

It is difficult to understand how NATO enlargement could provoke Russian military aggression against Ukraine. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, almost all NATO members reduced defence spending and the Alliance's command structure. So, NATO enlargement was more political in nature. New members did not add much to increase the organization's military capability. In addition, all countries have volunteered to opt for membership in the Alliance, no one has been forced to do so. Under such conditions, NATO could not be a threat to Russia. But why does Russia nevertheless insist on NATO "aggressiveness"? The main reason is that membership in NATO (as well as in EU) detaches former Soviet republics from Russian influence. And this is exactly what Moscow was never ready to accept. All talks about expansion of "aggressive NATO" to the East was and is not more than an excuse for Russia's own aggressive policy.

When it comes to Ukraine's possible membership in NATO, then it should be recalled that Kyiv cancelled its non-aligned status only in December 2014 – after

²⁷ Mearsheimer, 1993.

²⁸ Fontana, 2022.

the annexation of Crimea and the unleashing of a war in the Donbas by Russia. NATO membership, as a goal of Ukraine, was enshrined in official documents only after almost four years of fighting in Donbas. Since 2014, polling in all regions of Ukraine demonstrated a rise in NATO's popularity. Thus, according to a study, if a referendum on Ukraine's accession to NATO would have taken place in June 2017, 48.1% of Ukrainians would have voted in favor. In 2012, only 16.2% would have done so.²⁹ In 2021, the percentage of support for NATO membership increased up to 54%.³⁰

Putin annexed and unleashed the war against Ukraine in 2022 not because of NATO activities and attitude, but out of a long-standing desire to revive the Soviet (or Russian) empire.

One can agree to some extent with Russia's assertion that the West is to blame for Russia's attack on Ukraine. However, this did not happen because the U.S., NATO and the EU did not recognize Ukraine as a part of Russia's sphere of influence. As a matter of fact, the West had not responded properly to Russia's aggression against Ukraine since in 2014, the assassination of Putin's political opponents, and crimes against civilians in Syria since 2015. Declaring their commitment to democracy, the international system based on rules, some EU member states continued to strengthen economic relations with Russia and did not take any measures to diversify the supply of natural gas and oil. This left their economies hostage to Russia. Such a policy gave Russia a sense of impunity and confidence that even in the case of a military invasion, Western policy would not change fundamentally. Moreover, after Russia's victory over Ukraine, they would continue to cooperate with Russia, accepting the fact of Ukraine's defeat.

Ukraine in Putin's geopolitical projects

In 1994, the future Russian president Putin (he was elected to this post for the first time in 2000) stressed that, allegedly in the interests of common security and peace in Europe, Russia had voluntarily abandoned huge territories in favour of the republics of the former USSR, including those that "historically always" had belonged to Russia. He meant, above all, Crimea and the north of Kazakhstan. But what does "historically always" actually mean? Of course, there were whole historical epochs during which these territories had nothing to do with Muscovy or Russia at all. But following Putin's statements, French journalist Daniel Vernet rightly pointed out that the current Russian president has been developing his geopolitical project for at least 20 years.³¹ In 2005, Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union the "biggest geopolitical catastrophe of

²⁹ DIF, 2017.

³⁰ Razumkov Centre, 2021.

³¹ Vernet, 2014.

the 20th Century”, leaving tens of millions of Russian citizens and compatriots outside Russia.³²

In the minds of the current Russian leadership, there is no room for an independent Ukraine. On March 1, 2018, Putin said that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had lost 23.8% of “its” territory, 48.5% of the population, 41% of the gross domestic product, 39.4% of the industrial potential, 44.6% of the military potential due to the fragmentation of the armed forces of the USSR.³³ So, according to the approaches of the Kremlin, it is only Russia that has lost its territory and suffered other losses – and not the former Soviet republics that have gained independence and the ability to determine their future on their own.

Putin repeated the idea that Ukraine as a state is wholly and entirely the brainchild of the Soviet era and was created largely at the expense of historical Russia in an article in 2021. This article also reconfirmed that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people”, a single whole, and that “true sovereignty” for Ukraine is only possible in a close partnership with Russia.³⁴

Keystones of Ukrainian-Russian relations

In our opinion, there were several factors that could have contributed to successful Ukrainian-Russian relations.

Relatives and friendly perception. Partly, these statistics can be explained by the fact that, according to polls of the 1990s, 33.4% of Ukrainians had close relatives in Russia. In Southern and Eastern Ukraine this figure reached 69.5%.³⁵ Although such polls have not been conducted recently, one can safely assert that this percentage remains high.

As early as February 2014, almost 80% of Ukrainians responded well to Russia, and only 13% were negatively affected. The start of the protests against Yanukovich in November 2013 and the first tragic events did not have a significant negative impact on the attitude of Ukrainians towards Russia. Even after the annexation of the Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbas in May 2014, Ukraine still had a positive balance of attitude toward Russia – 52% to 38%.³⁶

In September 2020, 42% of Ukrainians viewed Russia well or very well and 42% badly or very badly. After the annexation of Crimea and the start of hostilities in Donbas, there was a sharp decline in the positive attitude of Ukrainians to Russia, but after the end of active hostilities, the attitude of Ukrainians to Russia improved

³² Putin, 2005.

³³ Putin, 2018.

³⁴ Putin, 2021.

³⁵ Kuchma, 2003: 98

³⁶ Chervonenko, 2016.

again.³⁷ In Russia, according to the results of a survey by the independent Moscow-based pollster Levada Center, 48% of the population treated Ukraine well or very well, 43% badly or very badly.³⁸

Trade. Another important prerequisite for the development of good-neighbourly relations between the two countries was trade and joint production in many spheres. In 2012, Russia was the destination for 25.7% of Ukrainian exports, compared to the EU's 24.9%.³⁹

Despite mutual trade sanctions and Russia's loss of Ukraine as its largest trading partner position among individual states in 2019, it still was the third largest trading partner in exports of Ukrainian goods and the second place among the countries Ukraine imported goods from.⁴⁰

Cultural exchange. Culture was also important basis for good-neighbourly relation development between Ukraine and Russia. Russia's audio and visual products were actually dominant in the Ukraine information space. Ukrainian TV channels broadcasted many Russian films and TV shows. Russian theatres, actors, artists were desirable guests in Ukraine and gathered big audiences. Bookstores were selling a great volume of literature of Russian origin. And the biggest Kyivan book market (*Petrivka*) was always dominated by items in Russian. In this context, the Russian leadership statements about oppression of the Russian language in Ukraine and the need to protect the Russian-speaking population looked totally absurd.

Since 2014, Ukraine prohibited some Russian films, TV shows, concerts etc. where certain artists had been employed who (as performers, scriptwriters, directors, producers etc.) supported Russian military aggression against Ukraine in public, gave concerts in occupied Crimea and, therefore, denied Ukraine's territorial integrity. Russian social networks have also been banned in Ukraine. Gradually, Ukrainians renamed streets, avenues and other symbols related to Russia and the Soviet past. Instead, there appeared streets named after Ukrainian war heroes who died during the fighting in Donbas, prominent Ukrainian historical figures, etc. Ukrainians are turning back to their origins, study history of Ukraine, think about own identity.

Conclusions

Since February 2014 at the latest, Russia no longer recognised Ukraine's territorial integrity and since February 2022, not even its independent existence. This did not come as a surprise, however, but had actually been on the horizon since 1992. This led

³⁷ KIIS, 2020.

³⁸ Levada-Center, 2020.

³⁹ Zachmann, Dabrowski & Dominguez-Jiménez, 2020.

⁴⁰ UKRSTAT, 2020.

to constant conflicts, Russia's interference in Ukraine's internal affairs, and pressure on Ukraine to change its foreign, security and language policy. Thus, Russia's 2022 full-fledged invasion is a "logical" continuation of Russia's policy toward Ukraine since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Russia never treated Ukraine as an equal partner. Perhaps, if Ukraine would have recognized itself as an "area of interest" of Russia, Moscow may have behaved less aggressively. However, that would mean that Ukraine as an independent and sovereign national state would *de facto* cease to exist. And to agree that Ukrainians and Russians are "one people" would amount to degrading the Ukrainian language to a "dialect of Russian" (what has always been the view of practically all Russian chauvinists), Ukraine's and the Ukrainians as a people own history would be degraded to the "regional history of Russians in the south-west of the Russian empire," and the entire Ukrainian culture would be declared inferior and irrelevant.

Instead, Ukraine refused to be part of the "Russian world" (*Russki mir*) and began to hinder a restoration of Russia's imperial status. This was the main reason for the annexation of the Crimea, the war in Donbas since 2014, and the invasion in 2022, all initiated by Russia. Regardless of Russia's accusations of the West, the U.S., the EU, and the expansion of NATO, the real background for Russia's behaviour is its refusal to recognize Ukraine as an independent state and Ukrainians as a distinct nation, meaning people different from Russians.

There are no trustworthy forecasts on the prospect of further development of Ukrainian-Russian relations. Even after 2014, there were still opportunities for a normalization. Family ties and trade were the factors that, given Russia's political will, could still help improve relations between the two countries. But after February 24, 2022, it is impossible to imagine that relations between Russia and Ukraine can any time soon return at least to the level of 2021.

Everything tells us that Ukraine has long been doomed to live with a sense of constant threat from Russia. This threat is not only military, but also economic and ideological.

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