

-USCRI BACKGROUNDER-

The Russian and Ukraine Crisis

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) presents the following backgrounder on the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine as of February 24, 2022. Information and maps are from various sources and not the original work of USCRI. All information is subject to change.

Quick Overview

The Russo-Ukrainian War in Ukraine has been an active protracted armed conflict since 2014. Over the past eight years, over one million people have been displaced within Ukraine and hundreds of thousands have fled the country. While several attempts to broker peace have occurred, civilians in eastern Ukraine still live in active conflict areas with limited access to humanitarian aid services. Recent events have stoked fears of a Russian invasion and siege on Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital. This fear was realized on February 23, 2022 when Russian launched a military invasion.



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Basic Information



Demographics^{1,2,3}

Population: 41.6 million (35th) (excludes Crimea and Sevastopol)
(USA: 326.2 million)

Population ages 0-14: 16% (USA: 19%)

Population ages 15-64: 67% (USA: 65%)

Life expectancy: 67 years (for men) (USA: 76), 77 years (for women) (USA: 81)

Fertility rate: 1.3 births per woman (USA: 1.7)

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita: \$4,380 (USA: \$74,725)

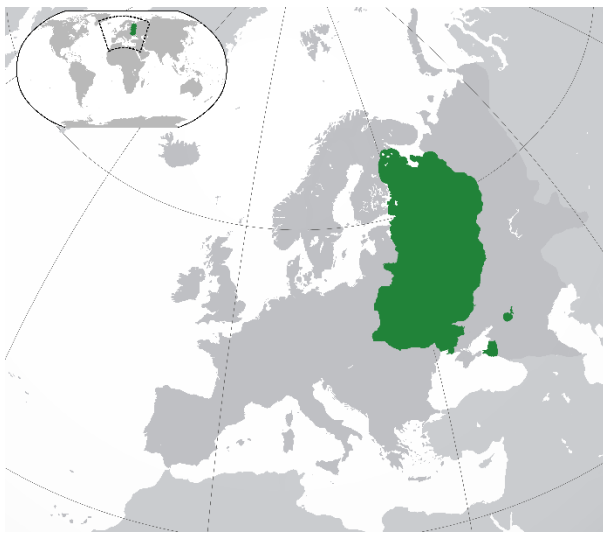


Origins of the Crisis

The country of Ukraine, which today is the second largest country on the European continent, has had a long history of invasion by foreign powers and upheaval. Since 882, Ukraine has experienced over a thousand years of intermittent periods of conflict, with those in the 20th Century significantly impacting the humanitarian crisis today and conflict with Russia. However, the most important root of the current conflict lies in the fight for national identity tied to geography, developed over many centuries.

Kyivan Rus

In 882, the city and region that would come to be known as Kyiv (note that it is only spelled “Kiev” in Russian, not Ukrainian) on the vast Dnepr River was conquered from Khazar tribes by Prince Oleh of Novgorod.⁴ In 988, the territory was officially established as a Christian empire by Volodymyr the Great, coming to be known as Kyivan Rus (later Orthodox Christian).⁵ At its height in the mid-11th century, it stretched from the Black Sea in the south to the middle of modern-day Finland in the north and from Ryazan in modern-day Russia in the east to modern-day Slovakia in the west.⁶ The empire would last until 1240, when it fell to a Mongolian invasion.⁷ However, its importance cannot be understated in understanding the roots of the current conflict: modern-day Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians all claim Kyivan Rus as their foundations politically, religiously, culturally, and ethnolinguistically.⁸



Galicia-Volhynia, the Golden Horde, and the Cossack Era

After the fall of Kyivan Rus, a territorial area known as Galicia-Volhynia that includes much of modern-day Ukraine eventually became a vassal state to the Mongolian Empire as part of the Golden Horde.⁹ During this period, the brutal and recurring contest for this territory that continues to this day began as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland vied for control of different parts of Galicia-Volhynia against the Mongols.¹⁰ This period marks the beginning of the European powers’ appreciation for Ukraine’s advantageous geopolitical location on the eastern entrance of Europe on the Black Sea.

During this period, “Ukraine,” meaning “borderland” (Україна – Ukraina) started to be more widely used to refer to the territory which makes up most of the country known as Ukraine today given its location bordering modern-day Poland and Lithuania.¹¹ Interestingly, today this meaning tends to bolster Russian sentiment that Ukraine should be a territory of Russia and that it is not an independent country within the context of the current conflict.¹² It is important to note that the

group of East Slavs that are currently referred to as “Ukrainians,” were widely known as “Ruthenians” until the 19th Century when there was a consolidation of nationalist idealism, but roughly can be considered the same group as what is referred to here as native Ukrainians.¹³ As the Mongolian Empire crumbled, Poland and Lithuania took control of most of the territory, with only Crimea in the south on the Black Sea left under the control of the Mongols as the Crimean Khanate.¹⁴ The Crimean Khanate remained an independent, majority-Muslim (known as Tatars) territory under the Ottoman Empire until 1783 when it was annexed by the Russian Empire (see below).¹⁵

In the mid-1500s, Ukraine fell under Polish administration with the creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, sparking more conflict as native Ukrainian Orthodox peasants resisted being made serfs by Polish Catholic settlers.¹⁶ These rebelling peasants later came to be known as Cossacks and used brutal guerilla-type military tactics to overcome the Polish settlers.¹⁷ After decades of skirmishes, the Cossack actions culminated in a calculated rebellion between 1648 and 1657 called the Khmelnytsky Uprising. The Uprising resulted in the creation of a Cossack state under the command of Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky and the Cossacks allied with the Crimean Tatars and native Ukrainian peasants.¹⁸ During the 9-year rebellion, the Cossacks committed violent attacks against Commonwealth forces and groups of Jews, whom the Cossacks considered to be complicit with Polish rule.¹⁹ The Uprising came to an end when the Cossacks swore allegiance to the Tsardom of Russia, thereby effectively incorporating Cossack territories into what later would become the wider Russian Empire.²⁰

The Cossack era is of particular importance to understanding the current conflict in Ukraine. Ukrainian nationalists view the Cossacks as a significant symbol of Ukrainian ability to resist invaders. Moreover, this era marks Ukraine’s first significant relationship with Moscow.

Russian Empire to World War I

As the Peter I (also known as Peter the Great, 1682-1725) expanded control over the Ukrainian territory, the Cossacks felt betrayed by their lack of sovereignty and pivoted their rebellions toward Russian authorities until the late 18th Century. As conflict disintegrated the Kingdom of Poland, the Duchy of Austria and the Kingdom of Hungary came to control western parts of Ukraine.²¹ The Russian Empire would take the rest of the Ukrainian territory, including Crimea, which the Ottomans lost as a result of war.²²

This era marks yet another incremental step towards the conflict that would start nearly 300 years later. Under Peter I, controls were placed for the first time on the use of the Ukrainian language and its autonomy was abolished, sparking discontent among the Ukrainian peasants.²³ Later, during the reign of Catherine II (also known as Catherine the Great, 1729-1796), fearing secession, a widespread Russification program was instituted.²⁴ Russian became the compulsory language in schools, universities, churches, and in publications.²⁵ Further, under Catherine II, Ukraine was turned into the province of “Little Russia” and its Cossack leaders stripped of any decision-making powers.²⁶ By 1772, nearly all geographical territory that makes up modern-day Ukraine was subsumed into the Russian Empire with the exception of one small western part, Galicia, which was still controlled by Austria.²⁷ Catherine II, unwittingly spurring modern sentiment among many

Russians, thought of taking control of Ukraine as restoring “what had been torn away.”²⁸

During the second half of Catherine II’s reign, Ukrainian national identity and the concept of nationhood was taking shape. The Ukrainian National Revival, which refers to a period of organized national resistance and intellectual revival, created a groundswell of separatist-nationalist movements, elevation of the Ukrainian language, and development of Ukrainian intellectual works that began towards the end of the 18th Century.²⁹

In response, the imperial government sharply increased its Russification program and heavily restricted Ukrainian nationalist movements, language, and literature, particularly in the second half of the 19th Century under Aleksandr II.³⁰ The reign of Aleksandr II marked the beginning of the decline of the Russian Empire with its loss in the Crimean War (1853-1856).³¹ As such, the cracks began to form, and Russification during this period was largely limited to the cities and industrial centers inhabited by imperial officials.³² The bulk of the Ukrainian population, the peasantry, were not deeply impacted and retained the language and culture.³³ Yet, during this time, Russian nationalism was also on the rise, and Russians viewed themselves as the “Great Russians,” the Ukrainians as the “Little Russians,” and the Belarussians as the “White Russians.”³⁴



The Russian Empire continued to decline through the reign of Aleksandr III (1881-1894) and into that of the final tsar, Nicholas II (1894-1917), with widespread losses of territorial control,

weakening of imperial power, defeat in a war with Japan, and rebellions.³⁵ In particular, an event known as “Bloody Sunday” in 1905 allowed for a rise in Ukrainian nationalism. Most ordinary Russians lived in abject poverty, working in dangerous working environments up to 15 hours a day with no access to modern facets of life enjoyed by the aristocracy and royal family that were commonplace in Western Europe.³⁶ After years of discontent, on January 22, 1905, thousands of striking workers peacefully marched to the Winter Palace to demand a reduction in the working day to eight hours, an increase in wages, and improvements in working conditions.³⁷ In response, imperial soldiers opened fire and killed around 200 peaceful protestors, causing a cascade that put into motion the events leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1917, which collapsed the Russian Empire.³⁸

As the tsar scrambled for control of the empire, Nicholas II issued an edict stating that subjects could freely choose their religion, effectively ceding control of the territories through religion.³⁹ While the imperial government still controlled Ukraine, intellectuals had been given more space to grow nationalist movements. Ukrainian nationalism was given even more room to grow with the onset of World War I (1914-1918), which further weakened imperial rule. Nicholas II viewed World War I as an opportunity to exercise tsarist might to regain control of the empire – a costly mistake that only served to expose his weaknesses and saw imperial territories such as Ukraine slip from his grasp.⁴⁰

With the ultimate disintegration of the Russian Empire at the end of World War I and the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917, Ukraine declared itself an independent country in 1918.⁴¹ Unfortunately, however, this independence was short-lived as the Russian Revolution (1917-1923) raged across the former Russian Empire and resulted in Ukraine being forced under the Soviets’ expanding thumb in 1922 as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR).⁴²

Soviet Rule

While overpowered by the Soviets ruling from Moscow, Ukrainians did not make for a submissive populace. Rather, ordinary Ukrainians, still mostly farming peasants, resisted the principles of the Soviet government, such as atheism and collectivization.⁴³ After Vladimir Lenin’s (1870-1924) death, Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) set his sights on crushing Ukrainian nationalism and harnessing Ukraine for expansion of his aggressive agricultural policies.⁴⁴ Ukraine, then and today, is often called the “breadbasket of Europe” given it has the most fertile soil on the European continent and a fairly temperate climate.⁴⁵ This advantage, when paired with the Ukrainians’ resistance of Soviet policies, created the perfect storm for Stalin’s totalitarianism.

Between 1932 and 1933, Stalin instituted an artificial famine aimed at breaking Ukrainian resistance and furthering unattainable agricultural goals.⁴⁶ This famine is known as *Holodomor*, or in Ukrainian, “to exterminate by starvation.”⁴⁷ Teams of Communist Party agitators forced peasants to relinquish their land, personal property, and sometimes housing to collective farms, and they deported so-called kulaks—wealthier peasants—as well as any peasants who resisted collectivization altogether.⁴⁸ Ukrainian villages saw their food rounded up, dumped, and left to rot in fields guarded by soldiers, as the peasants starved to death – effectively punishment for resisting Soviet rule.⁴⁹ Its artificial nature was obvious as Soviet officials silenced any news about it,

including that of Western journalists, and refused any outside aid.⁵⁰ During this period, the demographic losses due to the famine amounted to 10 million, with 3.9 million direct famine deaths, and a further 6.1 million birth deficits.⁵¹

The Holodomor continues to have significant impacts on Ukrainian nationalism today as it is viewed as an assault on national identity. As historian Anne Applebaum highlights,

The famine was accompanied by a broader assault on Ukrainian identity. While peasants were dying by the millions, agents of the Soviet secret police were targeting the Ukrainian political establishment and intelligentsia. The famine provided cover for a campaign of repression and persecution that was carried out against Ukrainian culture and Ukrainian religious leaders. The official policy of Ukrainization, which had encouraged the use of the Ukrainian language, was effectively halted... All those targeted by this campaign were liable to be publicly vilified, jailed, sent to the Gulag (a system of Soviet prisons and forced-labor camps), or executed.⁵²

Because the famine was so deadly, and because it was officially denied by the Kremlin for more than half a century, it has played a large role in Ukrainian public memory, particularly since independence.

Further, the modern Russian government refuses to acknowledge Holodomor as a genocide, while the United States, Canada, and more than a dozen other countries recognize it as such, thus polarizing the two countries further.⁵³

In World War II, the Nazis occupied the Ukrainian SSR, bringing it under control as the Reichskommissariat Ukraine (1941-1944) under Adolf Hitler's (1889-1945) *lebensraum*, or "living space" plan in Eastern Europe to create a utopia for ethnic Germans.⁵⁴ Some Ukrainians with the Holodomor still fresh in memory, distrustful of the Soviet regime and hoping the Nazis would defeat Stalin, joined the Nazis.⁵⁵ Yet, much like Stalin, Hitler prized Ukraine for its agricultural bounty and Ukrainians were again betrayed by an occupying power. This agricultural reputation along with one of the highest concentrations of Jews on the European continent made Ukraine a target yet again for mass atrocities: it would lose almost 7 million citizens (close to one million of them Jewish) or more than 16 percent of its prewar population.⁵⁶

Yet, despite the Nazis ravaging the Ukrainian SSR, Ukraine remained between a "rock and a hard place," as the assault by the Soviet government in Moscow remained constant. Soviet secret police deported close to 1.25 million people from Ukraine to gulags in Siberia and actively hunted Ukrainian nationalists during this period.⁵⁷ After the war's end in 1945, this only continued. Between 1944 and 1947, more than 256,000 Ukrainians were deported to Siberia to curb Ukrainian nationalist resistance, with Stalin expressing interest to deport all Ukrainians.⁵⁸ At the same time, the central government gave incentives for ethnic Russians to move to Ukraine.⁵⁹

After Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971), who had a strong affinity with Ukraine, became the Premier of the Soviet Union. Subsequently, while he recognized Stalin's extermination

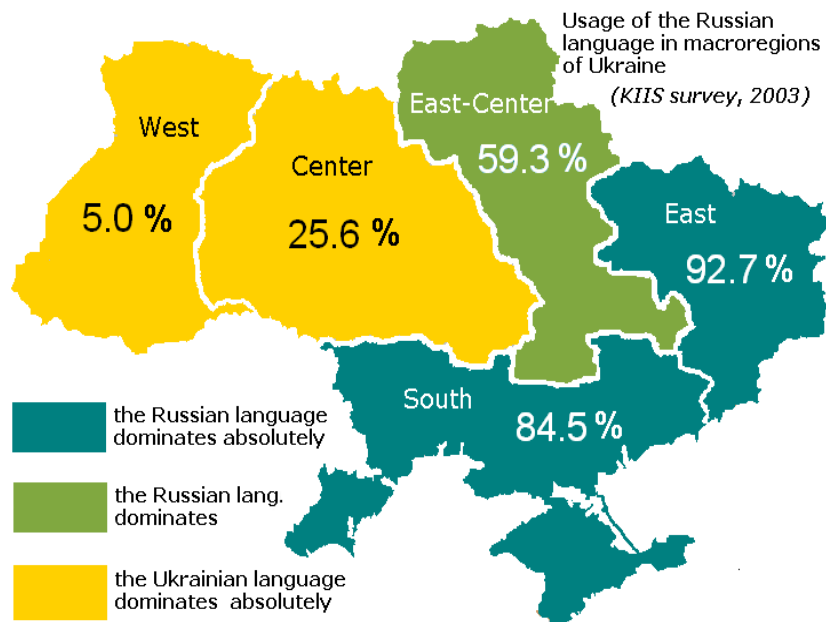
of ethnic Ukrainians and provided some freedoms, he continued the Soviet policy of cracking down on any Ukrainian nationalist movements.⁶⁰ The strict control of Ukraine, along with increased collectivization continued and kept Ukrainians effectively quiet as the agricultural providers of the entire Soviet Union. A long period of stagnation between 1971 and 1985 caused by central government policies instigated by Ukrainian Leonid Brezhnev (1906-1982) impacted Ukraine particularly badly with the annual agricultural growth rate falling from 3.2 to 0.5 percent.⁶¹ Ukrainians were further betrayed by the central government in Moscow in its approach to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, which occurred in the north of the Ukrainian SSR in 1986. The explosion resulted in the release of 50 million curies of radiation into the atmosphere – the equivalent of 500 Hiroshima bombs – and contaminating over 50,000 square kilometers of land – a territory larger than Belgium.⁶² More than 3 million were directly affected by the radiation fallout and 30 million were endangered by radiation falling into the Dnepr River and millions more in



neighboring European countries.⁶³ Yet, the central government in Moscow insisted that the disaster, and its impacts, be kept a secret from all, including the Ukrainians living around Chernobyl. It was only after authorities in Sweden detected radioactive materials that could only have come from the Soviet Union that officials finally evacuated affected areas.⁶⁴ Yet, despite Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, the Ukrainian population was kept in the dark about the true magnitude of what had occurred.⁶⁵ Ukraine still struggles today with nuclear cleanup.

As the Soviet Union began to crumble, her republics claimed independence one by one. In August 1991, the Ukrainian SSR became an internationally recognized independent country.⁶⁶

Independence to Maidan



After independence, Ukraine set its sights on establishing engagement with the West, most importantly Europe, and turning away from Russia, which it largely viewed as simply a successor state to the Soviet Union. In 1994, Ukraine entered into a cooperation agreement with the European Union and one with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – the first post-Soviet state to do so.⁶⁷ Moreover, its second presidential elections resulted in a peaceful transition of power.⁶⁸

Yet, despite these achievements, most of the 1990s were marked by political crisis, economic decline, and social dislocation.⁶⁹ Corruption, as is common in many post-Soviet states, became widespread while development stagnated.⁷⁰ In addition, the Ukrainian language became the only official language in Ukraine with the government mandating a progressively dominant role in all facets of life, including education, television, media, and government.⁷¹

Language in particular created a rift in Ukrainian society that has contributed to the current conflict in a significant way. According to the Atlantic Council,

Despite the upgrade of Ukrainian following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the language has continued to play second fiddle to Russian throughout much of the country and in many aspects of everyday life. Ever since the 1990s, efforts to regulate and promote the use of Ukrainian in place of Russian have proved politically explosive and have come to symbolize independent Ukraine's post-Soviet identity crisis. Meanwhile, the national debate on the language issue has reflected lingering divisions within Ukrainian society over attitudes towards the dominant role played by Russia in the country's past. This politicization of language does not reflect the day-to-day reality of bilingual Ukraine, where both Russian and Ukrainian are commonly spoken and widely understood across the country.⁷²

Despite government mandates, Russian continues to dominate the eastern parts of the country and is commonplace in the central parts of the country. Yet, the government, perhaps in response to centuries of Russification, stands firm that Russian will not be recognized as an official language. Ukraine's pro-Kremlin political parties have encouraged Russian-speaking Ukrainians to think of themselves as a distinct and oppressed minority since the early 2000s.⁷³ As such, many Russian speakers have seen value in the separatist movements.

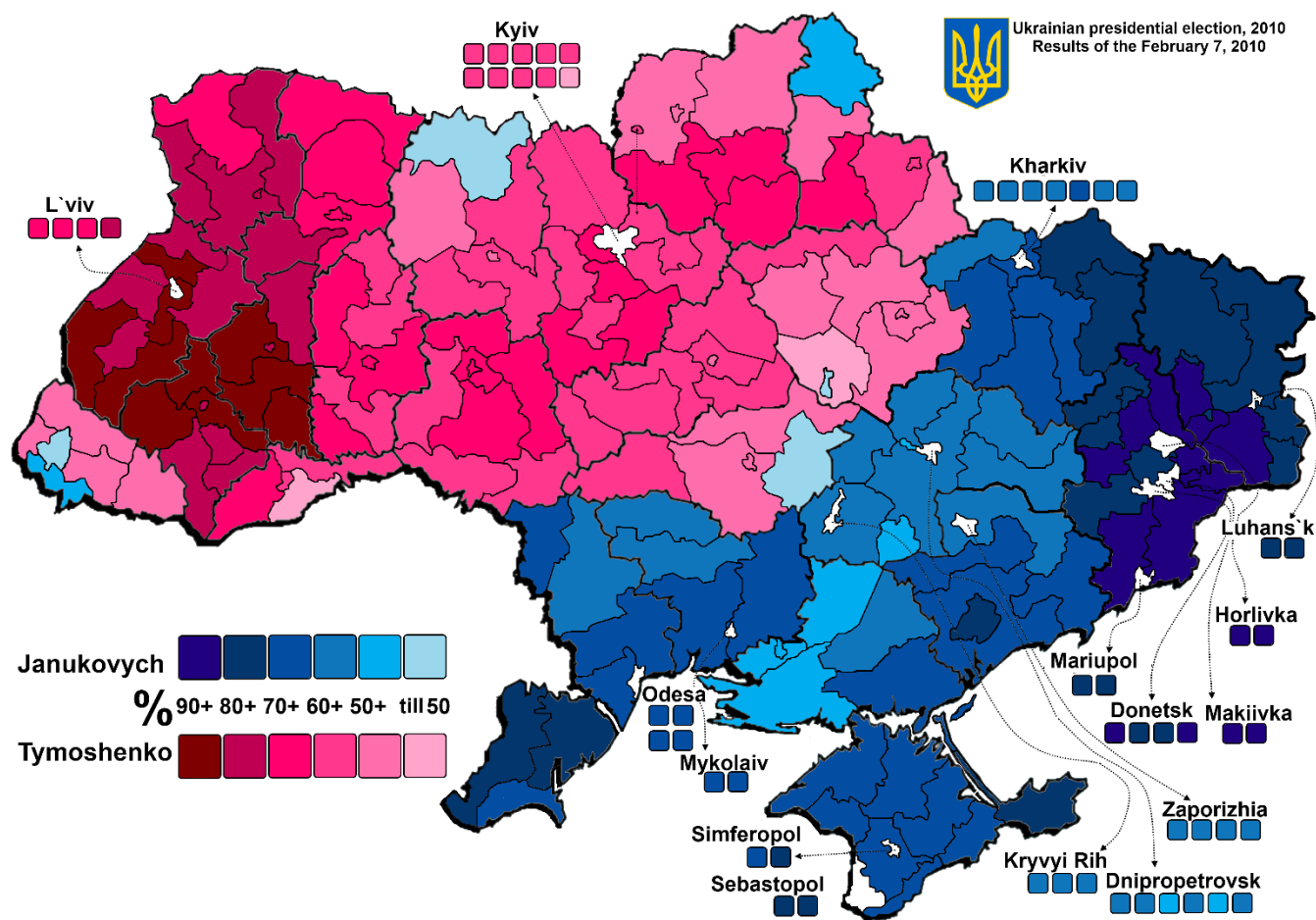
Moreover, the corrupt, and at times, bungling, Kyiv governments have done little to sway those who reminisce for the times of the Soviet Union over the years. The country began to be divided between those in the west dominantly speaking Ukrainian looking towards the European Union and those in the east dominantly speaking Russian looking towards Russia. In 2004, this division came to a head in elections between the pro-Russia candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, of the Party of Regions and the pro-West candidate, Viktor Yushchenko of the Our Ukraine party.⁷⁴

The elections were marred by massive corruption and rigged by authorities so that pro-Russian Yanukovich would win the presidency.⁷⁵ Widespread peaceful protests followed in what has come to be known as the Orange Revolution, taking its name from the color of the campaign of the Our Ukraine party.⁷⁶ A re-vote was ordered by the Supreme Court of Ukraine, resulting in the election of pro-West Yushchenko instead.⁷⁷

A new hope was instilled in the Ukrainian people as a result of the Orange Revolution, that showed solidarity and commitment to combatting corruption and striving toward Western democratic ideals.⁷⁸ However, these hopes were quickly dashed. Yushchenko, having declared he would root out the corruption that plagued Ukrainian business and official life, oversaw a culture of bribery and cronyism instead.⁷⁹ Moreover, his aggressive drive to project Ukrainian language and culture, by tearing down Soviet-era monuments, unnerved millions of ethnic Russians in the ethnolinguistically diverse country at the expense of rebuilding the economy and making the ex-Soviet state fit to join Europe's mainstream.⁸⁰

Exports in key industrial sectors such as steel fell sharply, banks collapsed, and the healthcare system was left in shambles, with Ukraine becoming reliant on a \$16.4 billion lifeline from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁸¹ In 2005 and again in 2009, disputes over natural gas prices and payment took place involving Russian state-owned gas supplier Gazprom and many European countries that depend on natural gas supplied by Russia through a Ukrainian pipeline, resulting in Russia cutting off the supply.⁸² With Western European countries breathing down the neck of Ukraine to work to turn the gas back on, Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko successfully negotiated a deal with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin with new, more standardized prices and processing.⁸³

By the time the 2010 presidential election rolled around, most had lost hope in the ideals of the Orange Revolution. President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, once allies, were now bitter enemies.⁸⁴ With the pro-Western party divided and the country's trust significantly weakened, particularly in the eastern regions of the country, this gave former pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich ample opportunity to be successful. With Yushchenko and Tymoshenko running separately against Yanukovich, the pro-Western platform was significantly weakened. Yanukovich received 48 percent of the vote, Tymoshenko, 45 percent and Yushchenko, less than 6 percent.⁸⁵ It is particularly important in the context of today's conflict to note that the majority of pro-Russian voters were in the east, and the pro-Western voters in those regions closer to the European Union. As such, Yanukovich won and Ukraine's policies once again pivoted toward Russia.



In order to consolidate power, Yanukovych had former Prime Minister Tymoshenko arrested and jailed on trumped-up charges of abuse of office while brokering the 2009 gas deal with Russia.⁸⁶ Among other restrictions, Yanukovych limited freedom of the press and freedom of assembly.⁸⁷ In 2013, Yanukovych refused to sign the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement, which would have allowed visa-free movement of Ukrainians among other provisions, and instead pursued closer ties with Russia.⁸⁸

In response, between 400,000 and 800,000 protestors flooded Maidan Nezhamosti (Square of Freedom) in central Kyiv demanding that Yanukovych sign the agreement.⁸⁹ Soon, the protest escalated into the three-month Euromaidan Revolution, which culminated in violent government crackdowns, government use of snipers on civilians, and almost 100 deaths.⁹⁰ At the end of Euromaidan, Yanukovych was ousted at which point he fled to Russia and the interim government signed the European Union agreement.⁹¹

Yet, conflict only continued in Ukraine, this time in the Crimea region in the south of the country on the Black Sea. It should be noted here that Crimea is an important geopolitical location for the Ukrainian navy due to its port access, making it a valuable asset for defense purposes. In February 2014, armed soldiers with no identifying insignia started occupying key facilities and checkpoints on the Crimean peninsula, with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin denying the involvement of Russian soldiers.⁹² Ukraine's Western partners urged Ukrainian troops on the peninsula not to engage them and by early March, Russian troops had secured the entire peninsula.⁹³ A few days

later, the local government in Crimea refused to recognize the interim government in Kyiv and demanded a referendum to leave Ukraine and join Russia.⁹⁴ The referendum, largely considered by the international community to be illegal, took place absent any international observers and resulted in a purportedly almost 100 percent vote to join Russia, which ratified the accession three days later.⁹⁵ Later reports showed that the vote likely was not even 50 percent.⁹⁶

The Russian claim to Crimea returns to the idea of identity. The Russians colonized Crimea during the reign of Catherine II, establishing Sevastopol as the homeport for the Russian Black Fleet.⁹⁷ Crimea was then part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (SFSR) until 1954, when it was transferred administratively to the Ukrainian SSR.⁹⁸ Russia used these two historical events paired with the fact that Crimea was ethnically majority Russian to justify its actions in the name of self-determination.⁹⁹ The interim government, still scrambling to pick up the pieces after the Euromaidan Revolution was powerless to respond.

Meanwhile, in eastern Ukraine, unrest was brewing. While there were pro-Russian protests in many oblasts (provinces), two were particularly contentious. In the east, there is a region of economic significance called Donbas (short for Donetsk Basin) consisting of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts that has historically been the center of Ukraine's heavy industry, including coal mining and metallurgy. During Ukraine's economic decline in the early 2000s, the population fell sharply along with the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and was particularly affected by poverty, government mismanagement, and high mortality rates.¹⁰⁰ Donbas had developed a particularly striking regional identity, as analyst Ingmar Oldberg points out in the late 2000s that,

Second only to Crimea, Donbas had the biggest share of people in Ukraine who identified as Russians (38.5 per cent in 2001). Nonetheless, the majority still regarded themselves as Ukrainians. The latter also spoke Russian and mixed with Russians. A regional identity had developed, with a lingering Soviet mentality and a mixed language, *surzhyk*. In contrast to other Ukrainians, few people travelled to Western Europe and many travelled to Russia for work.¹⁰¹

Even after the Euromaidan Revolution, only 27.5 percent of people in the Donetsk oblast and 30.3 percent in the Luhansk oblast, comprising over 15 percent of Ukraine's total population, supported separatism and a union with Russia.¹⁰² At the same time, the Donbas region in particular had been subject to a campaign under pro-Russian President Yanukovych aimed at growing mistrust of the Western-oriented leadership in Kyiv and anger over the exclusion of the Russian language since the mid-2000s, and at the time of Euromaidan, similar Russian propaganda.¹⁰³ Moreover, many in the Donbas region, motivated by the decline of the region and a feeling of exclusion by the government in Kyiv supported, or at least tolerated, separatist leaders, with those who did not fleeing to western Ukraine.¹⁰⁴

As such, there was little opposition to separatist leaders staging demonstrations and takeovers of official government buildings.¹⁰⁵ At first, Ukrainian security services managed to remove occupiers and quell protests, though soon they were overpowered by armed rebels flooding into the region.¹⁰⁶ In April, Russian President Putin spoke of the historic region of Novorossiia, which comprises the Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and

Odesa regions, indicating an ambition to cut Ukraine off from the Black Sea and create a land corridor to Moldova, where Russia has backed the separatist “Republic of Transnistria” since 1991.¹⁰⁷

Despite the separatists’ efforts, only the attempted takeovers in the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts were successful and as a result, the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) were proclaimed by referendum in May.¹⁰⁸ As the separatists extended their power in the Donbas region, they took control of weapon arsenals and personnel, as well as border posts and airports from the Ukrainian government control, which was largely too weak to stop the insurgency.¹⁰⁹ In March 2014, the defense minister stated that only 6,000 Ukrainian soldiers were ready for combat, adding to the issue that its military weaponry came from the Soviet era.¹¹⁰



However, after drafting volunteer units, Ukrainian forces managed to take back some territory from the separatists, closing in on the DPR and LPR areas.¹¹¹ In response, Russia shelled Ukrainian territory, transferred more state-of-the-art military technology and troops without insignia under the guise of “humanitarian convoys” across the border, and sank Ukrainian patrol boats in the Sea of Azov.¹¹²

On September 5, 2014, Under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Ukraine, Russia and the self-declared separatist republics concluded an agreement in Minsk on a ceasefire, the withdrawal of troops, and a prisoner exchange, which was largely respected only on paper as fighting continued.¹¹³ In 2015, another ceasefire was attempted, this time with the agreement that the oblasts would be given temporary self-governance under the Ukrainian government – again, largely ignored.¹¹⁴ Many efforts over the last six years have been made to broker an effective peace agreement with different propositions, including placing a United Nations peacekeeping mission across the 280-mile front line, but to no avail.¹¹⁵

Today, the conflict rages on. After an escalation in violence in the spring of 2018, shelling and skirmishes still occur regularly.¹¹⁶ Both the DPR and LPR have held elections and adopted constitutions, though neither should be considered democratic under international standards.¹¹⁷ The judiciary and the mass media are under political control, filled with Russian propaganda, and repressive, with arbitrary detentions and torture reported.¹¹⁸ Both the DPR and LPR are deeply dependent on Russia economically with most infrastructure destroyed, trade patterns broken, and banks collapsed.¹¹⁹ Millions fled the region and more than 10,000 civilians have been killed, though this figure is likely much larger.¹²⁰

The last year has seen the conflict scale up with tensions rising between the Russian and Ukrainian governments. In April 2021, Ukrainian authorities asserted that the number of Russian troops along their eastern border swelled from 100,000 to 120,000.¹²¹ The Russian build up, which drew down in June only to scale back up in October, led to international concern around an invasion. In December 2021, Russia advanced two draft treaties with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United States, including a legally binding promise that Ukraine would never join NATO.^{122 123} Ukraine under current President Zelensky has stated that it is Ukraine's intent to join NATO, a "red line" for the Russian government. Since then, speculation about a Russian invasion has only grown. In February 2022, Russia recognized Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states, moving troops into Donbas. On February 23, 2022, Russia launched a military invasion into Ukraine. How the conflict plays out will be determined by a myriad of factors, including how much Russia believes a military invasion in Ukraine is worth the risks of potential prolonged violence, and possible sanctions by the United States and European allies that could severely hurt the Russian economy.



As the conflict continues, it is clear that beyond the obvious geopolitical power struggle over Ukraine between Russia and independent Ukraine, much of the conflict is tied to a struggle to claim identity, as evidenced by thousands of years of the country's history as outlined here in brief. Yet, identity in Ukraine is not as black and white as it may appear on the surface. It is far more complex than just ethnically Russian-identifying Russian speakers

vs. Ukrainian-identifying Ukrainian speakers. In Ukraine, it is quite common to find nationalistic Ukrainians who speak Russian far more often than Ukrainian.¹²⁴ Further, it is not uncommon to find Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the east who admire Russia, but are vehemently against Ukraine becoming part of Russia.¹²⁵ Nor is it uncommon to find Ukrainian-speakers in the west of the country who support making Russian the second official language.¹²⁶

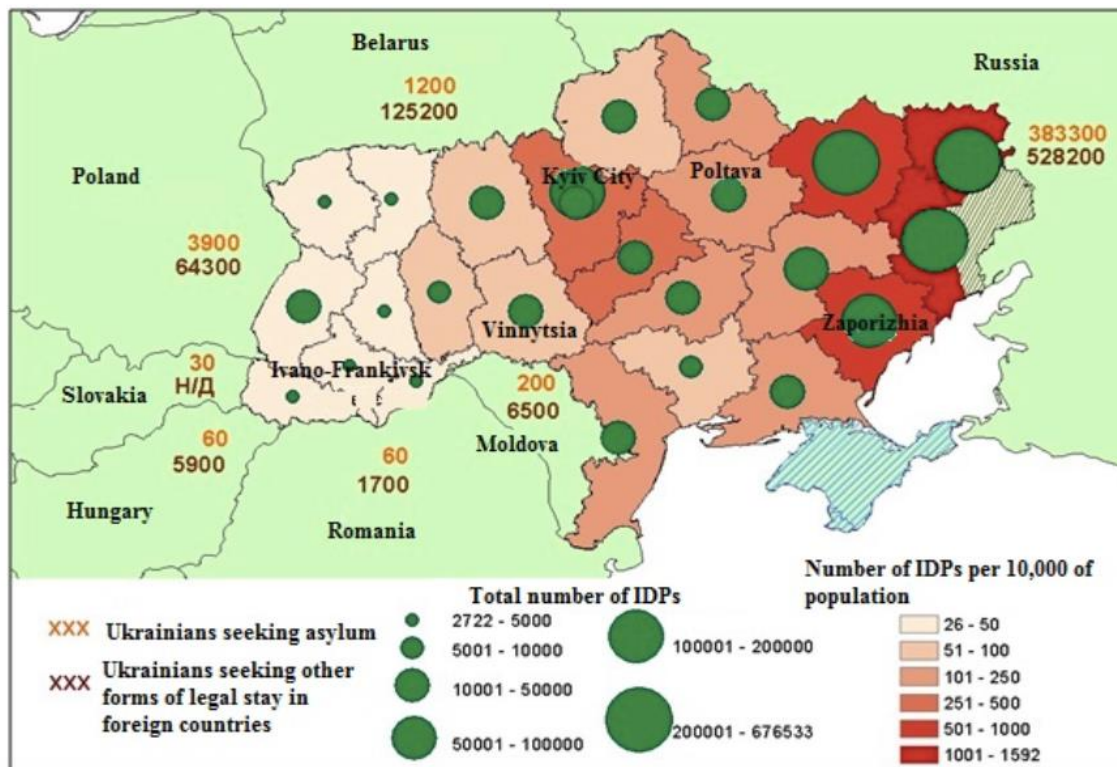
On the other side, many Russians view Ukraine as a territory of Russia, even using a different preposition usually designated for use with territories of a country (*na*) rather than that used with independent countries (*vuh*).¹²⁷ Many Russians view an annexation of Ukraine as the return to the Kyivan Rus empire with Moscow at the helm and Ukraine as the little sister – a return of what is rightfully Russia's.¹²⁸ Yet, much like with Ukrainians, there are many Russians who would rather just leave Ukraine alone.¹²⁹

Thus, in sum, it can be said that the current conflict is the result of Russia's geopolitical ambitions, a weak independent Ukrainian government, and tensions among many complex identities that have grated against each other in the region for thousands of years in their quest for self-determination and independence.

Impacts Post-2014 in Donetsk and Luhansk

Internally Displaced Persons

Over two million internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been forced to flee from their homes in the east since the conflict began to find safety elsewhere in the country, making Ukraine the ninth largest country in the world in terms of the number of IDPs, with thousands more becoming refugees in other countries.¹³⁰ However, Ukraine is among the poorest countries in Europe with a per capita GDP of \$4,380 and an average yearly salary of between \$7,000 and \$16,000 depending on industry and region and finds it difficult to support such a large population of IDPs.¹³¹ Lack of housing, income, and employment opportunities remain the biggest issues for IDPs trying to integrate, according to a March 2019 survey by the International Organization for Migration, with only half of those surveyed saying they felt integrated into local communities.¹³² Due to a lack of resources, a significant number of IDPs have resorted to living in uninhabited and uninhabitable places within the country, such as the Chernobyl exclusion zone in the north of the country, a clearly unsafe location in terms of health.¹³³ In these situations, IDPs would rather live off the land in radioactive areas in abandoned homes to escape shelling and starvation.



Humanitarian Crisis Behind the Contact Line

In 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recorded a 59 percent increase in people of concern in Ukraine, most of them in the conflict zone behind the contact line.¹³⁴ While there are far more impacts than those highlighted here, these are the most significantly recorded.

Impacts on the elderly

The conflict has had a particularly disastrous impact on elderly civilians living behind the contact line. Many young or skilled people emigrated or fled to the rest of Ukraine or to Russia, and about one third of the people in need of humanitarian assistance in the region are of pension age.¹³⁵ At the end of 2014, Ukraine ceased payment of pensions and social benefits to people in the occupied regions unless they collected them across the contact line.¹³⁶ While Russia has started paying some pensions and social benefits, Ukraine at the same time imposed compulsory registration for pensioners living in the conflict zone as IDPs, required to periodically physically attend a designated branch of a bank and if they are not found at their place of registration, they can lose their pension, as happened to half a million people in 2016.¹³⁷

Medical care

Medical care has significantly declined in both the DPR and LPR. Prior to the conflict, the city of Donetsk was the region's main medical hub and had a nationally recognized medical university with the largest cancer center in Ukraine, headed by the country's chief oncologist.¹³⁸ Today, those in search of medical care of two options: pay exorbitant fees in a country with supposedly free healthcare or receive treatment from separatists in a propaganda regime called the "Humanitarian Program to Unite the People of Donbas."¹³⁹ This option carries with it particular risks as it is illegal to collaborate or support separatist activities and civilian Ukrainians could be blocked from crossing the contact line into peaceful areas to get supplies.¹⁴⁰

Moreover, a lack of access to preventative healthcare and post-facto treatments has had severe impacts: rates of tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS have risen to epidemic levels, there are an estimated 80,000 unvaccinated children, close to 100,000 cancer patients with just three radiotherapy machines left in Donetsk oblast, and limited quantities of medications such as insulin.¹⁴¹ HIV in particular is a significant risk in Ukraine, which once had the highest rates of the virus outside of the African continent in the years following independence, as the hard-won infrastructure for providing HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment services has been shattered.¹⁴²

Limited humanitarian aid access

Furthermore, the access of international aid organizations to the separatist regions has been reduced, since they must be accredited by the authorities and are often seen as Western agents.¹⁴³ The United Nations and International Committee of the Red Cross are the only organizations admitted, still exposed to arbitrary controls, and local aid networks work under strict political conditions.¹⁴⁴

Mines and unexploded munitions

Many civilians cross the contact line on a daily basis, though there are few facilities for safe passage, and those often have long waits under little protection. Many have crossed in unprotected areas, exposing themselves to mines and unexploded munitions as the contact line zone is said to be one of the most mined in the world.¹⁴⁵

Food and clean water security

Constant shelling threatens access to safe water and sanitation for more than 3.9 million people (including 500,000 children) in eastern Ukraine.¹⁴⁶ Every fourth resident near the contact line lacks a reliable source of drinking water. Most of the Donbas region's water originates from the 186-mile Siverskyi Donets–Donbas canal, which supplies 300 settlements on both sides of the contact line and is located within key combat areas.¹⁴⁷ The canal, built in 1958 and crumbling, has been damaged more than 300 times.¹⁴⁸ In addition, armed conflict threatens regional wastewater treatment, which will likely, sooner or later, lead to widespread water pollution and the spread of infections.¹⁴⁹

In addition, a recent food security assessment conducted by nongovernmental organizations indicates that over three quarters of families inside the conflict zone struggled to secure food, with 82 percent of people living in the DPR and LPR struggling with increased food prices and scarcity.¹⁵⁰ Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the area has seen the price of a “borsch basket” (containing potatoes, cabbage, onions, and carrots) increase almost by 30 percent.¹⁵¹

Human trafficking and exploitation

Within the conflict zone, widespread reports of trafficking involving various forms of exploitation have been reported. Reports of slave labor camps, children's brothels, drug couriers, drug couriers, and child soldiers are commonplace with the problem becoming so acute that the Ukrainian parliament's Equal Opportunities Caucus issued a statement asking the United Nations, European Union, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs to investigate and prosecute the individuals responsible for these crimes.¹⁵²

In 2016, evidence surfaced of the use of child soldiers in combat by rebel forces, as well as the forced recruitment of men and boys for their use in the armed conflict with women and girls kidnapped for the purposes of sex and labor trafficking by separatists.¹⁵³ The U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report the same year stated that about 5,000 prisoners in the LPR are subjected to slave labor reminiscent of the gulag with evidence of similar practices in the DPR.¹⁵⁴ Recently, nongovernmental organizations have reported that the demographics of trafficking victims in these areas has shifted to include younger male victims exploited in drug trafficking.¹⁵⁵

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has not stopped armed combat, and has only exacerbated the above issues, with food and medicine prices skyrocketing.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, all regulated movement across the contact line was recently suspended – a measure which hits elderly residents especially hard, preventing them from accessing their pension payments and other social services, and rendering them unable to attend hospital appointments or even to withdraw cash.¹⁵⁷

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- ⁶⁰ *Id.*
- ⁶¹ *Id.* at 307.
- ⁶² *Id.* at 311.
- ⁶³ *Id.*
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