



## **RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR: CAUSES AND AFTERMATHS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The international system has been enjoying relative peace almost immediately after the end of the cold war. However, recent development especially among the so-called ‘super powers’ in Europe and terrorism as well as insurgency has been considered has a threatening factor for the relative peace enjoyed by mankind. There has always been an unhealthy relation between Russia and Ukraine since the days of the defunct Soviet Union. The recent unfortunate Russian-Ukrainian war which has revived the bad blood relationship between the two warring nations has undoubtedly attracted wider global attention for the implications of the recent development are better imagined than seen or felt directly or indirectly. Since the break-up of the USSR, political tensions between the two neighbouring states-Ukraine and Russia-have continued on many issues. The conflict that rears its ugly head in that part of the world had its roots at the very outset of the post-Cold War era. It is against this backdrop that the paper examines the current crisis between Russia and Ukraine. It discusses the remote and immediate causes of the war. Attempt would be equally made to x-ray the implications of the war as it is likely to affect the international system and the peaceful co-existence of mankind especially when most countries of the world are grappling with the negative effects of COVID-19. Finally, the paper will be concluded with recommendations. Primary and secondary sources were used in the collection, collation and interpretation of data.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the last four decades security in the international system has been affected by armed violence and wars and this has accompanied the disintegration of a number of nations in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Western Balkans and the former Soviet Union. This ugly situation has undoubtedly led to the emergence of more than a dozen new internationally recognised nations across Europe. The most successful secessions of these new states occurred in parallel with the development of a group of failed states unrecognised by the international community. Some of these are the Northern Cyprus, Transnistria, Abkhazia, Southern Ossetia, Nagorno Karabakh and later on Kosovo, that came to be treated in international relations literature as so-called “frozen” conflicts. With Kosovo moving out of this group, a newcomer emerged in the 2014: the Russian- Ukrainian conflict over Crimea, and the ongoing war which began in 2021, Russian-Ukrainian conflict.<sup>1</sup>

Russia and Ukraine have what either side might describe as a complicated legacy that is firmly rooted in the distance past. In the 20th century, Ukraine, described as the breadbasket of Europe, was one of the most populous and powerful republics in the former USSR as well as an agricultural staple until it declared independence in 1991. Meanwhile, Russia has since kept a close eye on its neighbour to the West, while Ukrainians have found their independence to be tumultuous at times, with periods of civil disobedience and corruption in the public sector. Ukraine’s ambitions to align itself more with Western countries especially its publicly stated interest in joining North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), which itself was established partly to curtailed or checkmate Soviet expansion, has been met with aggression from Russia. The Ukraine crisis can be understood as one of the most controversial events in today’s global political debate. The ongoing conflict has come to affect and influence Europe’s as well as the entire the world’s foreign policies especially security<sup>2</sup>.

Historically, Ukraine has been torn between East and West ever since the country pull of the defunct Soviet Union and subsequent independent in 1991. Ukraine’s national identity has thus, been questioned due to the citizens’ fragmented attitude towards Ukraine’s future cohesion. With the attainment of full independence in 1991, country changed its official name to Ukraine, and made frantic effort to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), an association of countries that were formerly republics of the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that Ukraine occupies the southwestern region of the Russian Plain (East European Plain). The country consists almost entirely of level plains at an average elevation of 574 feet (175 metres) above sea level. Mountainous areas such as the Ukrainian Carpathians and Crimean Mountains occur only on the country’s borders and account for barely 5% of its area. The Ukrainian landscape nevertheless has some diversity: its plains are broken by highlands running in a continuous belt from northwest to southeast as well as by lowlands.<sup>4</sup> However, in this paper, the causes of the war will be x-rayed, bringing out the long distance and immediate causes. The paper will be concluded with the perceived implications of the war.

## **REMOTE CAUSES OF THE WAR**

The major issues that concern the two parties are the ideological differences, the historical interconnectedness, 'Russified' and personal interests of the most influential individuals, and many more. The complexity of the underlying causes of the conflict makes it difficult to address it. The precedent set by the annexation of Crimea in 2014 gave rise to the hybrid war in the East of Ukraine and as well as the ongoing war between the two nations.<sup>5</sup> As Russian invasion of Ukraine continues to dominate the international system, a look back at the long, intertwined history of the contentious neighbours reveals how the stage was set for the current conflict. The two countries' shared heritage is deeply rooted in the distance past when Kyiv, (now Ukraine's capital) was at the center of the first Slavic state, Kyivan Rus, which is the birthplace of both Ukraine and Russia. Vladimir I, the pagan prince of Novgorod and grand prince of Kyiv, accepted the Orthodox Christian faith and was baptised in the Crimean city of Chersonesus in 988 A.D.<sup>6</sup>

In 1793, the Russian Imperial Empire annexed the right bank (western) Ukraine. Over the years that followed, a policy known as Russification banned the use and study of the Ukrainian language, and people were pressured to convert to the Russian Orthodox faith. Ukraine suffered some of its greatest traumas during the 20th century. After the communist revolution of 1917, Ukraine was one of the many countries to be engaged in a civil war before being fully absorbed into the Soviet Union in 1922. In the first half of the 1930s, to force peasants to join collective farms, the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin deliberately orchestrated a famine that consequently led to starvation and death of millions of Ukrainians. Thereafter, Stalin brought in large numbers of Russians and other Soviet citizens of which many with no ability to speak Ukrainian and with few ties to the region in order to help repopulate the east. This ugly incidence created enduring fault lines. Eastern Ukraine came under Russian rule much earlier than western Ukraine, and as such people in the East have stronger ties to Russia. While Western Ukraine, spent centuries under the shifting suzerainty of Poland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which account for one of the reasons Ukrainians in the West are sentimentally attached to Western Europe.<sup>7</sup> The conflict emerged around several issues. In the first instance, the Russian maintenance of post-Soviet states has been put forward. The Russian Federation has a long history of imperial tendency and sense of superiority.

Moreover, it is a reaction to the eastward expansion of Western European states which was viewed by Russia as a potential threat.<sup>8</sup> Trailing behind the imperialistic tendency of Russia is the battle to consolidate the sovereignty of Ukraine. The activities of Russia have been continuously punctuating the sovereignty of Ukraine since 1991.<sup>9</sup> Russia would prefer to control a person who is in control of the Ukrainian government rather than having to meander around the provisions of international law or economic dependencies. That was the case with Yanukovich, during whose presidency the lease on Russia's naval base in Sevastopol (the Crimean Peninsula) was prolonged until 2014, despite earlier efforts of Yushchenko to take this strategically and economically crucial port. The deal was done in exchange for discounts on the price of Russian gas that is imported to Ukraine.<sup>10</sup>

The status of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk also added to the flames which later engulf Russia and Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> The series of events that are directly or indirectly connected to the annexation of Crimea commenced in the first half of 2014, when the pro-Russians seized important buildings in the Crimean capital, Simferopol, and subsequently organised a referendum<sup>12</sup>. Tension between Russia and Ukraine started when protesters ousted the Ukraine's pro-Russian President, (Viktor Yanukovich) in the Revolution of Dignity. The then-Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovich announced his refusal to sign an agreement with the European Union to bring Ukraine into a free trade agreement, citing pressure from Russia. This singular action consequently snowballed into massive protests in Ukraine calling for Yanukovich to resign. In February 2014, violence between police and protesters in Kyiv's Maidan square left many innocent citizens dead. Yanukovich eventually fled to Russia and the Ukrainian parliament subsequently formed a new government. It was around the same era that Russia annexed Crimea. This renders Ukraine in a vulnerable position for self-defence coupled with a temporary government and unprepared military. When Russia got wind of the unprepared Ukrainian military, she immediately moved to strike Donbas, which is located in Eastern Ukraine and the subsequent armed conflict between the Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed separatists.<sup>13</sup>

It must be noted that, in their political history, the status of Crimea is still a subject of bickering. However, the referendum on the status of Crimea triggered other pro-Russian demonstrations, in the Eastern-Ukrainian Donetsk and Luhansk provinces that shared border with the Russian Federation. Both of these provinces have the biggest percentage of ethnic Russians with 39% Russians in Luhansk and 38.2% in Donetsk. Moreover, these provinces have the largest, 92.7% of people who use the Russian language. Donetsk and Luhansk are important regions due to their well-developed industrial sector and quite rich natural resources. Shortly after the commencement of the demonstrations, pro-Russian groups established self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.<sup>14</sup> The Kremlin then provoked and supported, in some cases with regular units of the Russian army, the conflict in Donbas.<sup>15</sup> Those actions had major negative repercussions for Russia's relations with the Western World. For instance, the United States and Europe made conscious efforts to coordinate sanctions, deliberately targeting the economy of Russia. NATO, which had drawn down its military power since the early 1990s, reversed course; member states agreed to increase their defense spending, with a target of 2% of gross domestic product by 2024. Moreover, NATO began deploying ground forces in member states on its eastern flank.

The need to strengthen the sense of national identity took a centre stage among the Ukrainians. At the same time, this identity is quite complex as Ukraine is a multi-ethnic state with relatively large minorities, especially the Russians in the Eastern part. Moreover, it has been a target of many spheres of influence. For instance, Poland, the Soviet Union/Russian Federation.<sup>16</sup> One can understand the formation of Ukrainian identity as a response to the complexity of its position vis-a-vis Poland, Russia, the European Union, and, perhaps most importantly, vis-a-vis itself. Poland would feel more comfortable if Ukraine served as a buffer zone to the European Union member

states between Poland and Russia. Polish initiatives seem to treat Ukraine instrumentally as a means of strengthening Poland's security. Hence, Ukraine is divided between its two neighbours and the development of the sense of their national identity is thwarted by this division. Moreover, ideological differences that permeate the Ukrainian society formed a stumbling block for the emergence of a strong and unified national identity. Some people, especially those who settle in western part of Ukraine, would like to see themselves belonging to the European Union, while the predominantly Russian East feels a stronger attachment to Russia.<sup>17</sup>

As earlier pointed out, Ukraine officially declared itself an independent country in 1991. Since then, the country has been forming closer attachment to International bodies such as the European Union and with NATO. Ukraine was a major backbone of the Soviet Union until its independence in 1991. NATO pushed eastward, bringing into the fold most of the Eastern European nations that had been in the Communist orbit shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2004, NATO added the former Soviet Baltic Republic of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Four years later, NATO declared its intention to offer membership to Ukraine in the nearest future, thus infuriating Russia. Putin therefore considered NATO's unusual expansion as an existential threat, and the prospect of Ukraine joining the Western military alliance a potential stumbling block.<sup>18</sup>

The European Union, NATO, the UN, the United States and several non-governmental organisations, symbolise the liberal democratic stance that was perceived by Russia as a traditional threat to its existence and the status of the World's Power.<sup>19</sup> Russia's major argument was that, it is its traditional right to protect people who identify themselves as Russians from the oppression which they could face by virtue of their minority status in that region. Moreover, Russia considers Ukraine's efforts to join the European Union as a threat to the Russian economy and also territorial integrity due to the spread of the "Western ideology" closer to its borders. The EU and the U.S. has considered Russian offensive as a sign of Putin's neo-imperial foreign policy, which threatens the Baltic States. The Russian President's intention was to prevail on Ukraine to abandon its Western sentimental attachment and embrace Russian ties.<sup>20</sup>

## **IMMEDIATE CAUSES OF THE WAR**

War between the two sovereign countries had been exacerbated by a deepening Ukrainian energy crisis that Ukraine believes Russia has purposefully provoked. Ukraine views the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline (connecting Russian gas supplies directly to Germany) as a potential threat to its own security. Nord Stream 2 is one of the two pipelines that Russia has laid underwater in the Baltic Sea, in addition to its traditional land-based pipeline network that runs through Eastern Europe, including Ukraine. Kyiv views the pipelines across Ukraine as an element of protection against invasion by Russia, since any military action could potentially disrupt the vital flow of gas to Europe.<sup>21</sup> However, the separatist movements by pro-Russian extractions in parts of Ukraine and the subsequent declaration of war by Russia against Ukraine signaled the commencement of the unfortunate war. As earlier pointed out, Ukraine officially declared itself an independent country in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, the country has



been forming closer ties with the European Union and with NATO. Russia, however, describe these attachment as an economic and strategic threat to its own security. In 2014, Russia invaded and subsequently annexed the Crimean Peninsula and began backing pro-Russian separatists in parts of eastern Ukraine that opted to separate from the country. In the fundamental causes of the war, Luhansk and Donetsk are key to understanding the latest escalation in Ukraine.<sup>22</sup>The rebel-controlled territories, Luhansk and Donetsk, comprise a larger region called Donbas that borders Russia.

The two territories have been led by pro-Russia separatists for nearly a decade. In the latest flare-up of the crisis in Ukraine, while Ukraine make frantic efforts to stop further escalation of the Russian-backed separatist movements, Russian President Vladimir Putin recognised the independence of these two breakaway regions (Luhansk and Donetsk) in Ukraine's east as independent and ordered military forces to be deployed there. On February 21, 2022, the Russian Federation Council unanimously authorised Putin to use military force outside Russia's borders. Two days later, Russia launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, its neighbour to the southwest, marking the commencement of the Russo-Ukrainian war which had been lingering since 2014. **In the build-up to the war**, weeks of intense diplomacy and the imposition of Western sanctions on Russia failed to deter Putin, who had stationed between 150,000 and 200,000 troops along the borders of Ukraine. Meanwhile, Russia has demanded an end to NATO's eastward expansion and also views Ukrainian membership of the US-led Atlantic military alliance as an aberration.<sup>23</sup>

## **PERCEIVED AFTERMATHS OF THE WAR**

It is an undisputable fact that, the war would further devastate Ukraine's already weakened infrastructure. The nations' health system, reeling from COVID-19, is fragile, and its economy is likely going to experience decline drastically. Food and fuel shortages would be acute, public services would equally be rendered non-functioning. Widespread use of landmines and explosive ordinance could kill or maim thousands especially in Ukraine during and after the war. Increasing number of refugees is very certain should World Powers fail to checkmate aggressive nation. Many Ukrainians has already been displaced internally, and others forced to flee. Countries has stared estimating possible refugees. For instance, Poland has estimated that it could receive up to one million refugees, while Ukrainian officials have warned that the world could see numbers "similar to Syria." Ukraine also hosts refugees from other countries, such as Afghanistan and Belarus, who would be at particular risk if there was a further escalation of conflict.<sup>24</sup>Before the war, global leaders were experiencing the brain death of NATO, but Putin's unprovoked attack on Ukraine has forced America and its allies to bond, and has no doubt re-awakened NATO in the international system. Western leaders have confirmed that the military alliance will not put boots on the ground in Ukraine or impose a no-fly zone over the besieged nation, amid fears that direct engagement with Russian forces could trigger a global conflict. However, the alliance has led to the emergence of a three-pronged response to the conflict. Initially, NATO intended to apply the services of the policies of deterrence and diplomacy, and when that could not go far, it stepped up by arming Ukraine and

imposing unprecedented economic sanctions, while deploying extra forces to Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, the action of Russia had spurred NATO to action, something it has been searching for over the last two decades.

The war saw a sharp tilt in the foreign policy objective of Germany. While NATO was deploying lethal aid and sanctions, Germany announced a €100 billion injection to modernise its dilapidated armed forces, while pledging to raise military spending above 2% of GDP for the first time since the end of the Cold War and this is an indication of the fact that, Germany has abandoned its two-decade-long role as a peace loving nation, taking a series of steps that add up to the boldest transformation of the country's security doctrines in a generation which is a stunning foreign-policy shift.<sup>25</sup> The war as equally made Switzerland to shelve his historic non-aggression policies. It is important to note that throughout the two world wars of the 20th century, Switzerland maintained a position of strategic neutrality, refusing to be drawn into the conflicts even as Nazi Germany and its allies surrounded the country on three sides. However, the country breaks with the past by ensuring all measures to adopt all the sanctions that the EU has imposed on Russian people and companies and freeze their assets. The country also abandoned its historic non-aggression policies to bar entry to some high-level Russians with Swiss connections and close Swiss airspace to Russian flights, marking the birth of a new Europe united against Russia. Russia's invasion and attacks have not only dragged Ukraine closer to its Western allies, but also opened opportunities for the expansion of the European Union. This will undoubtedly further tilt the balance of power mechanism in the international system as such reactions are likely to snowball into unnecessary reactions and counter reactions in the international system. The war also led to the commencement of Energy revolution in Europe. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has exposed vulnerabilities in European energy supplies which have prompted urgent calls from across the EU for the continent to pursue longer-term independence. It must be noted that, Russia provides almost 40% of the EU's natural gas and more than 25% of its crude oil, but following the outbreak of the war, the bloc is expected to unveil a new energy strategy which is likely to reduce its dependence on Russian gas supplies. The invasion also caused Germany to halt the approval of the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, a decision that caused the Swiss company behind the project to fire all 106 of its staff after also being targeted by US sanctions.<sup>26</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Russo-Ukrainian war, as it has been tagged, has a set of complex underlying causes and long-lasting grievances which sometimes make it complex. Moreover, the two opposing perceptions, the Western and Russian, of the conflict both have legitimate grounds for their claims and further complicate the resolution of the war. An assessment of the war reveals that by declaring war on Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin hopes that Ukraine and the Western World especially NATO and US will make concessions and Ukraine will re-align itself back to Moscow. Moscow has sought to frame this crisis as one between Russia and NATO, but the Kremlin's primary focus is Ukraine. This is partly about geo-politics and Moscow's desire for a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. However, it is also very much about Russian domestic politics. A

Ukraine that charts its own course, consolidates its democracy and enacts reforms that realise the full potential of its economy poses a nightmare for the Kremlin: That Ukraine would cause Russians to ask why they cannot have the same political voice as Ukrainian citizens and perhaps even challenge the president, Putin's authoritarianism.

## END NOTES

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