

UDC 327(477+470)"1991/2014"

*Brandon Rodrigues,
Seton Hall University
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7026-2426*

A Shared History: Russian-Ukrainian Relations from 1991 to 2014

Abstract. This work provides background for understanding the complex and close relationship between Russia and Ukraine from the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. It covers topics such as Ukraine's allocation of an inherited nuclear arsenal, the countries' economic interdependence, the Orange Revolution, and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. The purpose of this work is to shed light on the complicated history of Russia and Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion initiated on February 24th, 2022.

Keywords: *Ukraine, international relations, Russian Federation, 1991 – 2014, annexation, the Crimea, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.*

The Russian – Ukrainian War is, at the time of writing, an ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia beginning in February of 2014. The initial eight years of conflict included the annexation of Crimea by Russia that transpired in early 2014 and, as of 2022, the ensuing war in the Donbas region of Ukraine that started in 2014. As of 2022, the war has displaced millions of people and has seen the death of over 14,000 individuals. ((United Nations, 2022) The conflict escalated after Russia launched a full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, after months of military build-up around Ukrainian borders. As a result, protests erupted globally including 50 Russian cities. This paper is not an attempt to narrate the events of the war, merely to provide an explanation of the complex relationship between Russia and Ukraine since the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and describe some of the factors leading up to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, and possibly contributing to their eventual full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The dissolution of the USSR was one of the most globally significant events of the 1990's. To better understand how Ukraine formed and why the USSR dissolved, it would be pertinent to provide some context. In the mid 1980's, the USSR led by Mikhail Gorbachev, found unintended consequences in using the themes *glasnost* and *perestroika* as political slogans. *Perestroika* was Gorbachev's attempt at modernizing Soviet communism. "The Law on Cooperatives" enacted in 1988 was one of the most significant of the economic reforms under Gorbachev's tenure. It permitted collective ownership of businesses in several sectors, imposed high taxes, and implemented employment restrictions. This version was later revised to avoid the discouragement of private-sector activity. His bold reforms eliminated the Ministry of Foreign Trade's monopoly on trade operations, eliminating the bureaucracy of trade ministry organizations. (Schneider, 1989) After years of government repression, his policy of *glasnost* meant the increased openness and transparency in the USSR's institutions and activities. It was the Gorbachev administration's commitment to allowing Soviet citizens to publicly discuss problems and voice their opinions. (Hewett, 1991) These reforms were often regarded as vague and limited. Alexei Simonov, president of the Glasnost Defense Foundation, critiques these reforms, suggesting it was "a tortoise crawling towards Freedom of Speech." (Glasnost Defense Fund Digest, 2022) *Glasnost* allowed both, ethnic and nationalist disaffection to surface leading to social problems receiving wider public attention, and economic reforms following the theme of *perestroika* were insufficient, leaving most elements of the previous communist economy intact.

During the revolutions of 1989, the USSR lost the majority of their allies in Eastern Europe. By 1990, the Soviet government had lost control over economic conditions from various factors such as the low price of natural gases, ongoing war in Afghanistan, and corruption. Tension between Soviet Union and Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (SFSR) authorities became personified between Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. This began the period known to some as Fall of Communism which resulted in the end of communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe.

Ukraine gained its independence on August 24, 1991, following the dissolution of the USSR; it was formalized with a referendum on the 1st of December. The early histories of Ukraine are marked by the presidencies of Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma. This transitional period saw the country attain its independence from Russia, its presidents maintained close ties.

The first major dispute following Ukraine's independence was regarding its nuclear arsenal. Following its departure from the USSR, the country inherited the third largest nuclear stockpile in the world. Granted they obtained physical control of the weapons; they had not inherited operational control of them. The signing of the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances in 1994 saw Ukraine pledge to destroy the rest of its nuclear weapons and join the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. (Solchanyk, 2001)

The second dispute of Ukraine's early years was regarding the fate of the Black Sea Fleet and its operating bases, which included the city of Sevastopol. Upon the dissolution of the USSR, Russia's strategic position in the Black Sea was weakened. Its fleet was degraded as a result of funding cuts, the loss of territory, and the loss of Crimea, which saw the country's assets divided and located on foreign soil. After much deliberation, Presidents Yeltsin and Kravchuk agreed to equally divide the Black Sea Fleet on June 17, 1993, completing the division by the end of 1995. Between pro-Russian separatist groups becoming active in the local politics of Crimea and then – Ukrainian naval officers professing their loyalty to Russia, tensions were significantly increased. (Millie et al., 1995)

The last of the major disputes between Ukraine and Russia in the 1990's was concerning economics and energy supplies as several oil and gas pipelines ran through the country. After the signing of new treaties, Ukraine's gas debt to Russia was paid off by the transfer of nuclear – capable weapons they inherited, such as Tu-160 bombers. (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine & Russian Federation, 1999) Ukraine and Russia's economic interdependence complicated matters. Between one third and one half of Ukraine's trade was with the Russian Federation and up to 80% of annually consumed oil and gas came from Russia. On the other hand, Russia came out as the fourth largest investor in the Ukrainian economy, following the United States, the Netherlands, and Germany by 1998. (Molčanov, 2003)

The 2004 Ukrainian presidential election was extremely controversial. During Viktor Yushchenko's electoral campaign, he was poisoned by TCDD dioxin – chemical used in herbicides such as Ancient Orange – where he later implicated Russian involvement in the affair. (Kyiv Post, 2009) November of that year saw the election of Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, despite allegations of election fraud by election observers. The following months saw widespread peaceful protests known as the Orange Revolution. After the Supreme Court of Ukraine declared a rerun of the elections, Yushchenko assumed the presidency and Yulia Tymoshenko as prime minister. The Orange Revolution was part of a larger set of 21st-century protests within the former USSR states known as the color revolutions. (Cordesman, 2014)

In 2013, Ukraine decided to pursue an association agreement with the European Union as opposed to the Russian-led Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia. (Aslund, 2013) In August 2013, the Russian Custom Service halted imports from Ukraine in an attempt to prevent Ukraine from signing the trade agreement. (Kyiv Post, 2013) A month later, Russia threatened Ukraine with financial catastrophe and the collapse of the state if they followed through on their planned trade agreement with the European Union. Advisor to Russian President Vladimir Putin,

Sergey Glazyv said “Ukrainian authorities make a huge mistake if they think that the Russian reaction will become neutral in a few years from now. This will not happen”. At this point, Russia had already placed restrictions on Ukrainian products and were open to implement additional sanctions if the agreement was signed. (Walker, 2013)

Yanukovych won the 2010 elections, facing backlash 3 years into his tenure after pro-European Union protests took place in response to his decision to not sign the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. (Guardian, 2010) In contrast, the Ukrainian government built closer ties to Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. This led to the Euromaidan movement. Following these protests, Yanukovych and parliamentary leaders signed an agreement for early elections before fleeing the capital ahead of his impeachment vote. On February 27, 2014, an interim government was established, and presidential elections were then scheduled. Yanukovych resurfaced in Russia in an attempt to reclaim his spot as acting president of Ukraine. Simultaneously, Russia began its military campaign in Crimea. (Polityuk & Robinson, 2014)

In response to the Ukrainian revolution of 2014 that saw the impeachment of Viktor Yanukovych, protests erupted by groups of ethnic Russians in favor of closer ties, integration with Russia, expanded autonomy, or possibly independence for Crimea. On the 27th of February of 2014, unidentified and masked soldiers seized a number of buildings in Crimea, including airports and the parliament building and raised the Russian flag. Ukraine accused Russia of intervening in Ukraine’s internal affairs, Russia later denied these claims. (Reuters, 2014)

On March 1st, President Vladimir Putin won parliamentary approval to invade Ukraine. Remaining Ukrainian bases and ships were besieged. On March 5th, Russia dismissed their calls to withdraw troops from Crimea. In mid-March, Russia officially recognized Crimea as a sovereign state, beginning its process to formally annex it. On April 15th, the Ukrainian parliament declared Crimea temporarily occupied by Russia. The Russian government then gradually increased their military presence and used their nuclear power to assure the capture of the region. (Reuters, 2014)

The relationship between Ukraine and Russia has been a complex one since both countries gained their independence from the USSR. Their economic interdependence, along with their unpredictable interactions, has created a complicated and shared history. Given Russia’s recent unpredictable actions, launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it is through analyzing the country’s past actions and intentions that we can find possible reasons and motivations in ongoing uncertainty.

References

- Aslund, A. (2013, September). *Policy brief 13-22: Ukraine’s Choice: European Association Agreement or....* Retrieved May 29, 2022, from https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/pbei/iie/0029281/f_0029281_23772.pdf.
- Conflict-related civilian casualties in Ukraine. (2022, January 27). Retrieved May 29, 2022, from https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Conflict-related%20civilian%20casualties%20as%20of%2031%20December%202021%20%28rev%2027%20January%202022%29%20corr%20EN_0.pdf.
- Cordesman, A. (2014, May 28). *Russia and the "Color Revolution"*. Russia and the "Color Revolution" | Center for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved May 29, 2022, from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-%E2%80%9Ccolor-revolution%E2%80%9D>.

- Creator. (1999, October 8). *Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on transfer from Ukraine to the Russian Federation heavy Tu-160, Tu-95MS bombers, long-range cruise missiles and equipment*. Офіційний вебпортал парламенту України. Retrieved May 29, 2022, from https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/cgi-bin/laws/main.cgi?nreg=643_116#Text.
- Guardian News and Media. (2010, February 8). *Yanukovich set to become president as observers say Ukraine election was fair*. The Guardian. Retrieved May 29, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/feb/08/viktor-yanukovich-ukraine-president-election>.
- Hewett, E. (1991, January 1). *Milestones in glasnost and perestroyka: Hewett, Edward A: Free download, borrow, and streaming*. Internet Archive. Retrieved May 29, 2022, from <https://archive.org/details/milestonesinglas00edah>.
- Millie, H., Williams, H., Robert Stavins and Halla Hrunn Logadóttir, Maria Robson Morrow | May 18, Robert D. Blackwill | October 17, Blackwill, R. D., Sean M. Lynn-Jones | March 1998, & Lynn-Jones, S. M. (1995, September). *Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet in Russian-Ukrainian relations*. Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Retrieved May 29, 2022, from <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/crimea-and-black-sea-fleet-russian-ukrainian-relations>.
- Molčanov Michail A. (2003). *Political culture and national identity in Russian Ukrainian relations*. Texas A&M Univ. Press.
- Pikayev, A. (n.d.). *NPR 1.3: POST-SOVIET Russia and Ukraine: Who can push the button?* Retrieved May 29, 2022, from <https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/npr/pikaye13.pdf>.
- Polityuk, P., & Robinson, M. (2014, February 22). *Ukraine parliament removes Yanukovich, who flees Kiev in "coup"*. Reuters. Retrieved May 29, 2022, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-parliament-idINDEEA1L04L20140222?edition-redirect=in>.
- Schneider, R. (1989). *Developments in Soviet Property Law*. Retrieved May 29, 2022, from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/144226366.pdf>.
- Solchanyk, R. (2001). *Ukraine and Russia: The post-soviet transition*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Study: Dioxin that poisoned Yushchenko made in lab. (2009, August 5). Retrieved May 29, 2022, from <https://www.kyivpost.com/>.
- Thomson Reuters. (2014, March 8). *Timeline: Political crisis in Ukraine and Russia's occupation of Crimea*. Reuters. Retrieved May 29, 2022, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-timeline/timeline-political-crisis-in-ukraine-and-russias-occupation-of-crimea-idUSBREA270PO20140308>.
- Ukraine's Employers Federation: Russia's customs service halts all Ukrainian imports. (2013, August 14). Retrieved May 29, 2022, from <https://www.kyivpost.com/>.

Walker, S. (2013, September 22). *Ukraine's EU trade deal will be catastrophic, says Russia*. The Guardian. Retrieved May 29, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/22/ukraine-european-union-trade-russia>.

Фонд Защиты гласности. (2022, May 23). Retrieved May 29, 2022, from <http://www.gdf.ru/>.