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Features of Ukraine's image in the media space of the French Republic in the pre-war period (1991 – 2013)

Abstract. The article presents a study of the peculiarities of forming Ukraine's image in France after the declaration of independence in 1991. It describes the key areas influencing the perception of Ukraine in the French media space, including political relations, economic challenges, sports events, and culture. The main characteristics of Ukraine's representation in the French media are analysed, and the dynamics of their changes are illustrated in the context of internal and foreign political developments.

Keywords: image, Ukraine, media, France, Russia.

The relevance of this research stems from the need to gain a deeper understanding of how the French media space reflected key events and processes related to the formation of independent Ukraine in the years 1991 – 2013. Analysing media coverage makes it possible to trace the development of Ukraine's image through the lens of changes that directly influenced the shaping of the Ukrainian political nation.

On 24 August 1991, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine, laying the foundation for the country's future sovereign development. Subsequently, Ukraine began establishing diplomatic relations with other countries. The development of relations between Ukraine and France went through several stages, determined by internal changes in Ukraine and external factors, which affected France's perception of Ukraine.

Following Ukraine's declaration of independence, France closely monitored the critical events occurring in the early stages of Ukraine's state-building. On 27 August 1991, the French newspaper *Le Monde* noted that Ukraine and Belarus had declared independence on 24 and 25 August, respectively (*Le Monde*, 1991). France was also among the first Western countries to officially recognise Ukraine's independence – on 27 December 1991, France supported Ukraine in its aspiration to take its place on the international stage. In January 1992, the two countries signed a Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Ukraine and the French Republic, and the Treaty on Understanding and Cooperation between Ukraine and the French Republic, signed on 16 June 1992, created a solid legal foundation for the development of bilateral relations in the political, economic, cultural, and scientific spheres.

However, deepening cooperation between the countries experienced an inevitable slowdown. One of the reasons was that France regarded Russia as the leading actor in the post-Soviet space and perceived Ukraine through the prism of its ties with Russia. Since 1991, French media have highlighted Russia's reluctance to relinquish control over Ukraine. *Le Monde* reported that "the USSR could do without the Baltic states, but the situation is entirely different regarding Ukraine, the most populous and richest of the Soviet republics after Russia" (*Le Monde*, 1991).

An important aspect that influenced Ukraine's image in France was the issue of Crimea and the subsequent political disputes over the Black Sea Fleet. This conflict had a significant geopolitical dimension and demonstrated the complexity of post-Soviet relations between Kyiv and Moscow. Tensions peaked in 1992 – 1993, when the parties exchanged statements about ownership rights, and Russia openly supported pro-Russian forces in Crimea. Incidents at sea and provocations accompanied political and diplomatic disputes. France viewed the situation as a potential source of instability in the region, which could affect the security of the Black Sea area and the eastern flank of

Europe in general, particularly given that both countries possessed nuclear weapons. Accordingly, much of the French media coverage was devoted to these issues. In total, between 1991 and 2003, *Le Monde* mentioned “Black Sea Fleet” in 96 publications about Ukraine, “Crimea” in 75, and “nuclear weapons” in 299.

Crimea was described in French media as the “pearl of the Black Sea” and the “main bone of contention” between Russia and Ukraine, “two nuclear giants” (Naudet, 1995). It was also noted that Crimea was just one of Russia’s levers of pressure in its efforts to “bring Kyiv back into the fold of Russia” (*Le Monde*, 1992). The dispute over the Black Sea Fleet was described in leading media outlets as an “extremely acute problem” that Russia and Ukraine were unable to resolve, partly due to deliberate escalations by the Russian side. French media conveyed Ukraine’s “weakened position” and the constant “nibbling away” by Russia of the “attributes of its independence” (*Le Monde*, 1994).

The publications repeatedly highlighted the issue of disarmament due to the “capabilities that Ukraine lacks” (*Le Monde*, 1991). There was a certain degree of mistrust and scepticism regarding Ukraine’s future steps in nuclear disarmament. For example, a *Le Monde* article stated: “According to L. Kravchuk, Ukraine remains committed to becoming a neutral state and abandoning nuclear weapons, but the latest decisions by the Ukrainian president and the way they are justified risk increasing Western uncertainty regarding the real situation in the former USSR” (*Le Monde*, 1992).

One of the key factors influencing France’s perception of Ukraine remained the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. Although the accident occurred before Ukraine gained independence, its consequences had a long-term impact on Ukraine’s image as a country that had experienced an artificial disaster of a global scale. Several articles expressed concern over the effects of the tragedy and highlighted France’s direct contribution to overcoming its consequences and ensuring future safety. French media reacted critically to Ukraine’s 1993 decision to continue operating the Chernobyl nuclear reactors, reversing the moratorium. Many materials concerned the necessity of closing the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant; there was a negative attitude towards Ukraine’s postponement of this decision, dissatisfaction with Ukraine’s demands, and concern about the state’s reliability. One publication noted: “Of course, Ukraine is demanding more. It even resembles blackmail: Chernobyl or ransom. Blackmail can be immoral, even suicidal in this case. The question remains - can [Ukraine] be trusted?” (*Le Monde*, 1994).

France also closely monitored Ukraine’s economic situation. Initially, in 1991, Ukraine’s considerable economic potential was highlighted, emphasising its “rich agricultural land”, “significant energy resources”, and “strategic location”, which “could make Ukraine an important player on the international stage” (*Le Monde*, 1992). However, the focus shifted to systemic challenges hindering the country’s development over time. The French press often emphasised the low living standards and corruption in Ukraine’s political and business circles, noting that these were among the main factors deterring foreign investment and implementing effective reforms (Nougayrede, 2000).

Particular attention was paid to the interrelation of economic problems with the country’s complex political situation. The media portrayed noticeable disappointment with Ukraine, which had “failed to meet the expectations” of Western governments and showed continued dependence on Russia (Nougayrede, 2001). One article stated: “The economy is in chaos, a large part of the population survives on meagre wages, and the leaders seem unable to agree on a clear policy: in the long term, the independence of a country suffering from massive regional disparities and pressure from Russia now seems under threat” (*Le Monde*, 1994). Another article emphasised the weakness of the state, referring to it as the “ghost of Europe” and a country that “awkwardly tries to use the Chernobyl disaster as an argument to obtain even more aid from the West” (Nougayrede, 1997).

At the same time, Ukraine’s aspirations for closer ties with the EU and NATO positively impacted its image. A telling example is that after Ukraine signed a Temporary Trade Agreement with the EU and committed to strengthening ties with NATO, there was a noticeable improvement in

the country's image in the media. For instance, a 1995 article in *Le Monde* noted: "In 1991, no one in the West, let alone in Moscow - where the country was still viewed as Russia's historical 'vassal' - placed much hope in the viability of Ukrainian independence. However, the image of this country and Western interest in it have radically changed" (*Le Monde*, 1995).

The Orange Revolution was a significant event highlighting Ukraine's pro-European sentiment. French media actively published news regarding election fraud and the protests by Ukrainian citizens, emphasising their aspiration for democracy. The popular French publication *Libération* noted that the revolution "deeply changed the country and made it more mature" (Millot, 2004). The numbers also reflect the growing attention to Ukraine: In 2004, *Le Monde* published 125 news items mentioning Ukraine, compared to just 13 in 2003. The phrase "Orange Revolution" appeared in 59 publications.

Despite the improved image of Ukraine after the Orange Revolution, the following year, the main topics in the French media shifted to political crisis and corruption. The press covered the conflicts between President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, government reshuffles, and reform debates. One *Le Monde* publication stated, "the beautiful unity demonstrated on Maidan Square in December was definitively shattered when President Yushchenko dismissed his entire government" (Châtelot, 2005). *Libération* reported that just a year after the Orange Revolution, "which seemed to mark the triumph of Western democracy, Ukraine is deeply divided between supporters of Yushchenko, Yanukovych, and Tymoshenko" (Millot, 2006). Over the following years, political crises in Ukraine remained a central topic in the French media, receiving pervasive coverage in 2007 and 2008.

In addition to internal political issues, French media widely covered the so-called "gas wars" between Ukraine and Russia in 2005-2006 and 2008-2009. The articles noted that Russia used gas blackmail as a tool of political pressure to support the pro-Russian opposition and weaken President Yushchenko's administration ahead of the crucial parliamentary elections in March 2006 (*Le Monde*, 2005). Describing Ukraine's situation, the media reported that "Ukraine is torn", as it "wants to protect Europe, which it approached after the Orange Revolution", yet "Moscow remains Kyiv's key trade partner" (Vatel, 2005). In the context of the gas conflicts, Ukraine was mainly portrayed as a weakened state.

After V. Yanukovych became President, *Le Figaro*, one of France's leading publications, stated that "Ukraine experienced a 180-degree turn, characterised both by the strengthening of the regime and a sharp rapprochement with Russia" (Thédrel, 2010). Consequently, starting from 2010, Ukraine was perceived as a country "heading down the path of 'putinisation'", "at risk of isolation", and "experiencing complete democratic regression" (Jégo, 2012).

Ukraine's image was also reflected in the context of sports, particularly through a significant event for the country, Euro 2012. The word "Ukraine" appeared in 152 news and analytical articles in *Le Monde* during 2012, 43 of which either directly covered Euro 2012 or mentioned the event in a political context. However, it should be noted that an article in *Le Figaro* about Euro 2012 and the impact of sports on a country's image stated that although hosting large-scale sports events can positively influence a nation's image, sport alone cannot solve everything, as illustrated by Ukraine's case: "We see this with Ukraine: when there are political problems, sport is not enough" (Détroyat, 2012).

Culture also played a role in shaping Ukraine's image. Well-known Ukrainian writers, singers, and other cultural figures contributed significantly. One of the most frequently mentioned personalities in the French media was Andriy Kurkov. Publications expressed admiration for the Ukrainian author, who portrayed surreal journeys through the former Soviet empire and depicted a "post-Soviet universe governed by absurdity" (*Le Monde*, 2004).

Mykola Gogol also sparked interest in the French media space – between 1991 and 2013, he was mentioned in 88 *Le Monde* publications. However, French media mainly described him as a Russian writer, only occasionally noting that he was born in Ukraine.

The French media also referenced Sergei Parajanov and his iconic film adaptation, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, which showcased the beauty of Ukrainian nature and culture. Over the period, *Le Monde* mentioned the acclaimed director and screenwriter 35 times. *Le Figaro* praised his talent, noting that in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* he “transposes the story of Romeo and Juliet into a legendary Ukraine” (*Le Figaro*, 2006). Meanwhile, *Libération* portrayed Parajanov as a “Russian, Georgian, Armenian homosexual director” and generally represented him as a Soviet artist (Potel, 2004).

Finally, French media devoted significant attention to Ukraine during the Revolution of Dignity. France’s leading publications regularly reported on the events, analysing the internal causes of the protests and the international response. News materials maintained a focus on Ukrainians’ struggle for democracy and their resistance to an oligarchic regime attempting to strengthen ties with Russia. According to *Le Monde*, Euromaidan “revived the spectre of Ukraine subordinated to Moscow, Ukraine doomed by its leaders to subsidised stagnation, corruption, and backroom deals among powerful cronies” (Smolar, 2013).

There was an increased focus on Ukraine’s European integration in media discourse. *Le Monde* highlighted the country’s desire to join the European community and its departure from the Russian political orbit: “This fully aligns with European values: the rule of law, democratic standards, and the rejection of Vladimir Putin’s ‘model’” (*Le Monde*, 2013). The publications also stressed the importance of civil society in shaping a new image of the country: “the citizens of Ukraine have once again shown that they fully understand and support the project of European association in its historical dimension” (Gérard, 2013). *Le Monde* mentioned “Ukraine” in 199 publications in 2013.

Thus, in the early years of independence, Ukraine’s image in the French media was shaped predominantly through the lens of its relations with Russia, geopolitical challenges, and internal issues. Initially, Ukraine was not perceived as a fully independent actor in international relations, and its image remained vague and fragmented. The main narratives in the French press focused on nuclear disarmament, economic difficulties, and political instability. Ukraine was often portrayed as a country in Russia’s shadow, with limited capacity to influence its future. Uncertainty surrounding the Black Sea Fleet, disputes over Crimea, and the economic crisis only reinforced this perception.

As for the positive aspects, media reports acknowledged that Ukraine possessed considerable resource potential and had values and achievements that set it apart from Russia. However, the dominant discourse on crisis-related issues often overshadowed these elements. Ukrainian culture also failed to significantly enhance the country’s visibility and recognition, as renowned Ukrainian artists were frequently perceived in France as Soviet rather than Ukrainian.

Later, following the events of the Euromaidan, there was a noticeable shift in the French media’s portrayal of Ukraine. Analytical articles emerged, highlighting the country’s European aspirations, social transformations, and commitment to democratic development. Ukraine increasingly came to be seen as an active and independent actor, capable of defending its interests.

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