

Tomasz Stępniewski*

Russia-Ukraine war: independence, identity, and security

Wojna Rosji z Ukrainą: niepodległość, tożsamość i bezpieczeństwo

Summary: The aim of this short paper is to show that the relations between Ukraine and Russia are extremely complex as they are built on a shared history, religion, language, and culture and they should not, therefore, be gauged by Western standards. Evaluating the current situation from a broader perspective, the fact that Ukraine plays a significant role in Russia's foreign policy needs to be emphasized. Ukraine is considered the key post-Soviet state, a significant "near abroad" country, whose position, potential, and geopolitical location are vital for the balance of power in both Eastern Europe and Europe in general. The research project aims at a synthetic examination of the current Russia-Ukraine war from the point of view of Ukraine striving for full independence, memory, and identity. Will the war of the brotherly nations wreck Russia's long-term policy towards Ukraine? Will the conflict ruin Russia's plans of post-Soviet space reintegration, whose pivot is set on Ukraine? Will the war stimulate Ukraine to deal with the issue of its identity, post-Soviet legacy, and collective memory?

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine war, Ukraine's independence, Ukraine's identity, security of Central Europe and Eastern Europe

Streszczenie: Celem niniejszego krótkiego artykułu jest pokazanie, że stosunki między Ukrainą a Rosją są niezwykle złożone, ponieważ zbudowane są na wspólnej historii, religii, języku i kulturze i nie należy ich oceniać według zachodnich standardów. Oceniając obecną sytuację z szerszej perspektywy, należy podkreślić istotną rolę Ukrainy w polityce zagranicznej Rosji. Ukraina jest uważana za kluczowe państwo poradzieckie, znaczący kraj „bliskiej zagranicy”, którego pozycja, potencjał i położenie geopolityczne mają kluczowe znaczenie dla równowagi sił zarówno w Europie Wschodniej, jak i na całym kontynencie. W tekście podjęto próbę syntetycznego spojrzenia na obecną wojnę rosyjsko-ukraińską z punktu widzenia walki Ukrainy o pełną niepodległość, pamięć i tożsamość. Czy wojna bratnich narodów zniweczy wieloletnią politykę Rosji wobec Ukrainy? Czy konflikt zrujnuje rosyjskie pla-

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ny reintegracji przestrzeni poradzieckiej, których osią jest Ukraina? Czy wojna pobudzi Ukrainę do zajęcia się kwestią swojej tożsamości, postsowieckiej spuścizny i zbiorowej pamięci?

Słowa kluczowe: wojna Rosji z Ukrainą, niepodległość Ukrainy, ukraińska tożsamość, bezpieczeństwo Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej

1. Russia-Ukraine war and security issues

● We are witnessing the decline of the security system established during the period of the bipolar division of the world – a different environment and geopolitical reality. In addition, the fact that institutions are static, but threats and challenges are dynamic, ought to be recognised. As a consequence, institutions and organisations are unable to adapt to the new international conditions in which they function¹. The fall of the bipolar security system has resulted in the emergence of a new order. Some superpowers aim at enforcing their own rules of the game in such a situation. The case of attempts at subordinating Ukraine to the rules of the "russkiy mir", i.e., "the Russian world", may serve as an example of just such a "new game without rules"².

The Russia-Ukraine war revealed that the post-Cold-War international order has changed³. As a consequence, an in-depth analysis of its nature is required. The Ukrainian crisis, also known as the Ukraine Crisis (and currently, the Russia-Ukraine war), constitutes something more than a mere conflict associated with Eastern Europe. It can be inferred that the international crisis is reflected in the rivalry between two external entities over Ukraine – the West (USA and the EU) and Russia⁴. According to Andreas Umland, the Ukrainian crisis pertains to the devaluation of the so-called Budapest Memorandum of 1994 (Russia, USA, and UK's security assurances for Ukraine in exchange for it joining the NPT), and thwarts efforts contributing to the prevention of WMD proliferation, exerts a negative impact on Russia's economy as an important actor in international relations, postpones Russia's integration with Europe, and thereby hinders the implementation of

1 A.D. Rotfeld, *Porządek międzynarodowy. Parametry zmiany*, "Sprawy Międzynarodowe" 2014, vol. 67, no. 4, p. 47.

2 Ibidem, p. 46.

3 *Ukraine under Zelenskyy: Domestic, Foreign and Security Policy in Flux*, M. Drabczuk, T. Stępniewski (eds.), "IEŚ Policy Papers" 2021, no. 10, Lublin 2021.

4 See: R. Zięba, *Międzynarodowe implikacje kryzysu ukraińskiego*, "Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations" 2014, vol. 50, no. 2, p. 15.

“A Wider Europe” idea, and the development of a free trade and security zone spanning from Lisbon to Vladivostok⁵.

Moreover, when analysing the Russian Federation’s security policy over the past few years, the conclusion that Russia is attempting to develop a security system based on military power at the expense of limiting its co-dependence upon international relations can be made⁶. As a consequence, with regard to the Ukrainian crisis, institutions such as NATO, but also the EU, will be forced to change their approach and perception of the international security system.

2. Ukraine’s place in Russia’s foreign policy

Among all countries of the “near abroad”, Ukraine is the one perceived as the key post-Soviet state, whose position, potential, and geopolitical location are vital for the balance of power in both Eastern Europe and Europe in general⁷. What motivated Russia to go to war with the brotherly nation, a war which cancels the long-term objectives of Russia’s policy towards Ukraine? Would the conflict have broken out if the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement was signed in November 2013? All evidence indicates that if the agreement had indeed been signed, the situation would not be any different. Viktor Yanukovich and the oligarchs would still be in power, and the political system would have gravitated towards authoritarianism. Serhiy Bilenky indicates that owing to the Euromaidan and ensuing events, Yanukovich’s corrupt government and associated oligarchs were removed from power and Ukrainians were given the prospect of essential reforms⁸.

5 A. Umland, *The Global Impact of the “Ukraine Crisis”: Russia’s Decline and Euro-Asiatic Security in the Early 21st Century*, “Krytyka Magazine”, June 2015, <http://krytyka.com/en/articles/global-impact-ukraine-crisis-russias-decline-and-euro-asiatic-security-early-21st-century#sthash.uFElB3S9.dpuf> [12.08.2015].

6 Wider on Russia’s security policy after 2008 see: A.M. Dyner, *Dyplomacja siły – rosyjska polityka bezpieczeństwa po 2008 r.*, “Sprawy Międzynarodowe” 2015, vol. 68, no. 1, pp. 33-49.

7 Cf. M. Klatt, T. Stępniewski, *Normative Influence. The European Union, Eastern Europe and Russia*, Lublin–Melbourne 2012, pp. 115-136.

8 Author participated in the lecture of the Harvard Summer School 2015 course: “Society, Culture, and Politics in Modern Ukraine” by Serhii Bilenky, PhD (Department of Political Science, University of Toronto).

The fact that 2022 brought a further escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and successive peace talks with the EU, Ukraine, and Russia, is noteworthy. This, however, does not change the fact that Russia's plans for Ukraine remain unchanged. Russia's short and medium-term goal is to destabilize the situation in southern and eastern Ukraine with a view to separating those areas from the country or establishing "occupied territories" there. While the annexation of Crimea was easy to carry out, the east and south of Ukraine do not seem likely to readily follow the same scenario, though it is not unfeasible. Support for integration with Russia is considerably smaller in those areas than in Crimea. Russia is using the activities of separatists to provoke Kyiv into further military action and in this way seeks to unleash a civil war in Ukraine and destabilize the country. All possible diplomatic efforts should be made to prevent an armed conflict – so that the scenario of Georgia, where, in 2008, it yielded to provocation and lost part of its territory, does not repeat itself. Under the present circumstances, such a course of events is highly probable.

3. Russia and Ukraine's collective past – a challenge for Ukraine's identity and memory⁹

Volodymyr Kulyk rightly states that "historical memory may be considered as one of social identity's elements due to the fact that it provides an answer to a significant issue of any community's self-identification, i.e., the question of its origin and future, which offers an explanation of the current state of communities"¹⁰. When referring to the origins of Ukrainian nationality, Kievan Rus (Ukrainian: Київська Русь) must be mentioned; however, Kievan Rus may be perceived as a starting point for three Eastern Slavic nations, Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. Such a state of affairs leads to a rivalry of narrations among Ukrainian and Russian historians as to the legacy of Kievan Rus and, de facto, Ukrainian history.

9 Chapter based on my publication: T. Stępniewski, *Russia-Ukraine War: Remembrance, Identity and Legacies of the Imperial Past*, "Yearbook of Polish European Studies" 2017, vol. 20, pp. 169-176.

10 W. Kulyk, *Narodowościowe przeciwko radzieckiemu: pamięć historyczna na niepodległej Ukrainie*, [in:] *Dialog kultur pamięci w regionie ULB*, A. Nikžentaitis, M. Kopczyński (eds.), Warsaw 2014, p. 163.

For many ages, the present territory of Ukraine has been under the influence of various political powers, beginning with the Kievan Rus, then Cossacks, the Kingdom of Poland, and then the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth up to the influence of Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires and the USSR. The issue is further complicated by the fact that nation-building in Ukraine has to overcome more than two centuries of colonial rule as described by Orest Subtelny¹¹.

Individual parts of Ukraine have experienced long-term rule by several countries and empires, which is reflected in the ethnicity, religion, and language of the country. Volodymyr Kulyk indicates that “differences in historical and national memory may be viewed by members of ethnical and language and regional groups as the most frequently supported main (meta)narrations of Ukrainian history and identity embodied in various public discourses”¹². The fact that the myth regarding the Cossacks is frequently used by Ukrainian historians to differentiate between Ukrainians and Russians is noteworthy. In view of the above claims, such differentiation would not be possible in the framework of Kievan Rus but is feasible in the case of Cossacks. It is assumed that it was the Cossacks who brought freedom to the lands constituting the present Ukraine¹³.

What does it mean to be a Ukrainian? The former Ukrainian president, Victor Yushchenko, stated in an election advertisement on Channel 5 (28th January 2006): “Think Ukrainian. You are a successor to Princess Olha, Volodymyr the Great, and Yaroslav the Wise, who are equal to the Apostles. History requires from you confidence and trust in Ukraine. Think Ukrainian”¹⁴.

11 O. Subtelny, *Imperial Disintegration and Nation-State Formation: The Case of Ukraine*, [in:] *The Successor States to the USSR*, J. W. Blaney (ed.), Washington DC 1995, pp. 184-195; also: O. Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History*, 4th edition, Toronto 2009; P.R. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine. The Land and Its Peoples*, 2nd edition, Toronto 2010; G. Smith et al., *Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands. The Politics of National Identities*, part I, Cambridge 1998; *Dilemmas of State-Led Nation Building in Ukraine*, T. Kuzio and P. D’Anieri (eds.), Westport, CT and London 2002.

12 W. Kulyk, op. cit., p. 164.

13 In-depth study of Cossacks and their significance for Ukraine’s identity and history in: S. Plokyh, *The Cossack Myth. History and Nationhood in the Age of Empires*, Cambridge 2012; see also: F. Hillis, *Children of Rus: Right-Bank Ukraine and the Invention of a Russian Nation*, Ithaca and London 2013.

14 See: T. Kuzio, *National identity and history writing in Ukraine*, “Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity” 2006, vol. 34, no. 4, p. 407.

Despite the current war in Ukraine, which accelerated the formation of a Ukrainian political nation (even in the south and west of the country), divisions remain. Recently, numerous researchers have claimed there have existed not one, but two or even several Ukraines – separate from each other, exhibiting individual identities and posing a challenge for the development of a common national identity of the country. As a result of the conflict, these divisions have been neglected, but they do remain and continue to influence the frame of mind of Ukrainians from various parts of the country. Significantly, as a consequence of the annexation of Crimea and south-eastern separatisms, approximately 5 million pro-Russian (defined as pro-Russian) citizens became separated from Ukraine. In addition, the situation in the Donbass serves as a bitter example to those entertaining thoughts of separatism.

Russia intended to exploit the divisions in Ukraine for its own political objectives. In 2014, Putin started referring to these divisions and called for establishing “Novorossiya” – the region of south-eastern Ukraine inhabited by Russian speakers. While the exploitation of Russian speakers proved fruitful and allowed Crimea to be annexed, the Novorossiya project did not fare well. As a consequence, Russia scrapped the plan altogether.

Making reference to the works of such authors as Andrzej Nowak, Włodzimierz Marciniak, Tomasz Stryjek, Adam D. Rotfeld, James Sherr, Dmitri Trenin, Alexei Miller, or the thoughts and works of analysts devoted to imperial Russia such as Andrew Wilson, Kadri Liik, Andrés Rácz, and others, as well as statements from Russian politicians, especially Vladimir Putin, from the 2013-14 period, the fact that we are dealing with the development of a certain Russian foreign and security policy, especially regarding the post-Soviet regions, may be acknowledged. A particular spiritual and civilizational community, the so-called Russian World (Russkiy Mir), constitutes a vital element of Putin’s doctrine, which establishes that regardless of their citizenship and ethnic background, a community of Russian speakers, who identify with the Orthodox religion and culture and share values,

forms around Russia¹⁵. The Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian community constitutes the core of the Russian World. Therefore, if Ukraine is the core of the Russian World, the question of the Russia-Ukraine war's validity arises.

4. Russia should understand that Ukraine is not Russia¹⁶

We are witnessing an attempt at stopping Putin's Russian neo-imperial policy. Russia's invasion of Ukraine (hybrid warfare) came several years too late¹⁷. Immediately after the dissolution of the USSR, Ukraine, as a newly formed state, whose statehood was only emerging, was susceptible to Russia's influence. The same was true for Ukrainians. However, the reality changed over time as generational change and the growth of the Ukrainian national identity took place. As a consequence, a political nation, which was non-existent at the moment of the dissolution [of the USSR], emerged. Furthermore, the emergence of the political nation was boosted by Russia's neo-imperial war against Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of south-eastern Ukraine led to the permanent separation of Ukraine from Russia. Hostility between Ukrainians and Russians, but also between Russians and Ukrainians, has since risen. And the common Soviet past is becoming alien to Ukrainians. It is perceived as unwanted, limiting the freedom of action, choice, and tyrannizing the country and its people. We are witnessing a gradual withdrawal of Ukraine and Ukrainians from the post-Soviet political space¹⁸. The removal of more than 500 monuments of Lenin in 2014 in Ukraine, including those in eastern Ukrainian towns, is the best example of the phenomenon. Therefore, Ukrainians are seen as renouncing their Soviet legacy and the division into the Ukrainian and Soviet worlds.

The question "Why is Ukraine not Russia and why are we witnessing the parting of the ways between the two countries?" needs to be addressed. Roman Szporluk is of the opinion that the origin of the con-

15 M. Menkiszak, *Doktryna Putina: Tworzenie koncepcyjnych podstaw rosyjskiej dominacji na obszarze postradzieckim*, "Komentarze OSW", no. 131, 27 March 2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl> [15.06.2015].

16 Chapter based on my publication: T. Stępniewski, op. cit., pp. 169-176.

17 A. Eberhardt, *Ukraińska wojna o niepodległość*, "Nowa Europa Wschodnia" 2015, no. 3-4, p. 42.

18 Ibidem, p. 42.

flict is the drive by Ukraine towards becoming a part of Europe, and its willingness to be one of the democratic, independent, and lawful states. Russia, on the other hand, does not seek to be a part of Europe, which brings about issues with Ukraine. To paraphrase, Ukraine is not Russia because Russia does not want to be in Europe¹⁹. According to Szporluk, due to the conflict, relations between Russia and Ukraine have reverted to the model present several centuries ago. Adam Eberhardt claims that we are dealing with the greatest blow to Russia's influence upon Ukraine, an influence that has been developed since the Treaty of Pereyaslav 360 years ago²⁰. On the one hand, Ukraine is gravitating towards Europe, and on the other hand, Russia rejects Europe and cooperation with the West through its assertive policy, contesting the post-Cold War order and striving to develop a new set of rules. The weakness and internal problems of the EU (threat of Grexit, reality of Brexit) along with the inconsistent approach towards its eastern neighbours have had their effect on the growth of Russia's neo-imperial policy. The lack of eastern strategy encourages all geopolitical actors, including Russia, to compete with the EU (the West) for influence in this part of Europe.

To sum up, when evaluating the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the fact that Russia, in its foreign policy, especially the one towards the post-Soviet states, is driven by an imperial mentality cannot be forgotten. Russian decision makers' frame of mind seems to be acknowledged by Andrej Krickovic, who claims that Russia "only respects powers such as USA, China, and Germany. People do not understand that. The Kremlin is constantly speaking about independence but never respects it. However, Russia's independence does not take small nations into consideration. America ought not to interfere in Russia's or China's affairs. Small states, however, present prospective spoils"²¹.

19 Author participated in the lecture given by Prof. Roman Szporluk titled "Why Ukraine is not Russia", Harvard University, 15 July 2015.

20 A. Eberhardt, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

21 K. Wężyk, *Niedźwiedziowi wolno więcej (rozmowa z Andrej Krickovic)*, 18 July 2015, <http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,146875,18384515,niedzwiedziowi-wolno-wiecej.html> [18.07.2015].

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