



The Russian War in Ukraine

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Since the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine is a neighbouring country of the European Union and Brussels made different efforts in order to find positive interactions with the neighbourhood, so to build «an organized and living Europe [which] is indispensable to the maintenance of peaceful relations»¹, as Robert Schuman already declared on 9 May 1950.

Kyiv articulated clear intentions to join the European Union as early as the 1990s. However, Brussels pointed out the need for domestic political reforms and linked this to all concrete steps towards EU membership. A Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Ukraine was signed on 14 June 1994 and entered into force in March 1998.

Since the “Orange Revolution” of 2004, economic integration and political cooperation between Ukraine and the EU have been a central goal of Ukrainian foreign policy. The EU also sees Ukraine as a “priority partner” within the framework of the new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), a program to improve economic, political and cultural cooperation between the EU and neighbouring States.

On 1 January 2008, agreements between the EU and Ukraine on visa facilitation and the readmission of people staying illegally came into force. Ukraine is also a partner country in the EU’s so-called “Eastern Partnership”, which was founded on 7 May 2009 at the summit in Prague. The aim was to bring the EU and six partner countries from its Eastern neighbourhood and the Caucasus region (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) closer together politically and economically.

At the end of November 2013, President Viktor Yanukovich put the association agreement negotiated with the EU on ice shortly before it was scheduled to be signed, apparently due to pressure from Russia. The agreement deals not only with economic and trade relations and the creation of a free trade area, but also with political cooperation. This agrees on close cooperation in foreign policy as well as in questions of justice and fundamental rights. With association agreements, the EU is trying to bind neighbouring States more closely to itself without offering them EU membership.

Six months later, in June 2014, the EU concluded an association agreement with the new Ukrainian government, despite ongoing tensions with Russia. President Petro Poroshenko signed the economic part of the agreement on 27 June, while the

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¹ Robert Schuman (9 May 1950). *Schuman Declaration*, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950_en, last check 22 August 2024.

political part had already been agreed in March. In September 2014, the parliaments of Ukraine and the European Union adopted the association agreement, which came into force on 1 January 2016.

According to a survey conducted in 2019, 57% of respondents were in favour of joining the EU, although there were significant regional differences. In the West of the country, the vast majority of respondents were in favour of EU accession. The South and the Donbas, on the other hand, were more in favour of membership in the Eurasian Economic Union with Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus².

On 7 February 2019, the Ukrainian parliament enshrined a strategic orientation of Ukraine towards full accession to the EU and NATO in the constitution with a majority of 334 out of 450 MPs³.

Since Russia's war against Ukraine began on 24 February 2022, some politicians have been calling for the country to join the EU quickly. According to EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, Ukraine should become part of the community of States as soon as possible. When asked about Ukraine's admission to the EU just a few days after the Russian war of aggression against the country began, she said: «Ukraine is one of us and we want them in the European Union»⁴.

In view of the catastrophic situation in his country, Ukrainian President Zelensky had also repeated an urgent request for admission to the EU. On 1st March 2022, Zelensky joined a meeting of the European Parliament in view of the war in Ukraine and made the following emotional appeal to the Europeans: «You know that we are giving lives for the rights, for freedom, for the desire to be equal as much you are»⁵ in order to preserve values and rights as in Europe, Zelensky said. And he concluded: «We are fighting for our rights, for our freedom, for our lives. We have proven our strength. Now prove that you are with us. Do prove that you indeed are European. Glory to Ukraine»⁶.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky submitted an official application to join the EU on 28 February 2022. A short time later, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova also submitted an application to join the EU. The European Commission is now in the process of reviewing the applications in order to assess the potential EU accession of the three States.

During her trip to the war zone in Ukraine on 8 April 2022, Commission President

² Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in collaboration with the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (4-19 November 2019). *European Integration of Ukraine: The Dynamics of Public Opinion*, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/european-integration-of-ukraine-the-dynamics-of-public-opinion>, last check 22 August 2024.

³ Radio Free Europe (7 February 2019). *Ukrainian Parliament Passes Constitutional Amendment to Reflect EU, NATO Aspirations*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-parliament-passes-constitutional-amendment-to-reflect-eu-nato-aspirations/29756695.html>, last check 22 August 2024.

⁴ Euronews (27 February 2022). *Ukraine is One of Us and We Want Them in EU, Ursula von der Leyen Tells Euronews*, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/02/27/ukraine-is-one-of-us-and-we-want-them-in-eu-ursula-von-der-leyen-tells-euronews>, last check 22 August 2024.

⁵ Volodymyr Zelensky (1st March 2022). *Extraordinary Plenary Session on the Russian Aggression against Ukraine: Statement by Volodymyr Zelensky, President of Ukraine*, Multimedia Centre of the European Parliament, https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/extraordinary-plenary-session-on-the-russian-aggression-against-ukraine-extracts_I219552, last check 22 August 2024.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

von der Leyen encouraged Ukraine on its path to the European Union. She wants to push ahead with the country's EU membership quickly: «We are with you as you dream of Europe. Dear Volodymyr, my message today is clear: Ukraine belongs in the European family. We have heard your request, loud and clear»⁷, said von der Leyen. During her visit, the EU Commission President also handed Ukraine a questionnaire, which the EU would like to use to sound out the conditions for Ukraine's accession. Ukraine immediately completed the questionnaire. The European Commission then assessed the application for accession positively. Ukraine was officially granted candidate status on 23 June 2022.

Meanwhile, the war goes on and the EU and its member States are facing a crucial moment. The topic is relevant to find a scientific discussion and it is not a case if this issue of *De Europa* is dealing with the ongoing war in Ukraine after the Russian invasion of 22 February 2022.

This day marks an epochal change in the nature of relations among States, in the return of nationalisms, in the East-West confrontation, in the crisis of the international order and, above all, it underlines how superficial it is to echo the "end of history".

As a matter of fact, the Russian invasion of Ukraine took European and world public opinion by surprise. After the conflict in the former Yugoslavia (1991-2001), a new war broke out in Europe, taking on different connotations – economic, values and political – which have in common Russia's challenge to the global order.

In the light of these dynamics, the contributions in the following pages aim at providing a general overview of the Russian invasion in Ukraine through a historical-political analysis of the strategic and geopolitical decisions of the actors involved. The methodological approaches change according to the field of the researchers, offering a multifaceted view of the topic.

Giovanni Savino discusses the origin and the development of the Russian nationalism, which provides a historical and contemporary understanding behind President Vladimir Putin's obsession with Ukraine as being part of the so-called "Novorossiia". It highlights the traditional and cultural sources of the Russian national identity, which explains Putin's denial of the existence of Ukraine and Ukrainians as a people, even prior to the 2014 crises in Crimea and Donbas. Doing so, the author takes also in consideration the roots of twentieth-century Ukrainian nationalism and its development after the Euromaidan events.

Lara Piccardo rebuilds the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict coming back to the long-term history of an area that has always been the victim of its powerful neighbours: Poland, which intends Ukraine as the last frontier of Catholicism, and Russia, which considers the territory the ancestral homeland. Like a barometer, Ukraine always registered the changing balance of power between its neighbours and, when Poland first joined NATO and then the EU, Kiev found itself in the middle of the West and Moscow. The analysis reveals four salient moments in Ukrainian his-

⁷ European Commission (8 April 2022). *Statement by President von der Leyen with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy at the Occasion of the President's Visit to Kyiv*, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-president-von-der-leyen-ukrainian-president-zelenskyy-occasion-presidents-visit-kyiv-2022-04-08_en, last check 22 August 2024.

tory, which represent as many fundamental turning points for determining the deep reasons for this war. First: 1. the birth of the Kievan *Rus'* and Ukrainian entrance in the Tsarist Empire. Second: the creation of various Ukrainian republics at the beginning of 20th century. Third: some problems of the independent Ukraine born with the dissolution of the USSR. Fourth: finally, the emergence of the reasons for the Euro-aidan crisis in 2013-2014. Each of these phases reveals, with varying intensity, how Ukraine is subject to incessant change in its dimensions, how fragile its identity is and how its independence has always been precarious.

Claudio Catalano underline the *casus belli* of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Followed by 6 sequential NATO enlargements (“Open Door”) to willing East European and Balkan partners (1999, 2002-2004, 2009, 2017, 2020), and strengthened by parallel European Union enlargements and associated partners, the issue of the enlargement to Eastern Europe as a justification for Russian aggression to Ukraine as mentioned by Putin’s speech at the Security Conference in Munich in 2007, where he rejected the post-cold war system, has been widely debated among politicians in the Western mass media. Consequently, the article explores the historical and political background, which paved the way to one of the most quoted reasons why Putin’s Russia decided to invade Ukraine.

The interaction between domestic and foreign policy under Putin’s presidency is explored by Mara Morini, who tries to combine the main domestic reasons - *i.e.* Putin’s personality and ideology, the institutional design, the legacies of the historical and cultural traditions – as well as the role played by the external factors (NATO, EU, and the US) in determining Russia’s reaction against Ukraine. So far, studies have interpreted “Putin’s war” as a nostalgic choice based on the will to restore former imperial glories to unify the Russian peoples denying, at the same time, the Ukrainians’ right to live in an independent State. Other scholars argued that the Russian invasion was mainly the effect to the Western policies – especially the NATO enlargement – perceived as a security threat by the Kremlin.

Cecilia Frego pays attention to Russian-speaking population, meaning to anyone who uses Russian as their preferred language, regardless of their ethnic background and political preferences. The presence of such a high number of Russian speakers became problematic from 2014 onward, when the use of the Ukrainian language took on a more pronounced political significance, and the divide with the rest of the Russian-speaking world became more apparent. This divide was evident through Ukraine’s political choice to align with the Euro-Atlantic world and Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The situation became even more complex following the Russian attack on 24 February 2022, which exacerbated tensions and moved away from the prospect of a peaceful resolution.

Matteo Mazziotti di Celso and Mattia Sguazzini contribute to the debate on the strategic autonomy of the EU by providing empirical analysis that allows for robust assessment of the leading hypotheses developed within this scholarly discourse. Since 2016, the European Union’s ambitions to become more autonomous from the USA have sparked intensified debate and it is hindered by two main challenges: stra-

tegic cacophony – *i.e.*, the presence of continent-wide divergences across national threat perceptions – and severe military capacity shortfalls. This analysis reveals that the strategic cacophony persists but has not prevented the EU from implementing a substantially cohesive response to the war, at least for now. The methodological approach is mainly based on some analytical dimensions: 1) the causes of the conflict with a particular attention to the historical origins of the relationship between Russia and Ukraine; 2) the objectives of the various parties involved between revisionist politics and defence of the *status quo*; 3) the possible war resolution scenarios. Moreover, the monographic issue aims to frame the Russian-Ukrainian conflict theoretically and historically within analytical dimensions consolidated in the scientific literature, which allow the study of the phenomenon to be addressed diachronically and in a comparative perspective.

Bringing together a research team made of historians and political scientists whose desire is basically to understand rather than to judge for political ends, these articles represent their scholars' experience "on the ground" and their engagement in the post-Soviet area studies, useful for underling historical and political elements for the future EU actions.