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# **PONDERING WAR: RENEWED TENSIONS IN UKRAINE**

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# Introduction

One of the lines in the Ukrainian National Anthem translates to “We too shall rule our country!”. Its metaphorical and literal translation stands true as we study the past of Ukraine. The country has been the apple of discord between NATO (and the EU) and Russia. Even though one might not regard the country as a powerhouse of geopolitics, but it is certainly a bone of contention between two dichotomies i.e., Western NATO and Russia plus the post-Soviet bloc. This essay will review the current tensions in Ukraine which will envelope conflict with Russia as well. To further understand the factors behind the on-going crisis, this essay will study the influence of the policy of Europe and the European Neighbourhood in Ukraine along with Russia’s role in shaping the domestic politics of Ukraine. The essay will also explain how the European Union (EU), the United States of America (USA) and Russia exert their influence in Ukraine in the post-Cold war theatre. It will also discern the important domestic actors in Ukraine and their interests in the crisis. It will assess how these events led to the military crisis of 2022 in the country. The essay will also attempt to conclude through proposing potential changes in the security infrastructures of Western and post-Soviet republics blocs. It will be retrospective, to some extent, so as to understand the circumstances and domestic dilemma that led the country to where it stands today.

## Background

The current crisis has arisen after Russia deployed huge troops and heavy military equipment near its border with Ukraine in October 2021. This raised concerns over invasion. Later, in December 2021, Russia’s Foreign Ministry put forth a set of demands that included putting a ban on Ukraine’s inclusion in the NATO<sup>1</sup> and demanded the Western alliance to pull back their forces to where they were in 1997.<sup>2</sup> The USA had called these demands as “non-starters”. To further deteriorate the situation, Russia annexed the Crimean peninsulas. Russia has also been conducting unexpected military exercises with Belarus, a country that has an on-going

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<sup>1</sup> Mcleary, Paul. 2021. *Politico*. December 23. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/12/23/russia-buildup-ukraine-satellite-images-526109>.

<sup>2</sup> Moscow Times. 2022. *Russia-Ukraine Stand-off daily briefing*. February 11. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/11/russia-ukraine-standoff-daily-briefing-feb-11-a76089>.

stand-off with Poland over the migrant crisis. Thus, tensions have only amplified recently, as political differences had always existed between Ukraine, NATO, and Russia, they only grew perpetually. Before discussing the way ahead from this conflict, it is pertinent to understand the events and political and security motivations that led to these tensions. The primary actors who shape the conflict are Ukraine itself, NATO, and Russia.

It is important to understand, first, that why Ukraine is the only post-Soviet nation to have gone through such turmoil. Comparing Ukraine to other post-Soviet countries like Poland and Estonia, they have more than doubled their wealth, whereas Ukraine, in 2014, remained as poor as it was in 1989.<sup>3</sup> Another political difference, apart from the mentioned economic disparity, is that Poland and Estonia are both members of the European Union. Meanwhile, Ukraine has not been able to make its way into either the NATO or the EU. Ukraine, since its independence, has been swinging between maintaining its relationship with Russia and Europe without upsetting the other party. This essay will further discuss meticulously how Ukraine's confused alignment foreign policy has led to such a severe conflict with Russia. The current strategic situation that involves most of the world's greatest economies and nuclear states will not become less dangerous if left on autopilot.

## Ukraine

As Aslund states, the fundamental problem with Ukraine is that it never fully broke away from its Soviet past.<sup>4</sup> To provide some perspective, it lost a quarter of a century when compared to Poland, Estonia, Turkey, and Belarus. Thus, Ukraine has done worse, economically, than any of its neighbours. Even in terms of GDP, while Poland and Turkey have approximately doubled their GDP, Ukraine's GDP has shrunk by 20% as of 2014. To make matters worse, now a military and security crisis has hit the country. In 2022, Ukraine is facing its worst crisis since its independence in 1991. Problems like fiscal deficit, public debt, exchange rates and hyperinflation are spiraling out of control after the disastrous tenure of President Viktor Yanukovich. The root cause of the economic problems is the tardiness of previous

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<sup>3</sup> Aslund, Anders. 2015. "Introduction: Ukraine on the periciple." In *Ukraine: What went wrong*, by Anders Aslund, 3-17. Washington: Peterson Institute for International Economics.

<sup>4</sup> Aslund, Anders. 2015. "Nation Building, but Little reform 1991-2000." In *Ukraine" What went wrong*, by Anders Aslund, 59-79. Washington: Peterson Institute for International Economics.

governments in introducing reforms and bringing about social change. Aslund enlists some factors behind the economic lag Ukraine is going through, however, those factors seem to be too much influenced by neo-liberalism.<sup>5</sup> Ukraine not only lagged in achieving the prerequisites for the EU membership but also in maintaining a sound equation with Russia. While trying to seek membership of the European Union, it unsuccessfully attempted to democratise itself on full swing and, on the other hand, it did very little to mend its relationship with Russia. Above a dangling foreign policy and alignment, President Viktor Yanukovich's regime became a nightmare. He was expected to strengthen the oligarchs of the country but ended up accumulating wealth for his kin instead.

Oligarchs in Ukraine can be seen as a necessary evil. Even though corruption has engulfed the Ukrainian society, oligarchs keep the society and the market open for business competition. But President Yanukovich tried to concentrate wealth in his family and turned against the businessmen of the country. His economic reliance on Moscow forced him to not integrate with the European Union and NATO. Moreover, the extremely centralised nature of the Ukrainian economy paved way for a corrupt government that further led to the Orange Revolution in 2004 and, later, the Euromaidan in 2014 as well.

One of the primary driving factors of Ukrainian economy is the energy price. Natural gas is the main source of enrichment in Ukraine since 1991. Despite having nine International Monetary Fund (IMF) agreements clearly recommending increasing gas prices, government have been lazy in doing so, the main reason being oligarchy.

Even attention towards the social sphere has been limited in the country. Ukraine was slow at introducing social reforms. The government has been spending more on real estate and fewer funds are diverted towards the health and education services. Lack of provision of these services led to further frustration among people resulting in an unstable domestic political situation. These services could not get much attention recently as the political narrative revolved around two perspectives i.e., either the pro-Ukrainian narrative that victimises Ukrainians and vilifies its Soviet past or the pro-Soviet view that glorifies it. There are numerous surveys and research studies that prove that the eastern part of Ukraine has a significant population embracing Ukraine's Soviet past.

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<sup>5</sup> Aslund, Anders. 2015. "Nation Building, but Little reform 1991-2000." In *Ukraine" What went wrong*, by Anders Aslund, 59-79. Washington: Peterson Institute for International Economics.

## Russia

Scholars often use the term “Russian factor” when describing Ukraine’s position in the international community.<sup>6</sup> The Russia factor has frequently stymied Ukraine’s efforts to foster its relationship with the Western bloc. Rather than assimilating Russian and Western viewpoints, Ukraine ended up having an ugly mess of both. Ukraine signed the ‘Treaty of Friendship’ with Russia after its independence. Meanwhile, it also westernised its defence and even contributed to NATO in some of its military missions. Thus, rejection of its Soviet past during its nation building led to inclination towards Europe. Apart from sentimental detachment, there are even logical reasons behind the Ukrainian tilt. The Russian model i.e., a combination of authoritarian regime, progressive economic reforms, and de-regulation of small and medium businesses as implied by President Putin was impractical in Ukraine. This model could not be implemented in Ukraine due to lack of its economic basis and top-down drive, which ideally should have been a bottom-up drive. Also, Ukraine had experienced an economic crisis due to its previous pro-Moscow regimes with business elites, axiomatically, not backing this model.<sup>7</sup>

But on the other side, the assumption that Russia compels post-Soviet countries to build a special relationship with itself based on ideological affinity is also not true. Russia did not hamper any revolution that came in Georgia or Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, it played a positive role in Georgia by assisting the dismissal of President Shevarnadze.<sup>8</sup> Putin has, however, advocated Ukraine’s inclusion in the Eurasian Custom Union that includes Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. Later, Russia viewed the Ukraine-EU trade deal as a threat to the Customs Union. Nevertheless, Ukraine has its own reason behind the skepticism. Deals concluded between Moscow and Kyiv on gas discounts had disappointed Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Ukraine took some measures to reduce its dependence on Russia for gas and went for gas routes through Azerbaijan and Turkey. Another sour factor in the Ukraine-Russia relations is the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Russia has openly expressed that it views DCFTA as a tool to expand Europe’s purview and as a plot to squeeze Russia out of the post-

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<sup>6</sup> O’Hanlon, Micheal E. 2017. "The case for a New Security Architecture." In *Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe*, 65-89. New York: Brookings Institution Press.

<sup>7</sup> SAMOKHVALOV, VSEVOLOD. 2015. "Ukraine between Russia and the European Union: Triangle Revisited." *EUROPE-ASIA STUDIES* 1371-1393.

<sup>8</sup> GLEBOV, SERGEI. 2009. "Concerning "Strange" Relations: Extensive Perceptions of Security Spaces." *Russian Politics and Law* 52-65.

<sup>9</sup> Buffa, David G. 2010. "A Proposed Remedy for the Dilemma of Innumerable Futures: Ukraine, Russia, and NATO Membership." *Brooklyn Journal of International Law* 593-626.

Soviet space. After the Ukraine-EU DCFTA was signed in 2014, Russia took aggressive steps and banned all Ukrainian products as it felt that it had not been consulted before the negotiations of the agreement. Even though it was an economic agreement, it became a symbolic gesture for a move towards security domain. Thus, in an already deteriorating relationship, Ukrainian crisis of 2013-14 was the final nail in the coffin. Russian invasion of Crimea and, later, cyber aggressions against Estonia worsened the equation even further. Moreover, to make the conflict even global, President Putin has been extremely critical of the American style of world leadership. Therefore, as we witness in 2022 as well, Russia has practiced a strategy of ‘escalate to de-escalate’ quite a few times, even during the Cold War.<sup>10</sup>

## NATO and the EU

NATO has been a successful security organisation that has not only helped the US over defence post the 9/11 attacks, but also avoided conflicts between member states like Greece and Turkey. However, NATO seems to involve itself in a fair share of controversies while expanding. While it goes through ‘enlargement fatigue’, it has also included Baltic states and intends to include post-Soviet republics. The 2008 Summit even promised eventual membership to Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> As scholar Angela Stent had stated, “George Bush administration wanted NATO membership for Ukraine more than even Ukraine itself wanted it”.<sup>12</sup> Russia’s fears are not irrational that NATO might use Ukrainian military bases to push its influence further eastwards. Ukraine has such a geopolitical position that it needs security guarantees from anyone who can provide them. Nonetheless, a significant section of the Ukrainian population also believes that the NATO is not only hostile but is also an aggressor. On the other side, NATO has also played an unpromising role towards Ukraine.

When Russia had invaded Crimea, Brussels refused to provide military support to the country. This gave Ukraine a reality check of the European interests and led to ‘Finlandisation’ of the

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<sup>10</sup> O’Hanlon, Micheal E. 2017. “The case for a New Security Architecture.” In *Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe*, 65-89. New York: Brookings Institution Press.

<sup>11</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization. 2008. *Bucharest Summit Declaration*. April 3. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm).

<sup>12</sup> O’Hanlon, Micheal E. 2017. “The case for a New Security Architecture.” In *Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe*, 65-89. New York: Brookings Institution Press.

Ukrainian strategy.<sup>13</sup> Later, Kyiv adopted the Finnish tactics of not being provocative for a long time, apparently. Ukraine tried to dodge the Central European approach of criminalising its Soviet past. Irrespective of how much the European Union justifies itself as different from NATO, their strategies remain entangled due to their overlapping members. Only difference between the organisations is that one is a security organization, and the other is an economic zone.

After Russia had annexed Crimea, the EU even made suggestions about diplomatic dialogue and brokered a deal to restore gas delivery and discounts. Thus, the EU tried every trick in the hat to avoid a war where it would have to be involved. Hence, even the EU acted as a disintegrated foreign policy actor. Member states were, individually, unwilling to stand up to Russia, given the economic interests that were at stake.

Also considering the process of including Ukraine in the EU, the body has been weak and slow, and the process remains unfinished as of now. The EU even proposed European Neighbourhood Policy as a framework to include Ukraine into the Union. Thus, the EU acted like a ‘gated community’ and perceived Ukrainian interests more symbolically rather than substantially. The EU was already going through an ‘enlargement fatigue’ and sent mixed signals to Ukraine about its inclusion. But the question remains that where does this triangle leave all parties?

## What Lies Ahead?

Many conflicts are neutralised by creating a non-aligned zone. Thus, the goal of Russia and NATO should be to keep a neutral zone in Central Europe in order to stabilise the region. But NATO is trying to quench its territorial aspirations through Ukraine and Georgia. As a result of its current policy, NATO, and even the EU, have been left ‘half-pregnant’ with membership of Ukraine and Georgia.<sup>14</sup> It has also left Ukraine strategically exposed to incensed Russia. On the other hand, for Ukraine, on the domestic front, option for minimum reform is no longer available. So far, no country has managed to reform itself in isolation. Certainly, even Russia

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<sup>13</sup> CROSS, MAI’A K. DAVIS, and IRENEUSZ PAWEL KAROLEWSKI. 2017. "What Type of Power has the EU Exercised in the Ukraine–Russia Crisis? A Framework of Analysis\*." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 3-19.

<sup>14</sup> O’Hanlon, Micheal E. 2017. "The case for a New Security Architecture." In *Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe*, 65-89. New York: Brookings Institution Press.

and Europe will have to become anchors for Ukraine to reform itself. A problem with Ukraine that has not been resolved yet is that the government, the business elites and the society have very diverging interests. Thus, the socio-ideological and the economic dimensions need to converge on some issues, at the very least. Currently, Ukraine has extreme polarisation in its society which needs to be reduced. It also needs to understand that its security is best ensured by a stable region. This polarisation, however, only rose after Russia started treating Ukraine as a “younger brother” and the NATO started building a “Euro-Atlantic” security space. Therefore, Ukraine is caught between two “(in)security spaces” and quasi-imperial ambitions.

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