

# Not a crisis nor civil war, but a foreign aggression: Why did Russia attack Ukraine in 2014?

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Kriz ya da iç savaş değil, bir yabancı saldırı: Rusya neden 2014'te Ukrayna'ya saldırdı?

Öz

18 Mart 2014'te Rusya Federasyonu Başkanı Vladimir Putin muzaffer bir şekilde Kırım'ın Rusya ile "yeniden birleşmesini" ilan etti. Ancak bu, yolun son noktası değildi, büyük sanayi merkezleri ve çoğunlukla Rusça konuşan nüfusuyla beraber tüm Güneydoğu Ukrayna'yı ilhak etmeyi amaçlayan aşırı hırslı planların sadece bir başlangıcıydı. Rusya'nın gizli birliklerinin küçük grupları ve ücretli "siyasi turistler", Güneydoğu Ukrayna'nın birçok şehrinde bir dizi ayrılıkçı Rus yanlısı toplantı düzenlemeye çalıştı. Ukrayna toplumu, Rusya'nın finanse ettiği, silahladığı ve doğrudan komuta ettiği "madenciler ve traktör sürücülerinin" Kiyiv'deki "faşist anti-demokratik cuntaya" karşı "iç savaşı" olarak kamufle edilmiş, sistematik olarak planlanmış bir dış saldırıyla karşı karşıya kaldı. Kremlin'in dilinde "yeniden birleşme" ve "iç savaş" olarak adlandırılan bu olaylar, dünyanın geri kalanı tarafından uluslararası hukukun açık bir ihlali olarak nitelendirildi ve 1974'te Birleşmiş Milletler Genel Kurulunca kabul edilen uluslararası saldırı tanımına uymaktadır. Bu şekilde cevaplanması gereken en temel soru, Sovyet sonrası coğrafyasında yeni bir uzun süreli silahlı çatışmayı başlatanın kim olduğu değil, bu çatışmanın arkasında yatan nedenlerdir. Makalede, Ukrayna'ya karşı gerçekleştirilen Rus saldırısının arkasındaki itici güçlerin ne olabileceğini incelemeye çalışılacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kırım, Rusya, Ukrayna, Avrasya, Terörizm

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Abstract

On 18 March 2014 Vladimir Putin, the President of the Russian Federation triumphantly declared the "reunification of the Crimea" with Russia. However, this was not the end, but just the beginning of overambitious plans to annex the whole South-Eastern Ukraine with its large industrial centers and mainly Russian-speaking population. The small groups of the Russian secret forces and paid "political tourists" tried to orchestrate a series of separatist pro-Russian meetings in a number of cities in the South-Eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian society faced with systematically planned foreign aggression, camouflaged as a "civil war" of Russian-financed, Russian-armed and directly Russian-led "miners and tractor-drivers" against a "fascist anti-democratic junta" in Kyiv. What in Kremlin's language came as a "reunification" and "civil war", for the rest of the world became a blatant violation of international law and meets the definition of international aggression adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1974. Thus, the most fundamental question remains not who initiated yet another protracted armed conflict in the post-Soviet space, but reasons lying behind it. The article attempts to look into what might be the driving force of the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

**Keywords:** Crimea, Russia, Ukraine, Eurasia, Terrorism

**Makale Türü:** Araştırma Makalesi

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout the history of Ukraine's independent existence, starting from 1991, Kyiv can be blamed of anything but igniting some interethnic violence and aggressive warmongering. When in two consecutive Maidan revolutions of 2004 and 2013-14 Ukrainians rose against the growing anti-democratic tendencies of Kuchma and Yanukovich political regimes, any large or small scaled armed conflicts seemed simply unimaginable. Both Maidans unified people from different parts of the country, who rallied in defence of their fundamental rights around the same values, demanding justice and transparency for the whole country. Only in February 2014, when in a few days President Yanukovich, the Head of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) Oleksandr Yakymenko, the infamous Minister of Internal Affairs Vitaliy Zakharchenko, and the Minister of Defence Pavlo Lebedev fled the country (Kovalenko, 2017), the overall crisis of power provided Russian Federation with a unique opportunity to carry out the annexation of the Crimea and to spill the war over to the Ukrainian Donbas.

Even though the official Russian narrative continues to spread the messages about "civil war" in Ukraine in 2014, the fact of the Russian aggression has been on multiple occasions recognized and condemned on the global arena by such international organizations as the UN, PACE or EU (The UN General Assembly resolution 68/262 "Territorial Integrity of Ukraine", 2014, 27 Mart; The UN General Assembly Resolution 72/190 "Situation of human rights in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine", 2017, 19 December; The UN General Assembly Resolution 75/29 "Problem of the militarization of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine, as well as parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov", 2020, 7 December; The UN General Assembly Resolution 75/192 "Situation of human rights in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine", 2020, 16 December; PACE resolutions of: 4–8 July 2019; 11 July 2018; 9 July 2017; 5 July 2016; 9 July 2015; 2 July 2014; High Representative on behalf of the European Union, 2021, 25 February; 2020, 16 March). While the very fact of the Russian invasion in Ukraine and subsequent de-facto occupation of the part of Ukrainian territory by Moscow stays unquestioned, the article attempts to look at the reasons lying behind the Kremlin's attack. In other words, along with the question "What happened?" the article would attempt to concentrate on answering the question "Why did it happen?" and to provide some plausible explanations for the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine that manifested itself in 2014.

## 2. Russia, Ukraine and the Global Terrorism Index

At the time when a number of hotspots (like in Transnistria, Karabakh, Chechnya, Abkhazia, South Ossetia or Tajikistan) were occurring here and there all over across the post-Soviet geography, the dissolution of the USSR never opened the way to any bloodshed or any ethnic clashes whatsoever in Ukraine. Should there be any smouldering confrontation among the inhabitants of Ukraine, the early 1990s was the best time for it to manifest itself. Both the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity in 2014 were caused not by ethnic, but rather social problems along the line between the people and their corrupted government. Unlike the armed forces of many post-Soviet states, after the disintegration of the USSR the Ukrainian army was never involved in any actual combat operations.

The absence of any wars/armed conflicts in Ukraine until 2014 makes a stark contrast to the Russian military, which since 1991 to a greater or lesser degree has been engaged in all major post-Soviet conflicts. Russia has regularly been included among the top 10 countries most impacted by terrorism in the world (Global Terrorism Index, 2017). In this respect, it would be interesting to compare the rankings of the two

countries, Ukraine and Russia, in the Global Terrorism Index over the last decade until the start of hostilities in Ukraine:

**Tablo 1.** Global Terrorism Index, 2017

Year	Global Terrorism Index ranking, Russian Federation	Global Terrorism Index ranking, Ukraine
2002	5th	63th
2003	2nd	70th
2004	2nd	77th
2005	3rd	81st
2006	9th	93rd
2007	10th	89th
2008	12th	106th
2009	12th	74th
2010	7th	52nd
2011	9th	56th
2012	8th	60th
2013	10th	48th
2014	11th	51st

While the phenomenon of organised terrorism remained largely unknown in Ukraine throughout 1990-s and 2000-s, it has become a deplorable part of everyday life in Russian Federation. The record of the terrorist attacks that took place in Russian Federation since early 1990s amounts to more than two thousand incidents (The Global Terrorism Database, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

### 3. The Budapest Memorandum (1994)

Following the dissolution of the USSR Ukraine became the world's third largest nuclear power possessing about 5000 strategic and tactical weapons (Ukraine Special Weapons, n.d.) (that is, Ukraine's nuclear capacity was larger than those of Britain, France and China combined (by 1994, UK, France and China possessed 250, 510 and 400 nuclear warheads, respectively) (Global Nuclear Weapons Stockpiles, 2002, 103-104), and gave up its entire nuclear arsenal inherited from the Soviet Union to Moscow. In return, the leaders of the Russian Federation, the United States and the United Kingdom agreed in the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, signed on 5 December 1994, "to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine, and that *none of their weapons will ever be used against Ukraine*" (italics are mine), as well as "to seek immediate United Nations Security Council action to provide assistance to Ukraine, as a

<sup>2</sup> The most notable of the terrorist attacks in Russia include those at Budennovsk (June 1995), Buynaksk (September 1999), Nord-Ost Theatre siege (October 2002), Beslan (September 2004), a number of explosions in Moscow underground (June 1996, August 2000, February 2004, August 2004, March 2010), a series of bombings in Volgograd (December 2013), subway train explosion in St. Petersburg (April 2017).

non-nuclear-weapon State Party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, if Ukraine should become a victim of an act of aggression or an object of a threat of aggression in which nuclear weapons are used" (Memorandum on Security Assurances, 1994). On the same day, China and France joined the memorandum's provisions in the form of individual statements (Vasylenko, 2009, 15 December; Rauf, 2013, 54). To sum up, all five permanent members of the UN Security Council reaffirmed their commitment to refrain from any use of force against Ukraine, and to respect its sovereignty and the existing political borders.

All this time the cited document remained only a joint declaration of intentions, and not a mutual defence agreement, in fact having no obligatory force (Petersen, 2014, 21 March). It should be noted here, that even at the beginning of 2014, let alone the mid-1990s, no one neither could nor did seriously expect that there would ever occur such an unimaginable situation when Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity will be actually threatened and violated not only by one of its neighbours, but also one of the signatories of the Budapest Memorandum (Socor, 2014, 10 March).

#### **4. Regional Differences, One Country**

All large countries quite naturally have their own regional differences, reflecting any particular nation's history, its cultural and linguistic variety. Ukraine<sup>3</sup> makes no exception in that respect. Those who have never been to Ukraine might think that the country was/is seriously divided by conflicts between its Ukrainian and Russian speaking parts. Unfortunately, this extremely oversimplified and rather distorted picture had been repeatedly translated not only in Russian media (what is understandable), but in foreign media as well. What is overlooked here is that the language the Russian speaking Ukrainians use does not make them automatically Russians. One should remember such thing as nationality, mentality and cultural identity. In this regard, the language which Ukrainians use in their daily life has always been of a secondary importance to many of them, as nearly all of the people living in Ukraine are bilingual and fluent in both Ukrainian and Russian.

Taking into account the habitual bilingualism and the same religion of Eastern Orthodox Christianity shared by majority of the Ukrainian citizens of both Ukrainian and Russian ethnic backgrounds (Razumkov Center, 2016, 25-30 March)<sup>4</sup>, with lots of intermarriages always being a commonplace, it is not surprising that no registered interethnic conflicts between the country's two largest ethnic groups, Ukrainians and Russians (including the Russian-speaking people of varied ethnic origin) (All-Ukrainian population census, 2001)<sup>5</sup> were even slightly manifest within 23 years of peaceful history of the modern Ukrainian statehood.

By 2014 no one even in a nightmare could imagine that war may come to Ukraine. This seemed nonsensical, yet it happened. How come then that murders, anarchy, kidnappings and tortures,

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<sup>3</sup> As is known, by its territory Ukraine is the largest European country that is located totally within the borders of the European continent, covering the territory 603 628 km<sup>2</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The Orthodox Christianity is by far the largest religious denomination in Ukraine, with 65.4% of the whole religious believers identifying themselves as the Orthodox. The Greek Catholic Church has 6.5% of the religious believers. The data for some other religions: Protestant Christian Churches – 1.9%, Roman Catholicism – 1%, simply Christians – 7.1%, Islam – 1.1%, Judaism – 0,2%. One should keep in mind, however, that as a consequence of many years of the atheistic Soviet rule a large part of society may still have no clear religious identification (atheists or those who does not belong to any church - 16.3%). The Ukrainian Orthodoxy in its turn has been divided into three major and separate churches, such as The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate) and The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

<sup>5</sup> According to the last national census made in 2001, 77.8% of Ukraine's population were identified as ethnic Ukrainians, and 17.3% as ethnic Russians. If combined, these two national groups constitute 95.1% of the country's population.

lootings, downing of MH-17 civil aircraft, shellings at the residential quarters, became a reality on a part of Ukrainian soil at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and still take place on the European continent? This question, in fact, has been many times answered in numerous resolutions adopted by the UN General Assembly (UN GA resolutions: 75/192 of 16 December 2020; 75/29 of 7 December 2020; 72/190 of 19 December 2017; 71/205 of 19 December 2016), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE resolutions of: 4–8 July 2019; 11 July 2018; 9 July 2017; 5 July 2016; 9 July 2015; 2 July 2014), the European Union (High Representative on behalf of the European Union, 2021, 25 February; 2020, 16 March), the US (The US Congress, 2014, 3 April) and NATO (NATO Wales Summit Declaration, 2014, 5 September), condemning the military intervention against Ukraine, violations of Helsinki principles and international norms, violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by Ukraine's neighbour, the Russian Federation.

### 5. Not a Crisis nor Civil War, But a Foreign Aggression

How possibly could be called a situation, when one state deliberately invades the territory of another sovereign state and under a pretext of a fake "referendum", concocted within days and explicitly supported by the occupying army, immediately annexes a part of that state's territory? The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX), adopted on 14 December 1974, clearly defines such actions as aggression. In accordance with the Article 3 of the resolution, any of the following acts qualify as an act of aggression (italics are mine) (UN GA Resolution 3314 (XXIX), 14 December 1974):

- a) *The invasion or attack by the armed forces of a State of the territory of another State, or any military occupation, however temporary, resulting from such invasion or attack, or any annexation by the use of force of the territory of another State or part thereof;*
- b) *Bombardment by the armed forces of a State against the territory of another State or the use of any weapons by a State against the territory of another state;*
- c) *The blockade of the ports or coasts of a State by the armed forces of another State;*
- d) *An attack by the armed forces of a State on the land, sea or air forces, or marine and air fleets of another State;*
- e) *The use of the armed forces of one State which are within the territory of another State with the agreement of the receiving State, in contravention of the conditions provided for in the agreement or any extension of their presence in such territory beyond the termination of the agreement;*
- f) *The action of a State in allowing its territory, which it has placed at the disposal of another State, to be used by that other State for perpetrating an act of aggression against a third state;*
- g) *The sending by or on behalf of a State of armed bands, groups, irregulars or mercenaries, which carry out acts of armed force against another State of such gravity as to amount to the acts listed above, or its substantial involvement therein.*

As regards these clauses, almost all of them (except for allowing its territory to commit an act of aggression against a third state) apply to what happened and continues to happen in Ukraine. Despite the fact that the international community unambiguously condemned the aggressor in numerous resolutions by the UN, PACE, EU, NATO, already mentioned above, quite often the Russian aggression in Ukraine continues to be depicted by using the terms such as "crisis" or even "civil war". These two terms are very misleading and both play into the hands of the aggressor state, in fact whitewashing its crimes in an unprovoked de facto war against its neighbour.

During the first stages of this war, the aggressor continued to inundate its victim's territory with its secret services agents (Mashovets', 2015, 31 July). In spring 2014 it was sending across then almost transparent Ukrainian-Russian border thousands of its citizens, so-called "political tourists". With the help of some locals brainwashed by the Russian propaganda they organised pro-aggressor meetings, waved aggressor's flags and at some places put them on public administration buildings, pretending as if these meetings were organised exclusively by local population. In the absence of substantial local support, but still aiming to create an impression of mass nature of demonstrations, the "tourists" had to travel from town to town, acting according to the same scenario at each new place they were coming to (Kuzio, 2018, 391; Khomenko, 2015, 8 April).

Later, without the formal declaration of war and emphasizing its complete non-involvement, the aggressor trained and equipped groups of the armed men, which harassed the locals, seized a number of administrative buildings in the two closest to aggressor's border provinces (Luhans'k and Donets'k), in accordance with already earlier applied tactics prepared two fake "referendums" and declared two "peoples' republics" (so-called "Lugansk People Republic" and "Donetsk People Republic") (BBC Ukraine, 2014, 11 May). Moreover, the allegedly local militants somehow managed to arm themselves to teeth, having at their disposal the advanced modern weaponry including armoured vehicles and surface-to-air missile systems. Some of these of clearly Russian production and only used by the armed forces of the Russian Federation. In order to camouflage its direct involvement in what is going on, the aggressor's propaganda would naturally prefer the usage of the terms like "civil war", "civil unrest" or at least some vague and colourless "crisis". All these words imply the internal character of the conflict. They suggest that it is an internal chaos, instability, a deep rift in society that brought about the current situation, and never indicate the first and the foremost cause of the devastations, which is a cold act of foreign aggression.

What is more, unlike some highly uncritical and superficial comments that abound in the academic literature, this aggression was not the result of a spontaneous decision caused by the desire to take advantage of the temporary power vacuum in Kyiv after the flight of Yanukovich and key security ministers. The Russian authorities had been systematically realizing the long-term strategy of "returning the Crimea to the home port" (*vozvrashcheniie Kryma v rodnuiu gavan'*). For this purpose, the Crimean annexation was planned many years in advance, with Russian military base present in Sevastopol and the Russian secret services recruiting the agents among the generals and officers of the Ukrainian army and police, creating and funding the local marginal pro-Russian separatist groups and organizations, as well as getting near-total control over the local Crimean media (Putin. War, 2015, 5-6). Furthermore, the earlier Russian pressure on the Ukrainian state resulted in Tuzla Island conflict in autumn 2003, the Russian-Ukrainian gas wars and periodic Russian embargoes on Ukrainian products in the 2000's. To cut it short, the power crisis in Kyiv had just accelerated what had already been underway long before 2014.

## **6. Why did Russia attack?**

Why did the Russian Federation attack Ukraine? As every rational action normally presupposes getting a certain expected result, what did Moscow aim for by defying the international order, risking the large-scale confrontation with the rest of the world, and embarking on its startlingly dangerous venture? Answering this only question necessarily includes lots of factors and raises further questions.

Was the Russian aggression in Ukraine really guided by the security considerations, as claimed by Mearsheimer (Mearsheimer, 2014)? Was it Moscow's desire to completely eliminate the slightest chance of Ukraine's closer cooperation with the EU and especially NATO, thus preventing the situation when in the foreseeable future the NATO troops might be stationed in the Crimea and in Ukraine, in close vicinity to the Russian borders? Considering this option, one should never forget that NATO has

been already present on the Russian borders since 2004 (the membership of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, all sharing the land border with the Russian Federation). What seems to really alarm Moscow, though, is not so much the threat of NATO per se, as the threat to lose Ukraine, should it join NATO, from the Russian sphere of influence permanently.

Some may argue that a key pillar of the Russian politics regarding Ukraine could be the economic concerns with the aim to realize the Kremlin's long cherished dream to snatch full control of Ukrainian natural gas transportation system and underground gas storage facilities (Belton and Olearchyk, 2010, 30 April) as well as to get hold of Ukraine's hydrocarbon deposits off the coast of the Crimea in the Black Sea (Daly, 2014, 7 May; Nunn and Foley, 2014, 14 March) and the newly discovered massive shale gas fields in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine (Ford, 2014, 8 April; Charter 97, 2014, 28 April; Batkov, 2015, 2 September). This would enable Moscow to keep Ukraine and Europe permanently dependent on the Russian natural gas supplies and would strengthen Russia's overall positions as the world's largest exporter of energy (Francis, 2014, 25 July). In addition, the purposeful destruction of the economic infrastructure in the industrial areas of the Donbas directly plays into the hands of Moscow, crippling Ukraine's economy and eliminating serious economic competitors of the Russian producers. While the Russian business is unable to compete with the leading US and European companies, it strives to oust out from the markets its direct competitors from other post-Soviet countries. In particular, Ukraine creates a substantial competition with Russia in the spheres of weaponry (Polievoy, 2012, 22 November; Chyhlyr, 2010, 16 December; Izhak and Simutov, 2013, 13 March), aircraft engineering (Kopchak, 2012, 2 July; Rossiyskie vertolety, 2011, 26 July), metal processing (Podolianets', 2014, 25 April; Ukrayins'ki truby, 2010, 16 December), automotive (Vorotnikov, 2014, 8 August; Kyiv Post, 2013, 21 October), chemical (Kazansky, 2013, 22 July) and food industries (Mel'nyk and Plastovets', 2014, 8 February; Doing Agrobusiness in Ukraine, 2013; Doing Agrobusiness in Ukraine, 2014).

In this respect it is also noteworthy that already as early as August 2013 Moscow started a massive trade war against Ukraine, opening a persistent defamation campaign against the Ukrainian producers, especially in food sector, and raising difficulties for access of a number of Ukrainian products to the Russian market (Shurkalo, 2013, 15 August; Giucci and Kirchner, 2013). These actions aimed not just to prevent Ukraine's signing of a free-trade agreement with the EU and instead force it to join Russia's Eurasian Customs Union, but expressed the beginning of a more ambitious plan to finally destroy Ukraine's economy as a whole (Shcherbyna and Liamets', 2013, 20 August).

Such a variable as domestic situation within Russia itself provides further explanations of Kremlin's behaviour on the international arena, and in particular as regards the Russian undeclared war against Ukraine. Among other motives lying behind the Russian invasion in Ukraine, some point out Kremlin's fear of the potential impact of the Ukrainian Maidan Revolution upon the Russian society (Nemtsov, 2014, 11 March). The argument goes that it is the fear of the export of Ukrainian revolution that made Putin's regime to act. Should Ukraine succeed in becoming a stable democratic country, governed by the rule of law, truly liberal and freed of corruption, this might serve a bad (or good, for that matter) example for Russian people and would threaten the very foundations of Putin's regime (Young, 2014, 27 July). With strong and thriving Ukrainian state all Russia's neo-imperial ambitions are dead.

According to the view, voiced by some prominent figures in the Russian liberal opposition movement, for current Russian leadership to keep its tight grip on power is more important than anything else, and for that reason it would try, at whatever cost, to prevent the prospect of the second Maidan taking place on the Red Square in Moscow (Whitmore, 2014, 24 February; Kasparov, 2014, 9 April). In these conditions the best desired result for Kremlin is to keep at all times an unstable and weakened Ukraine, even at the cost of war.

Also related with Russia's domestic situation variable, and at the same time not new in world history, there comes yet another plausible argument about the driving motives of the Russian aggressive behaviour in the international arena. Many rulers in different countries at different historical epochs in order to gain public popularity and to divert the public attention from grave domestic situation resorted to a "small victorious war"<sup>6</sup> against the foreign enemies (Aron, 2014, 15 August).

Next factor, which should also be included in the discussion of the nature of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, and which is especially important when dealing with totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, is the personality of the state leader, a person who exclusively shapes the foreign and domestic policy of the state and who has the final say in all strategic decisions. As regards the leader of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, those who tried to analyse his life and personality usually point at several aspects that appear to be crucial in this respect. Most of the time, Putin's professional background as a career secret-service officer is mentioned in the first place, as a key circumstance that undoubtedly left its lifelong mark upon the individuality of the future President of Russia. He is completely in his element in the world of conspiracy. For another thing, it is the absolute power, which, as is known, corrupts absolutely. The resulting megalomania is closely connected with narcissism and fear to show weakness at any time for any reason (Robertson, 2014, 17 March; Burgo, 2014, 15 April). Further still, Russian journalist Masha Gessen by drawing upon the numerous ridiculous facts from Putin's biography argues that he suffers from pleonexia — "the insatiable desire to have what rightfully belongs to others" (Taylor, 2013, 17 June).

While speaking about the collapse of the USSR as the largest geopolitical disaster of the last century, and positioning himself as a strong leader, Vladimir Putin would certainly bear in mind the idea to undo the greatest, in his opinion, injustice. To bring the Soviet/Russian Empire back in the form of "*Russkii Mir*"<sup>7</sup> (Russian World) can be viewed even in messianic terms, as a special historical mission entrusted to Russia's President by destiny. Should he succeed, he would certainly go down in history as one of the most outstanding statesmen in Russian history, the proud 'gatherer' of the Soviet/Russian imperial legacy. A prospect to appear in this capacity in the history textbooks looks to be more than enough for an ambitious authoritarian leader.

Taking into account what has been said about Putin's personality, the Ukrainian Maidan, just like the Orange Revolution in 2004, in openly showing Putin's weakness to prevent them could be perceived as a personal insult. For an individual, whose main concern has always been "never to allow anyone to humiliate him in any way" (Burgo, 2014, 15 April) such a thing is totally unacceptable and therefore deserves to be punished. As for the cherished dream to fulfil the special historical mission of bringing the '*Russkii mir*' together, it should be remembered that without Ukraine any restoration of Empire is impossible. Once again, Ukraine happens to be a terrible nuisance that does not fit in Vladimir Putin's neo-imperial projects.

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<sup>6</sup> "In order to prevent revolution, we need a *small, victorious war*". A famous and often quoted phrase reportedly attributed to Viacheslav von Plehve, the Minister of Interior of the Russian Empire in 1902-1904, used about the Russian motives for entering the war against Japan (1904-1905).

<sup>7</sup> *Russkii mir* (Russian World) – a Russian neo-imperial term applied by the Russian Federation's propaganda to the areas somehow influenced by Russian culture, Russian Orthodoxy and Russian language, which have been included into a larger separate geopolitical space, exceeding the territory of Russia per se. More specifically, '*Russkii mir*', in the opinion of its creators, includes Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, as well as Moldova and Kazakhstan.

## **7. Acerrima Proximorum Odia<sup>8</sup>**

Despite all the above-mentioned aspects, the picture of the Russian aggression in Ukraine would still be incomplete without one more thing that has not been discussed yet. This is the place of Ukraine and Ukrainians in traditional Russian world outlook, shared by vast majority of the Russian society including the current Russian President Vladimir Putin (Marson, 2009, 25 May). In the eyes of most Russians, Ukrainians are not allowed to be a nation in its own right, just as Ukraine is denied the right to exist as a separate sovereign state. According to this Russian vision, quite clearly expressed in recent Putin's article (Putin, 2021, 12 July), as well as in his so-called "Crimean" and "Valdai" speeches (Putin, 2014, 18 Mart; Putin, 2014, 24 Ekim), Ukraine is nothing more but 'Little Russia' (a peculiar ethnographic part of larger Russia), while Ukrainians are Russians, who are simply unaware of their Russianness.

No wonder that when in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union the independent Ukrainian state came into being, this situation was perceived both as a terrible disaster, and as some temporary inconvenience which sooner or later, one way or another, would be mended. Thus, in the Russian point of view, any Moscow's aggression against Ukraine is void of sense, for one simple reason that there is not any independent Ukraine at all.

Regardless of very much distinct Ukrainian self-identification, language, culture and historical origins, Ukraine always was and is thought of as a part of Russia. What by any definition is a brutal invasion for Ukrainians, for Russians would be the fight for "unification" of the same divided people. What is interesting about this view is that considering the Ukrainians to be Russians is not an obstacle for hating them.

The Russian imperialist mind-set, among other things, necessarily includes deeply rooted Ukrainophobia, that is, the inherent hatred to Ukrainian nation, Ukrainian language, culture and history, as well as all other expressions of a separate Ukrainian identity. While Russian xenophobia is rather consistent, with higher or lower intensity applied to all the nations around Russian borders (like Finland, the Baltic countries, Poland, nationally oriented Belarussians and Ukrainians, the Caucasian people, people of the Central Asia, the Chinese, Japanese, as well as living far away Western Europeans, Americans and, last but not least, Jews – each nation having its special diminutive appellation in Russian), the hatred for Ukrainians is of a special kind. Only they could never be forgiven for being different.<sup>9</sup>

With all this being said, the Russian chauvinist attitudes to Ukraine and Ukrainians are not something new. These have always been present since the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Muscovite principality started gradually incorporating the Ukrainian lands into its orbit of influence and, later, Empire. In modern times the Russian Ukrainophobic tendencies were reflected in official bans on the Ukrainian language (Istorychna Pravda, 2012, 3 July)<sup>10</sup>, the Ukrainian "Holodomor"

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<sup>8</sup> The hatred of those most nearly connected is the bitterest of all (Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *Historiae*, IV, 70).

<sup>9</sup> As for the Russian imperial attitudes towards Ukraine and Ukrainians, it would be enough to have a cursory look at works of A. Dugin, published long before the occupation of the Crimea and the war in the Donbas (e.g.: Dugin, Aleksandr. (2002). *Osnovy Yevraziystva*. Moscow: Arktogeya-Tsentr). For some recent works on Russian nationalism see: Laruelle, Marlene. (2019). *Russian Nationalism: Imaginaries, Doctrines, and Political Battlefields*. London and New York: Routledge; Kolstø, Pål and Blakkisrud, Helge (Eds.) (2016) *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism, 2000–15*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Ukrainian language in the Russian Empire and later in the USSR was being restricted and forbidden over a span of about four hundred years. The most infamous are two documents, the Valuev Circular (a secret decree of the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Russian Empire Pyotr Valuev, 1863) and the Ems Ukaz (a secret decree of the Russian tsar Alexander II, 1876) aimed at stopping the printing and distribution of Ukrainian-language publications within the Russian

Famine/Genocide of 1932-1933, the continuous Russification of the Ukrainian society throughout the years of the Soviet rule.

These policies partly shed light onto the question of how Moscow managed to create its fifth column in Ukraine, especially in the Donbas region. Interestingly enough, those Ukrainian locals who happen to support the Russian neo-imperialist slogans in the Eastern areas of Ukraine are mostly ethnic Russians who were settled there in post-WW II period, after millions of indigenous Ukrainian people were starved in Holodomor, or lost their lives in WW II. Apart from that, though to a lesser extent, some Eastern Ukrainian locals of Ukrainian ethnic background who had been completely Russified and brainwashed within a couple of generations by Soviet/Russian propaganda, can also keep pro-Russian attitudes. Especially this is true with elderly people (Morello, 2014, 30 June). However, as it turned out later, the critical mass of people ready to support the Russian invasion came to be surprisingly insufficient, much to the severe disappointment of the Russian mercenaries who hoped to fill in their ranks with lots of local recruits (Strelkov, 2014, 17 May).

### **8. A Guilty Mind Betrays Itself**

Describing the anti-criminal Maidan revolution that took place in Kyiv in winter 2014 as a fascist coup has become an integral part of the newspeak of the present-day Russian propaganda (Dzerkalo Tyzhnia, 2018, 23 May; Poliakovskaia, 2014, 22 June). In fact, the term 'fascism' in Russian media's interpretation has turned into a word that may be effectively used against all the opponents of the Kremlin. Along with a military aggression, Ukraine and Ukrainians have to face a serious information war waged by Putin's administration. Examples of a strong anti-Ukrainian campaign, stigmatizing the Ukrainian people as 'fascists', much to the delight of Moscow, could also be found in the West (Pilger, 2014, 13 May; Parry, 2014, 10 August; Parfitt, 2014, 11 August).

Meanwhile many independent observers call attention to the fact that all of the fundamental characteristics of the classical fascism are actually present in the daily life of the contemporary Russian society (Goble, 2014, 8 May; Young, 2014, 21 May). Those pro-Russian activists who try to depict the nationally-oriented Ukrainians who came out to defend their country against the Russian aggression, as fascists, turn a blind eye at the similarities between Putin's Russia and the classical definition of fascism. So, the main characteristics of the fascist states include: 1. Cult of a Chief Leader (this condition applies more to the present-day Russian Federation, rather than Ukraine); 2. One party political system (which is the *de facto* reality of Putin's Russia, dominated by the United Russia party); 3. Militarism (after the dissolution of the USSR, Russian army has been continuously participating in the armed conflicts all over the post-Soviet area); 4. Dominant political influence of secret services (V. Putin's professional background speaks for itself); 5. Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia promoted/tolerated by authorities (Russia's growing anti-Western hysteria; rampant hatred of the EU, the US, NATO; anti-Ukrainian, anti-Georgian, anti-Caucasian, anti-Semitic, etc. feelings, fed by the state propaganda); 6. Subordination of media to authorities and powerful state propaganda machine (numerous facts of distorted information spread by the Kremlin-controlled media (Stopfake.org); the dispersals of the anti-war protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg culminating in the assassination of Boris Nemtsov<sup>11</sup>; restrictions on the independent sources of information (Sukhov, 2014, 14 March); 7. External aggressiveness and territorial claims to neighbouring countries (at least two examples of direct Russian

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Empire. In particular, the Valuev Circular stated that "no separate Little Russian language ever existed, doesn't exist, and couldn't exist".

<sup>11</sup> As a voiced opponent to the war in Ukraine, Nemtsov was a primary initiator of the report "Putin. War", revealing the details of the Russian involvement in the Crimea events and the conflict in Donbas. On 27 February 2015 Nemtsov was shot dead on Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Bridge in the centre of Moscow, in close vicinity to the Kremlin. The report "Putin. War" was published posthumously in May 2015 (Putin. Voyna, 2015).

aggression against its neighbours only in the most recent history are enough to be mentioned, Russia's wars against Georgia in 2008 and against Ukraine in 2014) (Ukraine Crisis Media Center, 2014, 8 May).

In this way, when the Kremlin clothes itself in the mantle of anti-fascism, labels its neighbours fascists, and whips up patriotic frenzy in Russia by calling to the memory of the Soviet victory against Nazis in the WW II, this lends credibility to the phrase attributed to Winston Churchill and often quoted recently, that "The fascists of the future will be called anti-fascists".

### 9. Not Out of the Blue

In his so-called Crimean speech (Putin, 2014, 18 March 18), delivered on the occasion of annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, and answering to the questions in a live television broadcast (Putin, 2014, 17 April), Vladimir Putin said that Russia never planned any annexations and all what happened in the Crimea became a result of "tangible threats to the Russian-speaking population" of Ukraine. In Putin's words, only when "the situation of potential threats and persecutions" came about, and "the people of the Crimea began to talk about their self-determination", Russian authorities started to think of protection of the Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine. The very idea of protection of the citizens of the neighbouring sovereign state may sound peculiar, yet, as it has been acutely observed by Timothy Snyder, the fact that a person speaks Russian automatically makes him or her a Volksgenosse requiring Russian protection, or, to put it as it is, invasion (Snyder, 2014, 26 May).

While the threat to the Russian language in Ukraine exists only in the minds of the entrenched Russian chauvinists, for whom even the current de facto relative (and absolute in the Eastern regions of the country) domination of the Russian over Ukrainian is by far not enough, it is another thing repeated in Putin's speeches which is especially noteworthy. This is reiteration that the Russian Federation itself never planned any aggression against Ukraine and not 5, 10 or 20 years ago, but only in 2014, in the view of the 'fascist coup in Kyiv', was forced to take the necessary protective measures (Putin, 2014, 17 April). A simple overview of the Ukrainian-Russian relations in the recent past casts serious doubts upon the version of spontaneity of the Russian actions.

In this respect one may remember the Ukrainian-Russian territorial conflict over the Tuzla Island inspired by Moscow as long ago as 2003; two disputes over the prices for natural gas supplies in 2005-2006 and 2009, which were called the Gas wars; the trade restrictions imposed by Russia on Ukrainian producers in 2013, referred to as the Ukrainian-Russian trade war; constant ideological expansion realized by means of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, with regular visits of the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill to Ukraine starting from 2009; subversive anti-Ukrainian activities of various cultural and educational organisations like the Union of the Orthodox Citizens of Ukraine, "Russian-Speaking Ukraine", "For Ukraine, Belorussia, and Russia" etc., financed by the Russian Federation; cultural expansion via Russian printed media, popular music, films and TV programs; creation of the *Russkii Mir* (Russian World) Fund by Putin's decree in 2007, promoting the Russian imperial thinking and ideas of geopolitical integration of the Russian-speaking world.

In view of the facts mentioned above, whatever the speeches of Vladimir Putin might be, it would be very difficult to deny the Kremlin's earlier encroachments upon the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state. The persistent direct Russian involvement in the Ukrainian affairs may be approached at diverse levels of analysis, and have numerous complementary explanations, but in its core it is rather the result of consistent Ukrainophobia, rooted in the Russian neo-imperial mindset and proved on many occasions at different times. Setting aside all the geopolitical, security, economic and emotional considerations of the Russian invasion both in the Crimea and in the Donbas, the main problem of the Ukrainian-Russian relations seems to be at a deeper existential level. The traditional Russian world outlook questions the very existence of the Ukrainian people, and, respectively, the sovereign

Ukrainian state. To put it in a few words, as long as Russia remains an empire, the Ukrainians would always be looked upon as “Russians who do not know that they are Russians”, a torn away piece of Mother Russia that should be sooner or later returned, and be guilty in the Kremlin’s eyes simply for their being Ukrainians.

#### **10. Conclusions: Looking Ahead**

Considering a variety of arguments that might be suggested to explain the causes of the Russian intervention in Ukraine, helps to arrive at the conclusion that there cannot be one simple and easy answer clarifying the motives of the Kremlin’s actions in Ukraine. The approach that only addresses the security realm and tries to describe the Russian aggression as a mere reaction to the potential NATO enlargement and Russia’s unwillingness to see NATO on its borders, is quite oversimplistic. The problem is much deeper, and has many other dimensions including ideology, economy, psychology, Russian ethnic and political self-identity, as well as the irredentist and revisionist views dominating the Russian society since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

When asked what he thinks about the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Putin once notoriously said that it was the largest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century. So, the long-term goal seems to be the new restoration of earlier spheres of Moscow’s dominance. In this sense not only the Crimea or the Donbas, but all of Ukraine is fundamental. Without getting Ukraine, or at least part of it, the Russian irredentist expansionism would never be completely satisfied.

At the same time, what has become clear already during the first months since the occupation of the Crimea and start of hostilities in the Donbas, is that the Russian aggression has consolidated the new Ukrainian political nation, as well as much helped Ukrainians with their world publicity. The war in Ukraine is not over and anything may still happen. However, what has become obvious by now, is that the Kremlin’s aggression would not have a warm welcome in Ukraine, but only ever-increasing resistance by ordinary people defending their homes against the foreign invasion. Like it happened earlier in Finland, the Baltic countries, Poland, the Eastern Europe, or the Caucasus.

In the long run, it looks that only the radical change in imperial mentality of the Russian ruling elites, when Russia would cease to be an irredentist power looking to enlarge/restore its former borders or spheres of influence and would turn into a truly democratic national state of the Russian people, might help Russia to improve its relations with Ukraine and its other neighbours and bring more stability to Europe and the world.

#### **Statement of Research and Publication Ethics**

This study does not require ethical permission.

#### **Authors' Contributions to the Article**

The author completed the article.

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