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*Ukraine*

**BIRTH OF INDEPENDENT UKRAINE:  
CIRCUMSTANCES OF DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE  
AND THEIR IMPACT ON RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA**

**Abstract:** *This paper examines the circumstances surrounding Ukraine's Declaration of Independence and its subsequent influence on relations with Russia. The early years of Ukraine's independence were characterized by tense interactions and a struggle to define its identity. Russia, a successor state of the Soviet Union, grappled with accommodating a newfound independent neighbor while preserving its own interests in the region. Historical, cultural, and territorial complexities added layers to the evolving relationship. The Declaration of Independence was met with mixed reactions both domestically and internationally. As Ukraine embarked on nation-building, it sought to redefine its identity, build economic stability, and establish its place in the global arena. However, the transition was not without challenges, with issues like the status of Crimea and the treatment of Russian-speaking minorities testing the fragile relations. The diverging paths of Ukraine's pro-European aspirations and Russia's efforts to maintain influence in the region intensified the diplomatic struggle. The early years of Ukrainian independence set the stage for intricate dynamics in Russia-Ukraine relations. The Declaration of Independence and subsequent events highlighted the intricate interplay of historical, cultural, and political factors, contributing to the complex relationship that continues to shape the region's geopolitical landscape.*

**Keywords:** *Ukraine, Ukrainian independence, Russia-Ukraine relations, geopolitical dynamics, international interventions, conflict escalation.*

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## **Introduction**

The birth of independent Ukraine, in the context of its Declaration of Independence and its impact on relations with Russia, holds profound historical and political implications. This event, occurring during a complex point in history, marked a new chapter in the nation's trajectory and significantly influenced the relationship between Ukraine and Russia.

The circumstances surrounding Ukraine's Declaration of Independence in 1991 are closely tied to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. After a prolonged period of Soviet dominance, Ukraine's growing desire for sovereignty became unstoppable. The pivotal moment was the Declaration of Independence on August 24, 1991, following the Moscow coup attempt and Gorbachev's ousting. This occasion was the culmination of a process of democratic transformations and national aspirations that accompanied the collapse of the USSR.

The Declaration of Independence evoked diverse reactions in Russia. On one hand, Moscow was compelled to acknowledge the factual disintegration of the Soviet Union and recognize Ukraine's independence. On the other hand, relations remained tense as Russia lost its dominant position in the region, and many Russians continued to view Ukraine as part of their sphere of influence.

The impact of the Declaration of Independence on the relationship between Ukraine and Russia was significant. Conflicts and tensions were not uncommon, and territorial issues and geopolitical influence remained primary points of contention. Russia did not always accept Ukraine's sovereignty and sought to retain influence in the region, particularly in light of the significant Russian population in eastern Ukrainian areas.

The birth of independent Ukraine held immense importance in shaping the nation's national and cultural identity. However, it also brought about numerous challenges, including establishing state institutions and developing relations with Russia. Disputes and conflicts stemming from this process have influenced the bilateral relationship over the years, defining their contemporary interactions and mutual understanding.

The purpose of this discussion is to comprehend the circumstances surrounding Ukraine's 1991 Declaration of Independence and to analyze the impact of these events on relations with Russia. By delving into these two aspects, the author aims to highlight how the emergence of a sovereign Ukraine contributed to the shaping of its national, political, and cultural identity. Furthermore, an analysis of the consequences of these events on relations with Russia will enhance our understanding of the geopolitical connections and conflicts that emerged following Ukraine's change in status. Through this contextual lens, this discussion aims to shed light on the long-term effects of the birth of independent Ukraine on the relationship between Ukraine and Russia

## **The legal path to independence: Ukraine's journey to sovereignty**

The Renaissance and attainment of independence by Ukraine is a process stemming from numerous complex historical events and the efforts of generations of Ukrainians. For years, Ukraine was under the influence of the Soviet Union, which hindered the development of its own national identity and sovereignty. However, starting in the late 1980s, social movements began to shape, aiming for the restoration of independence.

In the mid-1980s, due to a deep crisis within the Soviet society, there arose a need for comprehensive renewal of economic, social, political, and legal institutions and relations. Implementing this proved impossible on the old economic foundation and under the centrally-administered management system. Consequently, the “perestroika” policy was not substantiated, and “glasnost”, intended to bring maximum openness to the activities of state institutions and freedom of information, transformed into mere demagoguery and utopia. Anti-government protest movements emerged in many national republics, and instances of national liberation struggles became increasingly prevalent. These reactions were objective responses to the anti-democratic domestic policies imposed by the authorities on non-Russian populations. Concurrently, complex international and inter-ethnic conflicts erupted within the USSR. As a result, the tendency toward the dissolution of the USSR gained significant momentum. For 20th-century Ukraine, a new opportunity for national resurgence emerged.

In Ukraine, writers, poets, cultural workers, and teachers protested. They expressed dissatisfaction with the status of the Ukrainian language and demanded an objective discussion of Ukrainian history. During the same period, organizations and groups with political objectives began to form. This process was significantly influenced by the return of former dissidents from exile to Ukraine in the spring of 1987. They revived the activities of the Ukrainian social group dedicated to implementing the Helsinki Accords. In the summer of 1988, this group was renamed the Ukrainian Helsinki Union, with Levko Lukyanenko as its leader.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a pivotal role in the struggle for Ukraine's independence was played by the socio-political organization “People's Movement of Ukraine for Perestroika” (hereafter referred to as the Rukh). Its founding congress was held in Kyiv on September 9-10, 1989. A total of 1,109 delegates from all over Ukraine attended the congress, representing 280,000 members of the Rukh who were organized in 1,247 regional groups<sup>2</sup>. The organization was led by poet and activist Ivan Drach, with human rights defender and member Mykhailo Horyn heading the

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<sup>2</sup> I.Y. Boyko, *History of legal regulation of civil, criminal and procedural relations in Ukraine (IX-XX centuries)*, Lviv 2014, p. 903.

Secretariat. In a broad sense, the significance of the congress can be assessed by its extraordinary impact on the political, national-psychological, and moral state of Ukrainian society at that time. It was not an artificial monument to the Ukrainian intelligentsia; it represented their strength to engage in the fight for the revival of national ideas, independence, language, culture, and symbols. The congress initiated multiparty politics in Ukraine, taking a significant and appropriate step toward the overall democratization of society<sup>3</sup>.

The People's Movement of Ukraine for Perestroika became the primary organization actively advocating for the country's sovereignty. Its goal was to transform Ukraine into a democratic and independent state, free from the influence of the Soviet Union. This movement united individuals and groups that sought political and social changes leading to Ukraine's liberation from Russian dominance.

The congress held at the Kyiv Polytechnic Institute served as a unifying platform for representatives from diverse backgrounds and regions of Ukraine. It was during this event that discussions about the country's future direction and the necessity of freeing itself from Moscow's influence took place. This congress marked the inception of an organized movement for independence and demonstrated the strong will of the Ukrainian people to achieve sovereignty. In the subsequent years, through continued efforts and social transformations, Ukraine managed to declare its independence in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Thus, the establishment of the People's Movement of Ukraine for Perestroika stands as a pivotal moment in Ukrainian history, contributing to the emergence of aspirations for independence and sovereignty, and setting the course for the country's development in a new, independent reality.

On November 19, 1989, a significant event took place in the history of Ukraine's struggle for independence and commemorated the victims of Soviet regime repression. The transfer of the remains of three prominent dissidents – Vasyl Stus, Yuriy Lytvyn, and Oleksa Tykhy – from labor camps to Kyiv symbolized the fight for historical truth, memory, and the sovereignty of the Ukrainian people<sup>4</sup>.

This significant event was interpreted as a symbolic act of remembrance for the tragedy endured by many Ukrainians who fell victim to the political persecutions of the Soviet regime. Vasyl Stus, Yuriy Lytvyn, and Oleksa Tykhy were prominent representatives of the Ukrainian intelligentsia and activists advocating for human rights and freedom under the conditions of a totalitarian regime. The fact that the Soviet KGB allowed for the exhumation and transfer

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<sup>3</sup> V. M. Zaruba, *History of the state and law of Ukraine*, Kyiv 2006, p. 416.

<sup>4</sup> “*The Ukrainian Weekly*” 1989, No. 51, p. 5, <[https://ukrweekly.com/archive/1989/The\\_Ukrainian\\_Weekly\\_1989-51.pdf](https://ukrweekly.com/archive/1989/The_Ukrainian_Weekly_1989-51.pdf)> (22.08.2023).

of the dissidents' bodies to Ukraine caused immense upheaval and was seen as a manifestation of the Soviet power structure's decline. This event symbolized the shedding of the yoke of repression while affirming the strength and courage of the quest for independence.

The ceremony of transferring the remains to Kyiv also manifested the widespread condemnation of the Soviet system. Crowds from various regions of Ukraine gathered to honor the memory of these heroes and express their conviction that the Ukrainian nation would not forget its past and would fight for its identity and independence.

This ceremony evolved into a demonstration that highlighted the condemnation of the repressive methods of the Soviet regime and the desire for freedom and sovereignty. The solemn procession through Kyiv to the Baikove Cemetery, where the dissidents were laid to rest, became a symbol of unity and determination among Ukrainians to fight for the preservation of their culture and history.

Later, in January 1990, on the 71st anniversary of the unification of the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR) and the Western Ukrainian National Republic (ZUNR), Ukraine witnessed one of the most spectacular and symbolic events in its struggle for independence – the “Living Chain of Unity” or “Ukrainian Wave”. Millions of people, holding hands, connected cities such as Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Rivne, and Kyiv, forming a living chain that spanned over 770 kilometers<sup>5</sup>.

The “Ukrainian Wave” was an expression of an immense spirit of unity and the desire for freedom rooted in the history of the Ukrainian nation. People from various regions of Ukraine participated in this action, creating a powerful symbol of national unity and the aspiration to live in a united state. This event also conveyed a clear message that Ukrainians yearned for freedom and independence after years of repression under the Soviet regime. The “Living Chain of Unity” was a tangible and symbolic reality, literally connecting people in a grand act of solidarity.

However, the Soviet authorities attempted to downplay the significance of this action, officially reporting a low number of participants. Unofficial data suggested that even up to 5 million people took part, underscoring the tremendous popularity and significance of the “Ukrainian Wave”<sup>6</sup>. This not only demonstrated the desire for freedom but also exposed the propaganda of the Soviet regime.

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<sup>5</sup> *Akt zluky UNR i ZUNR*, <[https://esu.com.ua/search\\_articles.php?id=43521](https://esu.com.ua/search_articles.php?id=43521)> (22.08.2023).

<sup>6</sup> “Ukrayina zavzhdy zberet'sya i znayde syly». Shcho z haduye dnipryanka-uchasnytsya pershoho “Zhyvoho lantsyuha”, <<https://suspilne.media/200023-ukraina-zavzdi-zberetsa-i-znajde-sili-so-zgadue-dnipranka-ucasnica-persogo-zivogo-lancuga/>> (22.08.2023).

The “Living Chain of Unity” remains in the memory of the Ukrainian nation as a pivotal moment, underscoring unity, courage, and determination in the pursuit of independence. It was a symbolic step towards the construction of a sovereign Ukraine, free from the repressive influences of the Soviet Union.

Further growth of political and social activism among the populace occurred during the elections to the Ukrainian SSR Supreme Council and local councils of people's deputies in March 1990. The composition of deputies became more diverse, with a significant number elected from various politically inclined public organizations. However, a majority of parliamentary seats were still occupied by representatives of the old state apparatus and party officials.

During the same period, the Ukrainian SSR Supreme Council began operating in a parliamentary manner. The formation of the opposition group of democratic deputies, the People's Council, led by Ihor Yukhnovsky, played a role in its activation and democratization. This group opposed the conservative-communist parliamentary majority in decision-making, known as the “Group 239” (the group “For a Sovereign Soviet Ukraine”).

In the context of societal democratization, the first step towards Ukraine's independence was the adoption of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine by the Ukrainian SSR Supreme Council on July 16, 1990. The Declaration is composed of a preamble and ten chapters. The preamble states that expressing the will of the Ukrainian people and guided by other considerations, the Supreme Council declares the state sovereignty of Ukraine as the supreme authority, independence, full and indivisible power of the Republic within its territory, and independence and equality in foreign relations. Chapter I of the Declaration, “Self-Determination of the Ukrainian People”, emphasizes that the Ukrainian SSR, as a sovereign national state, develops within its existing borders based on the Ukrainian people's inalienable right to self-determination. In other sections of the Declaration, it is stated that only the Ukrainian SSR Supreme Council can speak on behalf of the entire nation; the Ukrainian people have the exclusive right to own, use, and dispose of the national property of Ukraine. In the future, Ukraine declared its intention to become a neutral state that would not participate in military blocs and would adhere to the three non-nuclear principles: not to accept, produce, or acquire nuclear weapons. Simultaneously, it proclaimed that the Ukrainian SSR fully restored its international status and was thus a full-fledged participant in international relations. Ukraine's course towards European integration is reflected in the Declaration's provisions about direct participation in the pan-European process and European structures. A fundamental aspect of the Declaration was the recognition of the superiority of universal human values over class values, and the primacy of universally recognized norms of international law over national laws. However, it should be noted that the Declaration was adopted by the Ukrainian SSR Supreme Council when it was

part of the USSR as one of the union republics. This status was reflected to some extent in the Declaration's text on the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state. Therefore, it stated that the Ukrainian SSR had its own citizenship and guaranteed every citizen the right to retain Soviet citizenship<sup>7</sup>.

Although lacking legal force, the Declaration of State Sovereignty played a significant role in establishing Ukraine's actual sovereignty and became the legal basis for building the Ukrainian state in a new format - its independence. The Declaration lifted the national spirit of the Ukrainian people and instilled faith in their rebirth based on the full exercise of their inalienable right to self-determination.

While the content of the Declaration, as its name implies, is primarily devoted to state sovereignty, its actual content is much broader and more multifaceted. It proclaims fundamental principles of the future state and social order of Ukraine, the status of individuals and citizens, the organization of state power, etc. Subsequently, the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine served as the basis for the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine in 1991. It also states that the Declaration “serves as the basis for the new Constitution”. It cannot be argued that the Declaration was not utilized in the process of preparing and adopting the 1996 Constitution of Ukraine. Nevertheless, many useful provisions of the Declaration were not considered in the constitutional process.

After the adoption of the Declaration of Independence of Ukraine, tension in Ukrainian society escalated. The attempt by the authorities to suppress opposition forces led to the Revolution on the Granite in the autumn of 1990, also known as the Student Revolution on the Granite (October 2-17) – a large-scale campaign of peaceful civil disobedience initiated by the “Ukrainian Student Union” and the “Student Brotherhood”<sup>8</sup>. The culmination of the events was a hunger strike by students from 24 cities in Ukraine<sup>9</sup>, which was first initiated by students of Taras Shevchenko University on October 2 at the October Revolution Square in Kyiv (now Independence Square)<sup>10</sup>. By October 16, 1990, a total of 298 people were participating in the hunger strike, with 16 of them starting it on the first day<sup>11</sup>.

The students' demands were narrowed down to 1) preventing the signing of a new union agreement; 2) re-election of the Supreme Council of the Ukrainian SSR based on multiparty principles no later than the autumn of 1991; 3)

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<sup>7</sup> P. P. Zakharchenko, *History of the state and law of Ukraine*, Kyiv 2005, p. 368.

<sup>8</sup> V. M. Ivanov, *History of the state and law of Ukraine*, Kyiv 2007, p. 728.

<sup>9</sup> *History of the state and law of Ukraine. Course of lectures*, V. M. Shcherbatiuk (ed.), Kyiv 2018, p. 496.

<sup>10</sup> *History of the state and law of Ukraine*, A. S. Tchaikovsky (ed.), Kyiv 2006, p. 512.

<sup>11</sup> *History of the state and law of Ukraine*, Volume 1, V.Ya. Tatsia and others (ed.), Kyiv 2003, p. 656.

bringing back Ukrainian soldiers to the territory of the Ukrainian SSR and conducting military service by young Ukrainians exclusively within the republic's territory; 4) nationalization of the property of the Communist Party of Ukraine and the Leninist Communist Youth Union (LCYU) of Ukraine; 5) the resignation of the Prime Minister of the Ukrainian SSR, Vitaliy Masol, who supported the union idea. The Granite Revolution had no equivalent in contemporary Europe since the "velvet revolutions" in Eastern Europe in 1989 were led by experienced politicians. The student action ended with the partial fulfillment of the demands and the adoption by the Supreme Council of the Ukrainian SSR of a resolution to ensure their full implementation. Thus, the Granite Revolution was the first victory of the liberation movement in the early 1990s<sup>12</sup>. It played a significant role in establishing Ukraine's independence, showing that not only was it possible to challenge the system, but it could also be overcome.

On October 17, the Ukrainian Supreme Council (parliament) adopted a resolution "regarding the consideration of the demands of the students on a hunger strike in Kyiv since October 2, 1990". Formally, the protesters' demands were accepted, representing a step towards their implementation. One of the symbolic moments of this period was the public use of "pan" (sir) instead of the communist "tovarisch" (comrade). This indicated changes in language culture and attitude toward authority, symbolizing a different political and social reality that was being shaped.

The Granite Revolution was a pivotal moment in Ukraine's history, initiating political and social transformations leading to independence and democratization of the country. This event emphasized the desire for freedom, sovereignty, and the restoration of national identity.

These events eventually led to August 24, 1991, when by a majority of votes, the Ukrainian Supreme Council of the Ukrainian SSR adopted the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine. Although there was no room for Ukrainian independence in Russia on that day, as attention was focused on the funerals of three defenders of the Russian parliament who died on the night of August 20-21, understanding the context of those events is important.

The worsening of relations between Kyiv and Moscow began a few days after Ukraine declared independence. Ivan Drach and Oleksandr Yemets, prominent Ukrainian activists, were not present in the Ukrainian Supreme Council's session where the Act of Independence was adopted. Instead, they went to Moscow upon the invitation of Russian democrats to participate in the funerals. At that time, large demonstrations were taking place in Moscow,

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem.*



expressing democratic aspirations and the growing power of the Russian empire<sup>13</sup>.

The proclamation of the Act of Independence of Ukraine in 1991 marked a pivotal juncture in the nation's history. Yet, it also brought forth fresh trials and tensions, both within the country and on the international stage. This event vividly expressed the fervent yearning for liberty, sovereignty, and the rekindling of national identity. At the same time, it revealed the intricate dynamics and geopolitical aspirations at play between Ukraine and Russia, exerting a lasting influence on the region.

Headlines featured in the “Niezavisimaya Gazeta” publication further stoked tension and mistrust between the two republics. In the days immediately following Ukraine's Declaration of Independence, signs of distrust began to surface. Yevhen Kyselyov, the host of the “Viesti” program on Russian TV and radio in 1991, recounted that Moscow largely regarded the news as a ceremonial gesture akin to previous declarations of sovereignty, rather than a genuine assertion of Ukraine's independence<sup>14</sup>.

During a session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on August 26, Yuriy Shcherbak, a people's deputy and the Minister of Environmental Protection of the Ukrainian SSR, mentioned that Mikhail Gorbachev had a negative reaction upon learning of Ukraine's independence. However, his comment was met with silence, except for a proclamation by Anatoly Sobchak, the Mayor of Leningrad, asserting that Ukraine should not distance itself from Russia.

In this timeframe, Moscow media disseminated a statement from Yeltsin's spokesperson, Pavlo Voshchanov, suggesting that Russia had a legitimate basis for pursuing territorial claims against the republics that had severed their alliance<sup>15</sup>. This occurrence highlights that although Ukraine had announced its independence, the journey ahead was far from smooth, marked by real challenges and threats to upholding the nation's autonomy.

On August 28, 1991, a delegation from Moscow led by Alexander Rutskoy, the Vice President of Russia, journeyed to Kyiv. Yevhen Shcherbak had alerted Leonid Krawchuk about their imminent arrival. In Kyiv, demonstrations were organized, and Ukrainian Radio called upon citizens to safeguard Ukraine's independence. The Moscow delegation was met with banners and blue-yellow flags, symbolizing Ukrainian identity. Negotiations

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<sup>13</sup> *That day. On August 24, 1991, Ukraine declared independence,* <<https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-polytics/3301601-toj-den-24-serpna-1991-roku-ukraina-progolosila-nezaleznist.html>> (22.08.2023).

<sup>14</sup> *Kolaps. Yak ukrayintsi zruynuvaly imperiyu zla. 19 serpnia 1991-ho,* <<https://suspilne.media/254487-kolaps-ak-ukrainci-zrujnuvali-imperiu-zla-19-serpna-1991-go/>> (22.08.2023).

<sup>15</sup> *That day. On August 24, 1991...*

ensued, during which the Moscow delegation accused Ukraine of seeking to uphold a communist regime. However, Ukrainian proponents of democracy and Leonid Krawchuk were successful in persuading Rutschko and Sobchak that Ukraine's independence was not an endeavor to establish a “communism reserve”. Consequently, the Russian delegates issued a statement disavowing any territorial claims against Ukraine<sup>16</sup>.

While the announcement of the Act of Independence of Ukraine in 1991 was a momentous occasion in the nation's chronicles, it simultaneously ushered in fresh complexities and tensions, both within the nation and on the global stage. This occurrence underscored the ardent aspiration for liberty, sovereignty, and the reclamation of national identity. Concurrently, it offered a glimpse into the intricate interactions and geopolitical ambitions shaping the relationship between Ukraine and Russia, a dynamic that has had enduring repercussions on the region.

December 1, 1991, marked a pivotal moment in Ukraine's path to independence. On this day, an All-Ukrainian referendum was held, in which the Ukrainian people had the opportunity to express their will regarding the confirmation of the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine. The referendum question was simple: “Do you confirm the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine?” The answers were two: “Yes, I confirm” or “No, I do not confirm”. The turnout was significant, with 31,891,742 people participating in the referendum, which accounted for 84.18% of Ukraine's population at that time. This indicated a tremendous interest and engagement of citizens in the decision-making process about the country's future. The results were groundbreaking and highly unequivocal. A staggering 90.32% of participants answered “Yes, I confirm”, thereby expressing their support for Ukraine's independence<sup>17</sup>. This was a testament to the powerful will of the people, who had long sought to have a sovereign state of their own.

Levko Lukyanenko, the author of the Act of Declaration of Independence and a fighter against the Soviet regime, was one of the key strategists of independence. In an interview with Radio Svoboda, he emphasized that Ukraine never stopped fighting for independence, even during the times of the communist dictatorship. This demonstrates that the desire for freedom and sovereignty was deeply rooted in Ukrainian national identity<sup>18</sup>. The All-Ukrainian referendum on the Declaration of Independence was the culmination of the Ukrainian people's long-standing aspiration for their own state, and the

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<sup>16</sup> *Kolaps...*,

<sup>17</sup> *Events that formed and strengthened the Independence of Ukraine*,

<<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/podii-shcho-formuyut-nezalezhnist/31405953.html>>  
(22.08.2023).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

referendum's outcome unequivocally confirmed that the nation was ready to take responsibility for its future and shape it in the spirit of sovereignty.

After declaring independence, Ukraine became a full-fledged member of the civilized world. On December 2, 1991, the new sovereign state was recognized by Poland and Canada. On December 25, 1991, Ukraine was recognized by the USA, and by 1992, by 64 more countries. Recognition was not only on a bilateral level. On January 30, 1992, Ukraine became a member of the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (since January 1, 1995, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe). The recognition by the Russian Federation was significant, as it aimed to maintain its leading role within the CIS. Ukraine supported a course of economic cooperation with former Soviet republics but vehemently opposed the creation of supranational structures threatening the country's sovereignty. Ukraine viewed the CIS as an international mechanism based on mutually beneficial bilateral relations between member states.

However, the most challenging relations turned out to be the Ukrainian-Russian ones, especially regarding issues of borders, particularly the Crimean Peninsula. The facts demonstrate that the Russian Federation tried everything to regain previously lost territories. The economic interdependence, multiplied by family ties or other connections of millions of people in both countries, compelled Ukrainian leaders to constantly compromise. They managed to avoid traps set for the young state, such as dual citizenship, a second official language, supranational bodies within the CIS, etc. Resisting colossal external and even internal pressure (especially in Crimea) became possible due to the growing support of Western states, which were pursuing their own geopolitical interests in Eastern Europe<sup>19</sup>.

### **Russian attempts to undermine Ukraine's independence: conflicts and tensions**

The relationship between Ukraine and Russia has been characterized by strained dynamics since its inception. Multiple factors have contributed to this unease, encompassing historical and cultural affiliations between the two nations, as well as deep-seated political and territorial disputes that have sown the seeds of challenges in their interactions. The tension escalated significantly when Ukraine proclaimed its independence in 1991, leading to Russia's reluctance to acknowledge the loss of control over its strategically significant neighbor.

The reciprocal connections between the two countries during this period attained the formal status of international relations within the framework of

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<sup>19</sup> G. I. Trofanchuk, *History of the State and Law of Ukraine*, Kyiv 2011, p. 384.

international law. Nonetheless, alongside the official dimension of these relations, an equally significant cultural-historical, cognitive, and emotional-psychological dimension exists. This facet often takes center stage in practical Russian-Ukrainian interactions, playing a decisive and molding role.

However, for Russian society, the ties with Ukraine, encompassing their attitudes and understanding of Ukraine, constitute a challenge that transcends mere political and economic considerations. Instead, it represents a quandary intrinsic to the very mentality of the Russian populace. This issue pertains to how Russians perceive themselves, and interpret their history, culture, and position within the global and European contexts.

The assertion of Ukraine's independence dealt a profound blow to the Russian psyche. It necessitated a comprehensive and painful reevaluation of their own beliefs, not only about Ukraine but also about their nation. This entailed acknowledging that a foreign territory, which had been perceived as an integral part for centuries, was now distinct. It also required relinquishing the long-held notion of having independent authority over a significant portion of history and culture, including the narrative of Kyiv's history. This sudden shift left Russia with an uncertain and contradictory historical foundation, which, for a nation defined by symbolism, analogies, and similarities, assumed the nature of a true tragedy.

Therefore, the declaration of Ukraine's independence evoked internal resistance, perplexity, and a sense of absurdity among millions of Russians, including the political elites. Ukraine's decision was entirely unexpected, thus being perceived by the Russian consciousness as an act of betrayal.

The impact was intensified by the prevailing disbelief within Russia that Ukraine could secede. The vast majority of Russians, encompassing both the democratic elements of society and the elite, held firm in their conviction that Ukraine had long been subsumed into the Russian melting pot politically, economically, and crucially, ethnically and culturally. Ukraine was often seen as a mere ethnographic province and a historical extension of Russia. The national referendum in Ukraine on December 1, 1991, caused an explosion of emotions. It was shocking for Russian society. For a month after the announcement of the referendum results, Russian media practically did not comment on what had happened. This shocking stage was replaced by a phase of disorientation for a year: chaotic attempts to understand the situation, relying on fragments of pre-revolutionary Russian historiography, and "brotherly" rhetoric of the communist era.

The creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) played a therapeutic role in the wounded Russian consciousness, which was perceived as the second edition of the USSR. During this time, Russian media and public discourse extensively exploited the theme of "severed ties" and "borders that separated people". However, the political exploitation of nostalgic sentiments

did not yield significant benefits. Moscow's elites experienced and still experience the collapse of the USSR as the collapse of historical Russia.

Efforts aimed at restoring the Russian "identity" in the context of Ukraine have shown a degree of relative consistency. Among the far-right Russian politicians, the idea of reintegrating Ukraine into Russia has been dominant and continues to be so. However, this is not perceived as a pseudo-state like the USSR or the Hetmanate, but rather as a guberniya (province).

Ultra-right politicians dream of regaining control over former Soviet republics through the avenue of communist parties and rekindling an "inflexible alliance" based on this premise. Centrists limit themselves to a historical perspective of transforming the CIS countries into entirely dependent entities, free from the fabricated state formations modeled after Belarus. Nevertheless, within the Russian political landscape, there are no influential political forces that advocate for equal cooperation with Ukraine as a sovereign nation.

Among Russian politicians of various levels and orientations, deeply rooted, sometimes daily psychological complexes exist in the perception of Ukraine. The independence of Ukraine is perceived as something strange, absurd, and scandalous. There is no reason to argue for the traumatic impact of Ukraine's independence on the Russian consciousness.

In Russian policy towards Ukraine, pragmatism and a certain distance are lacking. Excessive emotions, a sense of grievance, a desire for revenge, and attempts to reduce Ukraine's territory to elements of the Russian consciousness – all these are factors that have poisoned Russian-Ukrainian relations over time.

Russian elites and society, who reluctantly accepted the very existence of the Ukrainian state, were convinced that Ukraine, by accepting this fact, must give way to Russia in any case, even in the most remote demands: territorial (recognition by the Supreme Council of the Russian Federation of the "illegality" of transferring Crimea to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954, declaring Russian status for Sevastopol, etc.), humanitarian (the issue of special privileged status for the Russian language and culture in Ukraine), economic (demanding financial responsibility from Ukraine for the debts of Ukrainian enterprises to Russia, while refusing similar responsibility for their enterprises), political and military (desire to limit Ukraine's contacts with Western countries and international organizations, striving to retain the entire Black Sea Fleet and Sevastopol as its main base, the actual creation of supra-national and controlled structures in the CIS). In most cases, these demands were not created and presented by official state bodies but rather by Russian society, political parties, individual politicians, and state officials through mass campaigns in the press and through the use of pro-Russian internal organizations in Ukraine.

Returning to the Black Sea Fleet, conflicts between Ukraine and Russia regarding Crimea began as early as 1992. Territorial claims against Ukraine and reluctance to recognize its right to the Black Sea Fleet, deployed on Ukrainian

territory, pushed the matter to the brink of an armed conflict (in the areas of Sevastopol and Odesa)<sup>20</sup>. During this time, Russia attempted to block the transfer of the Black Sea Fleet to Ukrainian control. Accusing Ukraine of unlawfully seizing the fleet, Russia aimed to detach Crimea from Ukraine, utilizing provocations and anti-Ukrainian information campaigns. In June 1992, the presidents of both countries reached an agreement concerning the future of both countries' fleets, based on the Soviet Navy. It was agreed that joint command of the fleets would be established first, followed by their division within three years. The first years were marked by conflicts and incidents related to the fleets.

There were numerous incidents illustrating these dynamics. For instance, the raising of the Ukrainian flag on the patrol boat SKR-112 in June 1992 nearly led to an armed clash en route to Odesa<sup>21</sup>. A similar situation occurred with the Russian aircraft carrier “Admiral Kuznetsov”, which Ukrainian authorities considered to be their property, yet a portion of the crew managed to transport it to Russia. The deployment of the National Guard of Ukraine and Border Guard troops to Crimea in 1994 helped calm the situation, and in 1997, the presidents of both countries approved a final agreement regarding the fleet's division. It was decided that the fleets would be based separately in Sevastopol, with the Russian contingent not exceeding 25,000 personnel<sup>22</sup>.

The Budapest Memorandum, signed in December 1994 by Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, aimed to guarantee Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Under this agreement, Ukraine committed to surrendering its entire nuclear arsenal, while Russia and other signatory countries pledged not to threaten the territorial or political independence of Ukraine with force or the use of force. Unfortunately, despite this agreement, Russia engaged in aggression and the annexation of Crimea. And Ukraine's attempts to defend its national interests were often labeled and declared as “anti-Russian policy” or manifestations of “Ukrainian nationalism”.

During this period, a new ideological term emerged “integration”. Russian media actively promoted this term, creating an image that any process labeled as such was inherently positive. Those who opposed Russia's role as a new center for the CIS countries were branded as “integration opponents”. In reality, in Russia, “integration” implies (though not always vocalized) the reintegration

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<sup>20</sup> N. Savchenko, *Anatomy of an Undeclared War*, Kyiv 1997, pp. 162-165.

<sup>21</sup> *Na korabli Chornomors'koho flotu pidnyaly ukrayins'kyy prapor*, <[https://gazeta.ua/articles/history/\\_na-korabli-cornomorskogo-flotu-pidnyali-ukrayinskij-prapor/975454](https://gazeta.ua/articles/history/_na-korabli-cornomorskogo-flotu-pidnyali-ukrayinskij-prapor/975454)> (22.08.2023).

<sup>22</sup> *Uhoda mizh Ukrayinoyu i Rosiys'koyu Federatsiyeyu pro status ta umovy perebuvannya Chornomors'koho flotu Rosiys'koyi Federatsiyi na terytoriyi Ukrayiny*, <[https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643\\_076#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643_076#Text)> (22.08.2023).

of the supra-national entity. Belarus serves as a clear example of the intermediate and final stages of such “integration”. Even more dissatisfaction within the Russian leadership is evoked by any attempts by former republics to engage in integration processes outside the post-soviet realm. In the subsequent years following Ukraine's independence, both states pursued different political and economic concepts, leading to increasing tensions. Ukraine sought closer ties with the West, aspiring to join NATO and the European Union, but this was met with resistance from Russia, which feared a loss of its sphere of influence.

It's also worth noting that Russia employed a “hybrid war” against Ukraine, utilizing information warfare, cyber tactics, and economic pressures to weaken the country and spread disinformation within society. The use of propaganda, false information, and manipulation aimed to undermine the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government and limit public support for independence and democracy.

Another political card that Russian politicians frequently played was the status of Russians in Ukraine. This position was interpreted by the Russian side (mainly in non-governmental spheres but sometimes even during official meetings and negotiations) as unsatisfactory. “Facts” were fabricated about alleged “oppressions” in Ukraine in terms of nationality, language, religion, education, and culture. Some pro-Russian organizations, with the support of Russian patrons, demanded that Russians in Ukraine be granted the status of a forming nation, treating minority status as humiliating and discriminatory.

Unfortunately, within Russian elites, it's difficult to find circles capable of fundamentally changing their approach to Ukraine. Their convictions, formed over centuries, weigh heavily on their consciousness. This was evident in 2014 when Russia invaded and annexed Crimea, as well as when the armed conflict in Donbas erupted, further intensifying tensions between the two countries. Ukraine regarded these actions as acts of aggression and violations of its territorial integrity, while Russia argued it was defending the interests of its citizens in Ukraine. One pretext was the concern for the Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine, although this argument lacked full justification. Ukraine was apprehensive about Russian intervention and infringement on its sovereignty. Furthermore, Russia continued its hybrid warfare, using information tactics, disinformation, and destabilization to weaken Ukraine. Thus, it all came down to a full-scale war on February 24, 2022.

## **Conclusion**

In the initial phase, relations between Ukraine and Russia were tense, setting the stage for further conflict escalation. What initially appeared as peaceful solutions, such as the division of the naval fleet, gradually became a

source of growing mistrust and antagonism between the two states. This period significantly impacted the region's history and is a key element in understanding the current situation, including the ongoing conflict in Ukraine's eastern regions. As the situation deteriorated, a confrontational attitude intensified. Rhetoric from both sides grew sharper, and diplomatic efforts yielded limited results. Therefore, it can be summarized that several factors contributed to the further escalation:

1. Resistance to loss of influence: initial tensions and conflicts that emerged in the 1990s clearly demonstrated that Russia was unwilling to accept the loss of control over Ukraine, its strategic neighbor. This set the tone for future relations. Russia's rejection of Ukraine's independence and its pursuit to maintain influence over the country's decisions and political direction solidified mutual distrust;
2. Crimea conflict: beginning in 1992, when Russia attempted to limit the transfer of the Black Sea Fleet to Ukrainian control, a clear trend of Russia safeguarding its interests in Crimea emerged. This early ambition to interfere in Crimea's future and weaken Ukraine's influence in the region foreshadowed the later annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Crimea conflict underscored that Russia not only refused to accept the loss of control but was also willing to employ aggressive actions to achieve its goals;
3. Limited international response: during the 1990s, the international community had a limited response to tensions and conflicts between Ukraine and Russia. The lack of a clear response or sanctions may have reinforced Russia's perception that it had room for maneuver in the region. The relatively minor consequences of the international reaction in the 1990s could have emboldened Russia for future aggressive actions, including the annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine;
4. Undermining Ukraine's sovereignty: Russia was already using informational warfare and disinformation during that period to influence Ukraine's internal public opinion and challenge its independence. These actions impacted the difficulty of constructing a cohesive national identity and internal consensus in Ukraine. Artificially created divisions and misinformation influenced challenges in constructive debate and disrupted the country's stability;
5. Escalating tensions and antagonism: the conflicts and tensions of the 1990s contributed to growing mistrust and antagonism between the two countries. These early confrontations paved the way for further intensifying tensions in the following years. Mutual accusations, escalating rhetoric, and a lack of constructive communication perpetuated this situation.



In conclusion, the early years after Ukraine's Declaration of Independence were a crucial period that shaped the further development of relations between Ukraine and Russia. Events and conflicts from that era are significant components of the current situation, including the long-lasting conflict in Ukraine's eastern regions and the tensions between these countries.

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