

*Backgrounder*

# Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads of Europe and Russia

Ukraine has struggled to forge an independent path, torn between Europe and the United States in the West and its long-standing ties to Russia in the East.

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## Summary

The conflict in Ukraine is viewed by some as part of a renewed geopolitical rivalry between western powers and Russia.

A former Soviet republic, Ukraine has deep cultural, economic, and political bonds with Russia.

In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, a part of Ukraine, and it is keen not to let the country become more aligned with Western institutions, chiefly NATO and the European Union.

## Introduction

Ukraine has long played an important, yet sometimes overlooked, role in the global security order. Today, the country appears to be on the front lines of a renewed great-power rivalry that many analysts say will dominate international relations in the decades ahead.

Motivated by many factors, Russia's aggression in Ukraine has triggered the greatest security crisis in Europe since the Cold War. While the United States and its allies have taken significant punitive actions against Russia, they have made little headway in helping to restore Ukraine's territorial integrity.

In recent elections, Ukrainians have clearly indicated that they see their future in Europe, but the country continues to grapple with extreme corruption and deep regional rifts that could impede its path.

## **Why has Ukraine become a geopolitical flash point?**

Ukraine was a cornerstone of the Soviet Union, the archrival of the United States during the Cold War. Behind only Russia, it was the second-most populous and powerful of the fifteen Soviet republics, home to much of the union's agricultural production, defense industries, and military, including the Black Sea Fleet and some of the nuclear arsenal. Ukraine was so vital to the union that its decision to sever ties in 1991 proved to be a coup de grâce for the ailing superpower.

In its nearly three decades of independence, Ukraine has sought to forge its own path as a sovereign state while looking to align more closely with Western institutions, including the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, Kyiv has struggled to balance its foreign relations and to bridge deep internal divisions. A more nationalist, Ukrainian-speaking population in western parts of the country has generally supported greater integration with Europe, while a mostly Russian-speaking community in the east has favored closer ties with Russia.

Ukraine became a battleground in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and began arming and abetting separatists in the Donbas region in the country's southeast. Russia's seizure of Crimea was the first time since World War II that a European state annexed the territory of another. Some fourteen thousand people have died in the conflict, the bloodiest in Europe since the Balkan Wars of the 1990s.

For many analysts, the conflict marked a clear shift in the global security environment from a unipolar period of U.S. dominance to one defined by renewed competition between great powers [PDF].



### UKRAINE AT A GLANCE

**Area**  
233,000 square miles (largest country in Europe, excluding Russia)

**Population**  
44 million

**Religions**  
Orthodox Christian, Catholic, Protestant

**Primary Languages**  
Ukrainian (official), Russian

**Form of Government**  
Semipresidential republic

**GDP**  
\$112.9 billion

**GDP Per Capita**  
\$2,522

Sources: CIA World Factbook; World Bank.

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## What are Russia's interests in Ukraine?

Russia has deep cultural, economic, and political bonds with Ukraine, and in many ways Ukraine is central to Russia's identity and vision for itself in the world.

*Family ties.* Russia and Ukraine have strong familial bonds that go back centuries. Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, is sometimes referred to as "the mother of Russian cities," on par in terms of cultural influence with Moscow and St. Petersburg. It was in Kyiv in the eighth and ninth centuries that Christianity was brought from Byzantium to the Slavic

peoples. And it was Christianity that served as the anchor for Kievan Rus, the early Slavic state from which modern Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians draw their lineage.

*Russian diaspora.* Among Russia's top concerns is the welfare of the approximately eight million ethnic Russians living in Ukraine, according to a 2001 census, mostly in the south and east. Moscow claimed a duty to protect these people as a pretext for its actions in Ukraine.

*Superpower image.* After the Soviet collapse, many Russian politicians viewed the divorce with Ukraine as a mistake of history and a threat to Russia's standing as a great power. Losing a permanent hold on Ukraine, and letting it fall into the Western orbit, was seen by many as a major blow to Russia's international prestige.

*Crimea.* Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea from Russia to Ukraine in 1954 to strengthen the "brotherly ties between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples." However, since the fall of the union, many Russian nationalists in both Russia and Crimea have longed for a return of the peninsula. The city of Sevastopol is home port for Russia's Black Sea Fleet, the dominant maritime force in the region.

*Trade.* Russia is Ukraine's largest trading partner, although this link has withered in recent years. Prior to its invasion of Crimea, Russia had hoped to pull Ukraine into its single market, the Eurasian Economic Union, which today includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

*Energy.* Russia supplied most of Ukraine's gas until the Crimean invasion, after which imports petered out and then stopped entirely in 2016. However, Russia still relies on Ukrainian pipelines to pump its gas to customers in Central and Eastern Europe, and it pays billions of dollars per year in transit fees to Kyiv. In early 2020, Russia was close to completing Nord Stream 2, a gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea that some have warned could starve Ukraine of essential revenue. However, Russia is contracted to keep moving gas through Ukraine for several more years.

*Political sway.* Russia has been intent on preserving its political influence in Ukraine and throughout the former Soviet Union, particularly after its preferred candidate for Ukrainian president in 2004, Viktor Yanukovich, lost to a reformist competitor as part of the Orange Revolution popular movement. The shock in Ukraine came after a similar electoral defeat for the Kremlin in Georgia in 2003, known as the Rose Revolution, and was followed by another—the Tulip Revolution—in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. Yanukovich later became president of Ukraine, in 2010, amid voter discontent with the Orange government.

## **What motivated Russia's moves against Ukraine?**

Western scholars disagree somewhat on the motivations behind Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Some emphasize NATO's post-Cold War enlargement, which Russia viewed with increasing alarm. In 2004, NATO added seven members, its fifth expansion and largest one to date, including the former Soviet Baltic republics Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Four years later, when NATO declared its intent to bring Ukraine and Georgia into the fold at some point in the future, Russia made clear a redline had been crossed.

In the weeks leading up to NATO's 2008 summit, President Vladimir Putin warned U.S. diplomats that steps to bring Ukraine into the alliance "would be a hostile act toward Russia." Months later, Russia went to war with Georgia, seemingly showcasing Putin's willingness to use force to secure Russia's interests. (Some independent observers faulted Georgia for initiating the so-called August War but blamed Russia for escalating hostilities into a broader conflict.)

Other experts dispute the assertion that Russia's fear of NATO was its primary motive, countering that the NATO expansion question had largely dissolved after 2008 as Western governments lost interest and Russia increased its influence in Ukraine. Rather, they say, the biggest factor behind Russia's intervention was Putin's fear of losing power at home, particularly after historic anti-government protests erupted in

Russia in late 2011. Putin claimed U.S. actors were sowing this unrest and thereafter began casting the United States as an archenemy to rally his political base. It was by looking through this Cold War redux lens that he chose to intervene in Ukraine.

Russia's intervention in Ukraine proved to be immensely popular at home, pushing Putin's approval ratings above 80 percent following a steady decline.

## **What triggered the crisis?**

It was Ukraine's ties with the European Union that brought tensions to a head with Russia. In late 2013, President Yanukovich, acting under pressure from his supporters in Moscow, scrapped plans to formalize a closer economic relationship with the EU. Russia had at the same time been pressing Ukraine to join the not-yet-formed Eurasian Economic Union. Many Ukrainians perceived the decision as a betrayal by a deeply corrupt and incompetent government, and it ignited countrywide protests known as Euromaidan.

Putin framed the ensuing tumult of Euromaidan, which forced Yanukovich from power, as a Western-backed "fascist coup" that endangered the ethnic Russian majority in Crimea. (Western analysts dismissed this as a conspiracy theory reminiscent of the Soviet era.) In response, Putin ordered a covert invasion of Crimea that he later justified as a rescue operation. "There is a limit to everything. And with Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line," Putin said in a high-profile address formalizing the annexation.

Putin employed a similar narrative to justify his support for separatists in southeastern Ukraine, another region home to large numbers of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. He famously referred to the area as Novorossiya (New Russia), a term dating back to eighteenth-century imperial Russia. Armed Russian provocateurs, including some agents of Russian security services, are believed to have played a central role in stirring the anti-Euromaidan secessionist movements in the region into a rebellion. However, unlike Crimea, Russia continues to officially deny its involvement in the Donbas conflict.

## **What are Russia's objectives in Ukraine?**

Under Putin, Russia has been described as a revanchist power, keen to regain its former power and prestige. “It was always Putin’s goal to restore Russia to the status of a great power in northern Eurasia,” writes Gerard Toal, an international affairs professor at Virginia Tech, in his book *Near Abroad*. “The end goal was not to re-create the Soviet Union but to make Russia great again.”

By seizing Crimea, Russia has solidified its control of a critical foothold on the Black Sea. With a larger and more sophisticated military presence there, Russia can project power deeper into the Mediterranean, Middle East, and North Africa, where it has traditionally had limited influence. Meanwhile, to the south, Russia is strengthening its military and energy ties with Turkey, another Black Sea power.

Russia’s strategic gains in the Donbas are more fragile. Supporting the separatists has, at least temporarily, increased Russia’s bargaining power vis-à-vis Ukraine, but the region’s future is highly uncertain. Fostering political instability there may be Russia’s aim until other factors shift in its favor.

## **What are U.S. priorities in Ukraine?**

Immediately following the Soviet collapse, Washington’s priority was pushing Ukraine—along with Belarus and Kazakhstan—to forfeit its nuclear arsenal so that only Russia would retain the former union’s weapons. At the same time, the United States rushed to bolster the shaky democracy in Russia. Some prominent observers at the time felt that the United States was premature in this courtship with Russia, and that it should have worked more on fostering geopolitical pluralism in the rest of the former Soviet Union.

Former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, in early 1994 in *Foreign Affairs*, described a healthy and stable Ukraine as a critical counterweight to Russia and the lynchpin of what he advocated should be the new U.S. grand strategy after the Cold War. “It cannot be stressed strongly enough that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire,” he wrote.

In the months after Brzezinski's article was published, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia pledged via the Budapest Referendum to respect Ukraine's independence and sovereignty in return for it becoming a nonnuclear state.

Twenty years later, as Russian forces seized Crimea, restoring and strengthening Ukraine's sovereignty reemerged as a top U.S. and EU foreign policy priority. Other top U.S. interests in Ukraine are rooting out corruption, strengthening the rule of law, and encouraging privatization of state-owned businesses, particularly in the energy sector. Reorganizing Naftogaz, the state-run natural gas giant, has been a major focus of U.S. and EU policy.

## **What are U.S. and EU policy in Ukraine?**

The United States remains committed to the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. It does not recognize Russia's claims to Crimea, and it encourages Russia and Ukraine to resolve the Donbas conflict via the Minsk agreements. Signed in 2014 and 2015 and brokered by France and Germany, these accords call for a cease-fire, a withdrawal of heavy weapons, Ukrainian control over its border with Russia, and local elections and a special political status for certain areas of the region.

Before the crisis, Ukraine was a top destination for U.S. foreign aid, receiving on average more than \$200 million per year. In response to Russia's aggression, Washington has boosted its support to Kyiv, providing more than \$600 million annually in development and security aid. For its part, the U.S. military has provided Ukrainian forces with training and equipment, including sniper rifles, grenade launchers, night-vision gear, radars, and Javelin anti-tank missiles. NATO allies hold yearly joint military exercises with Ukraine, including Sea Breeze and Rapid Trident. Although Ukraine remains a nonmember, Kyiv has recently affirmed its goal to eventually gain full NATO membership.

The United States and its allies have also taken retaliatory actions against Russia for its actions in Ukraine. Over the years, Washington has imposed sanctions on hundreds of Russian individuals, as well as parts of the Russian economy, including the defense,

energy, and financial sectors. The European Union and countries including Australia, Canada, and Japan have imposed similar penalties. The Group of Eight, now known as the Group of Seven, suspended Russia from its ranks indefinitely.

The United States has also been active over Nord Stream 2, which it claims will give Moscow greater political leverage over Ukraine and other European gas customers. In late 2019, Washington imposed sanctions on companies involved in the pipeline's construction.

In recent months, U.S. relations with Ukraine became the subject of an impeachment investigation into President Donald J. Trump. Democrats alleged that Trump abused his power by withholding millions of dollars in aid to Ukraine to pressure Kyiv to investigate his political rival, former Vice President Joe Biden.

## **What do Ukrainians want?**

Russia's aggression in recent years has galvanized public support for Ukraine's Westward leanings. In the wake of Euromaidan, the country elected billionaire businessman Petro Poroshenko, a staunch proponent of EU and NATO integration, as president. In 2019, Poroshenko was defeated by Volodymyr Zelensky, an actor and comedian who campaigned on a platform of anticorruption, economic renewal, and peace in the Donbas. Zelensky's victory as a political outsider was viewed as a strong indicator of the public's deep dissatisfaction with the political establishment and its halting battle against endemic corruption and an oligarchic economy.

Analysts say that a critical test of Zelensky's anticorruption effort will be how he manages his controversial relationship with Igor Kolomoisky, an oligarch whose television station helped propel Zelensky to power. Kolomoisky is pushing to have the government return PrivatBank, Ukraine's largest lender, to him after regulators nationalized it in 2016 amid fraud allegations.

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